HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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

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Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Housing Ladder

1. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What steps he is taking to help young people get on the housing ladder.

**Giles Watling:** While the lifting of the housing revenue account cap is welcome and will deliver more council-built homes, which will be used to meet the long-standing demand for council housing across the country, we need more private homes. What more can the Government do to help the delivery of that private housing, which will bring prices down and increase the availability for young people?

**James Brokenshire:** My hon. Friend has made an important point about the housing revenue account cap and our desire to see more council homes built, but he is right to say that we also want to see a general increase in housing supply. Last year’s figures show that more than 222,000 homes were delivered, the highest number for a decade. As my hon. Friend says, there is more to do, but I should emphasise to him that the number of first-time buyers is at an 11-year high.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Government are failing to meet the housing needs of young people in the south lakes, while ignoring the simple fact that thousands of local houses are sitting empty as second homes. Will the Secretary of State agree to change planning and tax regulations, so that we can limit second home ownership and give our young people the chance of a place to call their own?

**James Brokenshire:** The hon. Gentleman has highlighted the broader issue of the need to increase supply. We have made reforms to ensure that there is clarity in the planning process, and through the schemes that I have mentioned. However, if the hon. Gentleman’s challenge is that there is more to do, yes, there is, and that is why we are determined to see that increase in supply. I think that is the best way to address the issues that he has highlighted in relation to his own constituency and others across the country.

**Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): In my constituency, we are delivering homes at three times the rate of the country as a whole. Does my right hon. Friend agree that maintaining supply of all styles and tenures is the key to enabling young people to make a start on the housing ladder?
James Brokenshire: I do agree, and I am well aware of the housing opportunities that are being taken up in and around my hon. Friend’s constituency and the work that is going on there. He has made a powerful point. If we ensure that all types and tenures of housing are being developed, that housing will be delivered more quickly, and that is where the focus lies.

14. [911366] Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The average full-time salary among my constituents is above national norms at £37,500, but that is still way off the house price that the Government class as affordable, at £450,000, and it is half the cost of the average sale achieved in W5 in the first quarter of the year, which was £905,348. One flat even changed hands for £3.5 million. What are the Government doing to relieve the pressures on young people specifically in London, where salaries and speculation are forcing out everyone but the children of the super-rich?

James Brokenshire: About £9 billion is being spent on the affordable homes programme, and half of that is going to London. I hope that the hon. Lady will join me in encouraging the Mayor of London to focus on the delivery of housing of all types for all people, and to ensure that there is that bright prospect in London as well as the rest of the country.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): After nine years of Conservative government, why are nearly 900,000 fewer people under 45 able to own their own home?

James Brokenshire: It is interesting that the right hon. Gentleman should make that point. He may recall saying in the past that falling home ownership was not “such a bad thing”. I should have thought that he would support the increase in delivery that I have mentioned, and, indeed, the fact that the number of first-time buyers is at an 11-year high.

John Healey: Is not the truth that the Government have been failing young people on housing for nine years? One in five of those on the Help to Buy scheme are not even first-time buyers, the average age of those on the right to buy scheme is over 50, and not a single one of the new starter homes that were pledged in 2014 has yet been built. Where is the new hope, and where are the new housing plans, from the wannabe Tory leaders?

Is it not clear, after nine years of Conservative government, eight Housing Ministers and four Secretaries of State, that the Conservatives still have no plan to fix the housing crisis, and is it not clear that the only hope for young people with regular incomes is a Labour Government with radical plans for discounted First Buy homes, first dibs for local people on new homes, and a programme for the building of a million new affordable homes both to rent and to buy?

James Brokenshire: I wondered, given the right hon. Gentleman’s peroration, whether he was building up to Christmas, but I can say to him that a Labour Government are absolutely not that gift, because if we look at Labour’s record in office we see house building fall to levels not seen since the 1920s. I would underline to him the work this Government have done: last year there were 222,000 new dwellings; only in one year in the last 31 have we seen a higher number. So it is a bit rich of the right hon. Gentleman to make those points when, for example, Labour has opposed and voted against our stamp duty cut for first time buyers, which is absolutely about making the difference for young buyers. The Labour party opposed that measure, which underlines that it is the Conservative party that has the ideas, the innovation and the energy, whereas the Labour party, frankly, offers none of that at all.

Local Government Efficiency

2. Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support efficiency across local government.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): This year we gave £20 million to the Local Government Association to fund council improvements, we introduced a programme to boost the use of digital technologies, and we are developing a tool to help councils improve efficiency. These measures will help councils continue their impressive work to manage budgets and deliver quality services.

Damien Moore: Does my right hon. Friend agree that councils should do their utmost to learn from best practice so that hard-working taxpayers are not burdened with bills, and that it is disgraceful that my local council, Labour-controlled Sefton, has wasted £32.5 million on a dilapidated shopping centre?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend rightly makes the point about Sefton, and councils should absolutely be focused on delivering good-quality services and value for money. That is why we are investing in areas such as digital innovation and looking at how that can drive further support. My hon. Friend is also right about ensuring that good practice is shared, and we are working with the LGA and others on that.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am sure the Secretary of State will accept that local government has had a 30% cut in spending since 2010 and also that councils have done incredibly well through efficiency savings and other measures to mitigate the worst impact of the cuts, but has he now seen the report by PwC for the County Councils Network saying that by 2025 there will be an £8 billion funding gap for councils? Does he accept that efficiency savings are not going to bridge that gap and that what we need now is an end to austerity and a major increase in funding for councils from the Government? Will he go to the Treasury and argue for that to happen?

James Brokenshire: I need no encouragement from the hon. Gentleman to make that case for local government and its power and ability to deliver good-quality local services. I recognise the challenge the hon. Gentleman brings to me in his question, but I highlight to him the real-terms increase in core spending power made available to councils this year. This Government have made that commitment to councils, but I absolutely want to be on the side of councils and commend them for their innovation and the work they do.
Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his answers thus far. May I commend to him a booklet published in 2011, with a forward by one of his notable predecessors, on efficiency in local government, which I had something to do with? May I suggest that no authority in the country has yet taken every single efficiency measure, and that we should roll that out right across the country?

James Brokenshire: I certainly look forward to perhaps continuing this discussion with my hon. Friend outside the Chamber, and I commend him for his work in rightly highlighting the issue of value for money. Of course we can and should do more, and it is important that where there is good practice we learn from that.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware that 544 homes across Kent managed by East Kent Housing have not been regularly subjected to vital landlord gas safety assessments, and has he had conversations with the four local authorities, cash-strapped themselves, across the affected parts of Kent to make sure that this never happens again?

James Brokenshire: I am very willing to talk to the hon. Lady about the issue she highlights, and obviously safety for residents is an absolute priority concern for me and Members across the House, so if there are further details that she would like to share with me I would be very happy to pursue this on behalf of her and her constituents.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Conservative-controlled North West Leicestershire District Council has frozen its council tax for the past decade. Can the Secretary of State confirm that council tax in 93 English local authorities is lower in real terms this year than it was in 2010-11?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the great work of so many Conservative councils up and down the country, with their sense of value for money, delivering for local people and local services and ensuring that council tax is kept low. This is absolutely about getting those priorities right and delivering for local people.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): When the Secretary of State looks at those efficiencies, is he aware of the New Local Government Network’s findings that a no-deal Brexit could contribute to an increase in demand for services to provide vulnerable people and families with support? Is he also aware that council grants in England from central Government have been reduced by nearly 50%, not to mention the £80 billion black hole in UK Government finances that a no-deal Brexit would leave? Will he and any future Prime Minister tell us how they will protect the most vulnerable in our society from a no-deal Brexit scenario, because they will certainly not be able to do it through efficiencies?

James Brokenshire: I appreciate that the hon. Lady is making her own point in her own way. Obviously, local government is devolved in Scotland, and she also makes her own point in relation to no deal. Preparations have been put in place and funding has been provided to a number of local councils in England, and we are ensuring that the money designed for EU preparations actually gets to where it needs to go, whereas that has not always been the case with the Scottish Government.

Local Authorities: Government Funding

3. Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of changes in the level of Government funding for local authorities on the adequacy of the services that they provide.

21. Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of changes in the level of Government funding for local authorities on the adequacy of the services that they provide.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Our recent settlement confirmed an increase of £1.3 billion in resources for local government this year. This real-terms increase recognises the critical services that local government delivers. Core funding is nearly all un-ring-fenced, giving local government control over its local income and the freedom and flexibility to spend according to local needs.

Faisal Rashid: We know only too well by now that central Government underfunding of local authorities has devastated many of our constituents through cuts to many essential services. Perhaps the most dismal funding failure of all from this Government has been on housing, with the building of social housing at its lowest level since world war two. When will the Government wake up and realise that our housing is in crisis and at breaking point?

James Brokenshire: I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that he has not recognised one of our biggest reforms in social housing, which has been to lift the housing revenue account borrowing cap. This will enable councils to borrow in order to build a new generation of council homes, and I want to see councils utilising and harnessing that so that we can build homes for people and ensure that councils play their part in that.

Vicky Foxcroft: Lewisham Council is fully committed to using the public health model to tackle youth violence, but since 2010, its budget has been cut by more than 60%. The Home Secretary says that the Government are also committed to that approach, but how does the Minister expect local authorities to put sufficient funding into schools, social services, housing and youth services when their budgets are being slashed?

James Brokenshire: I would highlight the fact that £261.2 million is being made available in Lewisham in 2019-20—a £7 million increase. The hon. Lady makes an important point about knife crime, and this is why we have targeted support through our troubled families programme, with around £9.8 million pounds being made available to actually get through to some of these issues with young people and to see that some of the work around families is accentuated. I am sure she will have an opportunity to make further points in the urgent question that will follow Question Time.
Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State acknowledge that in counties such as Shropshire, where our elderly population is growing at a disproportionate rate compared with the rest of the country, adult social care costs are going up very quickly? What steps is he going to take with the Treasury to ensure that more money is provided to enable rural shire counties such as Shropshire to deal adequately with adult social care costs?

James Brokenshire: I know that my hon. Friend will recognise the £650 million in additional funding that has been provided to local government for social care in 2019-20. He highlights some of the differentials around rural services, and as part of our fair funding review, we want to ensure that that is properly captured.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Social care needs both urgent funding and certainty from year to year, so that councils can rely upon funding packages such as those outlined by the Secretary of State. What can he do to assure us that rural councils will be properly accounted for in any business rates review?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend will no doubt be aware of some of the business rates retention pilots that are under way. They are a core element of our reforms. However, the whole concept of assurance for rural areas is part of our work through the fair funding review, and I appreciate the representations that he and others have made.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): But I know that my hon. Friend will no doubt be aware of some of the business rates retention pilots that are under way. They are a core element of our reforms. However, the whole concept of assurance for rural areas is part of our work through the fair funding review, and I appreciate the representations that he and others have made.

19. [911372] Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The local government funding settlement did nothing to tackle the crippling financial pressure on councils following eight years of austerity. Will the Secretary of State tell the House how he intends to respond to local authorities in 2019 when they have to choose between delivering children’s services, delivering adult social care and emptying the bins?

James Brokenshire: This year’s funding settlement offers local councils up and down the country a real-terms increase in core funding. Equally, the additional £650 million for social care is intended to address and respond to some of the issues around those services. However, she is right about the need for further reform in the longer term, and that is what we as a Government are determined to deliver.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): But back in the real world, 763 youth centres have closed, over 700 libraries have closed, Sure Start and early years services have been cut in half, and one in five children are now growing up in poverty. The legacy of this Government is a decade of neglect as local government takes the biggest hit at the altar of Tory austerity. So what is the Secretary of State most proud of: an entire country at breaking point, or the increased inequality that his savage cuts have created?

James Brokenshire: There are now more children’s centres than at any time prior to 2008, and quality has also improved. In 2010, 68% of early years providers were good or outstanding. Today, the proportion is 95%. As for outcomes, 52% of children left reception with a good level of development in 2013. Today, the proportion is 72%. I know that local government faces challenges, which is why I have argued the case for the settlement that we have this year, but the picture painted by the hon. Gentleman is designed to inflame rather than to reflect the reforms made by this Government and the positive improvements that have been delivered.

Local Government Unitarisation: Northamptonshire

4. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What assessment he has made of progress on the unitarisation of local government in Northamptonshire.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): The Secretary of State recently announced his intention to implement the reorganisation plan submitted by the Northamptonshire councils. Subject to parliamentary approval, the new unitary authority will be in place in April 2021. I place on the record my thanks to the councils for their continuing constructive attitude towards ensuring that their residents will have better local government.

Tom Pursglove: I thank the Minister for that answer and share his sentiment about the local authorities’ constructive work. What steps will his Department take to ensure that future decision making is at the heart of the new model and happens at the most local level possible, with strong area representation reflecting the different communities of north Northamptonshire?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of local decision making happening as close to people as possible. We expect new unitary authorities to support the creation of new parishes as part of this reorganisation, which has happened elsewhere, and we also encourage the formation of area committees to ensure strong local representation. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that local people must have a strong voice in the decisions that affect their communities.

Stronger Towns Fund: Scottish Towns

5. Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): What plans the Government have to ensure that Scottish towns benefit from the stronger towns fund.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I am sure my hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of local decision making happening as close to people as possible. We expect new unitary authorities to support the creation of new parishes as part of this reorganisation, which has happened elsewhere, and we also encourage the formation of area committees to ensure strong local representation. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that local people must have a strong voice in the decisions that affect their communities.

Stephen Kerr: When the stronger towns fund statement was made at the beginning of March, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said he would set out details on additional funding for Scotland and how it will benefit towns in Scotland. When will my constituents in Stirling see those details, and when will the fund be open for applications from Scotland?

Jake Berry: My hon. Friend’s constituents are, of course, already benefiting from £45 million through the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal. We are working to ensure that the benefit of the stronger towns fund can be felt in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We are working with the devolved Administrations on the best way to achieve that, and we will release further details in due course.
Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): We are still waiting for important details of the stronger towns fund. Whether it be in Scotland, England or Wales—all over the country—our towns have seen lower job growth than in our cities and have often been harder hit by austerity. We have lost sports centres, libraries, community centres and children’s centres, as services have been shrunk back by austerity into the cities. We urgently need the details of the fund, because we need investment in jobs and public services in our towns.

Jake Berry: I am not sure I agree with the right hon. Lady that austerity is the reason for services being shrunk back into the cities. Successive Governments have failed to concentrate on creating growth in our towns across the United Kingdom, which is why we are working on the prospectus for the stronger towns fund. I hope to see exciting bids come forward, not least from her constituency, to see how we, as a Government, can back our northern towns and our towns elsewhere in England.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It speaks volumes that even the Scottish Tories are disappointed by the stronger towns fund, which represents a drop in the ocean compared with the estimated loss of €13 billion of European regional development fund money that towns, villages, cities and high streets will lose under the Tories’ chaotic Brexit plans. Can the Minister guarantee that not a single penny will be lost to Scotland as a result of this chaos?

Jake Berry: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady has some sort of special insight. She seems to think that ERDF funding has already been lost. It is, of course, correct that the Government consult widely, not least with the devolved Administrations, on the future of the UK shared prosperity fund. It is absolutely right that we focus on delivering growth in every part of our United Kingdom, including Scotland.

Alison Thewliss: It is undeniable that money we would have got through ERDF funding will be lost on leaving the European Union, and this Government have no plans and no guarantees to replace that money. What is more, this Tory Government are intent on stringing Scotland along with promises of money—promises that, by their very nature, undermine the principles of devolution. Does the Minister not understand that, or does he just not care? He needs to show that he respects the Scotland Act 1998. If not, we move on.

Jake Berry: The hon. Lady says it is undeniable that money has already been lost.

Alison Thewliss indicated assent.

Jake Berry: That is not correct. If the hon. Lady has details, perhaps she will let me have them. We have been absolutely clear that we will respect all the devolution settlement as we move forward with the UK shared prosperity fund. But she does not have to wait, as we have already had 500 face-to-face engagements with stakeholders. I have engaged with all of England’s metro mayors, and we continue to have discussions with the devolved Administrations. I would have thought that, as an SNP Member of Parliament, she had been told that by her colleagues up in Scotland.

Planning Applications: Economic Opportunities and Housing Need

6. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to ensure that planning applications (a) maximise economic opportunities and (b) tackle local housing needs.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): The Secretary of State has issued a national planning policy framework that provides details on how economic opportunities should be included in applications that look to tackle local housing need.

Rachael Maskell: When a proposed economic development does not provide for sufficient good-quality jobs for our city, when proposed housing fails to address current and future need and when proposed car use only adds to an already gridlocked city, how will the Minister review planning so that ordinary residents have a real voice and so that councils and developers have to act on independent evidence to address local need, not their own interests?

Jake Berry: I believe the hon. Lady is referring to the planning application for the centre of York, on which she and I have met, and on which I have also met my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy).

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) is aware that the Secretary of State is currently considering this application, so it would not be right for me to comment. It is also right for me to say that I have formally recused myself from making a decision on the application because of my meetings with her and others.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): Planning applications that could deliver hundreds of new homes in Fareham are in limbo following advice from Natural England, which has instructed that planning permission should be refused unless developments are nitrate-neutral, after two rulings from the European Court of Justice. Will the Government work with me to look at suspending house building targets while affected councils work to find a solution to avoid being unfairly treated at potential appeals?

Jake Berry: We will happily work with my hon. Friend as she sets out. I believe that the housing Minister is already looking into this issue, and I am sure he will be in touch with her in due course.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): On Friday, I met a constituent who had been moved to temporary accommodation in Ilford, 17 miles from where her children attend school and where she works. The Government continue to place an unacceptable burden on councils, making them responsible for the lack of social housing while cutting their funding and refusing to increase their ability to build. Can the Secretary of State confirm that since 2010 the rise in homelessness has been caused by the cutting of council “Supporting People” budgets, the loss of more than 170,000 affordable council homes and a failure to stop soaring private rents?
Jake Berry: I do not accept there is the causal link to which the hon. Lady refers. Local authorities have an obligation, which they should discharge, to house homeless individuals and to provide good-quality accommodation. If she believes her local authority is failing to do that, perhaps she could provide details and we could look into that further.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will the Secretary of State provide details and we could look into that further.

Jake Berry: As my right hon. Friend is aware, the Department sits in a quasi-judicial position in relation to all planning applications. It would therefore be inappropriate for me to comment on the individual application to which he refers.

Mr Speaker: Yes, but there is nothing to stop the right hon. Gentleman depositing a copy of his written request in the Library of the House, for its collective delectation.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Does the Minister acknowledge that one unintended consequence of extending permitted development rights to commercial and industrial property is that a significant amount of housing is now being generated that is below acceptable space and safety standards? What action is he taking to correct that?

Jake Berry: I do not accept that, but I will say that we are looking at PDRs more generally. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman would, like me, celebrate the fact that this one policy alone has provided in excess of 40,000 houses for people to move into. We universally acknowledge, across this House, that we have a housing crisis and we need to build more homes, so I would have thought he welcomed that.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Many thousands of new homes are planned in Chelmsford, but pressure on our infrastructure holds back economic growth, and we especially need the second railway station for the city. Will my hon. Friend update us on the status of our housing infrastructure bid?

Jake Berry: My hon. Friend is a fantastic advocate for her constituents and really gets it: she understands that if we want to build the houses we need in this country, it is up to all of us, across this House, to get behind and support development. I know that she is in strong support of her housing infrastructure bid. The Department continues to review it and will give her the result of that review shortly.

Local Government Funding

7. Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the level of funding for local government. [911358]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): The Secretary of State and I both meet our counterparts at the Treasury regularly. Future funding for local government will, of course, be decided in the spending review, and the hon. Lady can rest assured that we will be making a robust case.

Mary Glindon: Since 2010, North Tyneside Council has lost £120-million worth of Government funding and, like many other councils, has had to cut frontline services to the marrow, not just to the bone. With the Chancellor admitting that he does not have a clue about the state of regional economies, can this House be confident that the Minister will make him fully aware of how bad things are for local councils?

Rishi Sunak: The Chancellor and my Department have already responded with an extra £1 billion to improve resources for local government. The hon. Lady may not believe me when I say that we are supporting local government, but perhaps she might listen to her own local authority. This weekend I glanced through the council’s plan, which shows that inequality between the least and most affluent areas is narrowing, that according to feedback from residents 80% of local people are highly satisfied with where they live, and that an increased proportion of residents think their local area has improved.

Mr Speaker: We note the Minister’s choice of weekend reading: the capital plan. I hope he found it stimulating or in some way therapeutic. I am sure we will hear his impressions on that matter in due course.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Given the importance of the need to demonstrate the effectiveness of spending through local government, will the Minister tell us when we will see the results of the successful bidders for the future high street fund?

Rishi Sunak: Successive rounds of bidding are currently in process. I can write to the hon. Lady with an exact date, if one is available from my hon. Friend the high streets Minister. More broadly, the hon. Lady is absolutely right about the need to measure the effectiveness of what local government does. In particular, the troubled families programme, with its extensive evaluation, provides great evidence to everyone in the House on the valuable early years prevention work that local councils do.

Mr Speaker: We all know that the Minister is an industrious fellow—I am sorry to dwell on this—but I sincerely hope that he was not reading the capital plan on Father’s Day. Surely not. I am sure he must have read it on Friday or Saturday, not on Sunday.

Licensing Act 2003: Communities and Local Planning Policy

8. Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): If he will discuss with the Home Secretary the effect on (a) communities and (b) local planning policy of the operation of the Licensing Act 2003. [911359]

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I am in daily receipt of advice from colleagues from across the Government—indeed, from across the House, local government and the nation—on the efficient and effective operation of the planning system.
Christian Matheson: Will the Government agree to change licensing laws to give local councils the authority to issue licences—for example, to events in their area—only if the applicant agrees to use recyclable or biodegradable plastics?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman, typically, raises an extremely important issue. As he will know, the proliferation of single-use plastics—or, indeed, the restriction thereof—is a matter for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We have made other progress, on top of the ban of microbeads, with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs having recently announced the ban on the distribution or sale of plastic straws and stirrers and plastic-stem cotton buds. The hon. Gentleman nevertheless raises an interesting point, particularly in respect of events, that we will ponder further.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): More and more licensed premises are being granted extended opening hours, even when it has hugely negative consequences for local residents. Councils report that the impact that the proliferation of licensed premises in a particular area can have, not only on the community but on crime generally. It is incumbent on local authorities to have an authoritative and assertive licensing policy that sits alongside their local plan and planning policy, such that they can defend their policies in court or under judicial review, if that is the case. Will the Minister agree to work with his colleagues to amend the Licensing Act 2003 to ensure that there is a much greater community voice in licensing and greater alignment with planning policy?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady addresses a significant issue that I had to address regularly in my previous life as deputy Mayor for policing in London. I recognise the impact that the proliferation of licensed premises in a particular area can have, not only on the community but on crime generally. It is incumbent on local authorities to have an authoritative and assertive licensing policy that sits alongside their local plan and planning policy, such that they can defend their policies in court or under judicial review, if that is the case. If the hon. Lady is concerned that that is not happening in particular authorities, I am more than happy to look into them and offer advice, where possible.

Bellwin Scheme: Social Care Packages for Vulnerable Children

9. Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment has he made of the potential merits of extending the Bellwin scheme to include the exceptional costs of social care packages for vulnerable children.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): The Bellwin scheme can be used to compensate authorities for emergencies and disasters in their area. Children’s services funding is made available through the settlement, with flexibility for councils to target their spending according to the local needs. In the autumn Budget, we were pleased to announce an extra £410 million to address the pressures on social care.

Luke Pollard: Plymouth City Council’s children and social care budget is being sunk by a small number of exceptional care costs for some vulnerable young people, with 6:1 care ratios costing £40,000 a week. Will the Minister agree to meet Plymouth City Council’s Labour leader and Conservative leader of the opposition to look into how the Government can offer additional support for the rare but exceptional care costs for these vulnerable young people?

Jake Berry: I will of course meet the hon. Gentleman, the group leader and the council leader. I understand the hon. Gentleman has been active in this policy area, because he recently met my hon. Friend the Minister for Children and Families and the leader of Plymouth City Council, Tudor Evans. I thought he might raise this issue today, so I checked, and I understand that the Minister he met previously is going to write to him shortly to update him on the progress he is making with his campaign.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Over the past two years in Sandwell, my local authority, the number of children in care has increased by a third. Government funding has not kept pace and, as a result, the Children’s Trust is faced with a deficit of £3.5 million. This is pretty representative, in common with local authorities up and down the country. What will the Minister do about it?

Jake Berry: The Government have their troubled families programme to tackle just the sorts of issues that the hon. Gentleman raises. No one in this House could be other than deeply concerned about the plight of our young people, particularly when they face the challenge of finding themselves in care, and that is why I am pleased that, since 2010, the amount the Government have spent on vulnerable children has increased by more than £1.5 billion.

Council Housing: Increasing Supply

12. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): What plans the Government have to increase the supply of council housing.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): We have given local authorities the tools that they need to increase the supply of council housing, abolished the housing revenue account borrowing cap, giving councils the freedom to borrow to build new homes, and provided a stable investment environment through a five-year rent deal from 2020.

Kelvin Hopkins: As vice-chair of Luton Borough Council’s housing committee in the 1970s, I recall that we faced a crisis housing waiting list of 4,000 families, but with the support of the then Labour Government we built and bought thousands of council houses and housed everyone on the waiting list. Now Luton’s Labour council has a crisis waiting list of 12,864 with no hope of housing them all, so will the Government stop cosying up to the billionaires and speculators with promises of tax cuts for the rich and give councils such as Luton the powers and the massive resources they need to provide the millions of good council houses the country so desperately needs?
Mrs Wheeler: I am absolutely delighted that the hon. Gentleman has brought up that question, because, frankly, the answer is yes. We want councils to get on with building, which is why we have taken the cap off the housing revenue accounts. We expect at least 10,000 new council houses to be built, so I suggest that Luton gets on with it.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): For any type of housing—council housing or private housing—to be built, we need to look at changing the rules around land banking. The Minister is aware that, in a Westminster Hall debate last week, I raised the problems that we have with a particular developer in Hull who is storing up different areas of land and preventing them from being developed. Will the Minister please meet me to discuss this problem in more detail and look at what legislative tweaks can be made to prevent this from happening?

Mrs Wheeler: The hon. Lady, as ever, puts her case terribly well. The appropriate Minister would be delighted to meet her.

Mr Speaker: Very well done. I think that we will put that down as a win.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Crisis and the all-party group on ending homelessness recently appealed to Ministers to prioritise for housing survivors of domestic abuse, but is not it the truth that it is difficult to prioritise anyone because of the social housing crisis—a crisis acknowledged just a few minutes ago by the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry)? Housing associations and local councils in particular have insufficient stock and limited capacity to build new ones to meet demand, and there are more than 1 million households on council waiting lists. Last year, just 6,500 social rented homes were built. That means that it will take 172 years for everyone on the current waiting lists to get a social rented home. Will the Minister please spell out exactly how she plans to sort out this crisis and offer our people some hope that they can also have a home of their own?

Mrs Wheeler: Again, I am absolutely delighted that the hon. Gentleman has asked that question, because we have actually put aside £9 billion for our affordable homes programme to deliver a quarter of a million affordable homes by 2022, including 12,500 for social rent. Let me repeat: we have given councils the ability to borrow against their housing revenue cap. We have taken the cap off. Please will councils get on with it?

[Interjection.] As the hon. Gentleman is chuntering from the Front Bench, may I tell him that wonderful councils such as the ever present Conservative South Derbyshire District Council are doing exactly that?

Integrated Health and Social Care: Northamptonshire

13. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What progress his Department is making with the Department of Health and Social Care on establishing an integrated health and social care organisation in Northamptonshire.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Following the meeting I had with my hon. Friend, we were pleased to facilitate meetings for the chief executives of the various councils and health bodies with officials from the Department of Health and Social Care and my Department. Those conversations have been very constructive, and I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that the Social Care Minister and I would both be delighted to meet him and other MPs once the proposals have been fleshed out in detail.

Mr Hollobone: I declare my interest as a member of Kettering Borough Council. There are still far too many patients in Kettering General Hospital and Northampton General Hospital who are classified as delayed transfers of care. They are mainly elderly patients whose medical treatment has been completed, but who face delays being put into the social care system. Does my hon. Friend agree that the reorganisation of local government in Northamptonshire presents a wonderful opportunity to create a social care and health pilot to combine these two services?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is spot on. Delayed transfers of care undermine patients’ dignity while putting pressure on beds and costing the taxpayer money. Although we have seen fantastic progress nationally with delayed transfers of care halving since the peak, Northamptonshire is obviously not in that place. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the opportunity and I dare say that greater integrated care could bring, and we are delighted to work with him and others to make that a reality.

Mr Speaker: I call Gordon Henderson. Not here.

Adult Social Care Funding

17. Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the funding for adult social care.

Rishi Sunak: The Government recognise the pressures faced by adult social services and have provided councils with an additional £10 billion in dedicated funding for adult social care in the three years leading up to 2019-20. Of course, the future level of funding will be settled in the spending review.

Bridget Phillipson: Councils are already struggling to meet the overwhelming demand and pressure to fund adult social care, to the extent that there will soon be little money left to pay for anything else. Demand is only going to increase and the need for reform is urgent, but after nine years of inertia can we ever expect this Government to get to grips with the growing crisis we face in adult social care?

Rishi Sunak: It is absolutely the case that the Government are gripping the pressures in social care—not only with £1 billion in extra funding at the recent Budget but, as we have recently heard, with greater integration of care between the NHS and social care. This is delivering real benefits on the ground, with a reduction in half of the delayed transfers of care showing enormous promise for what is possible in the future.
Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I am not quite sure where the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) was, but a number of Tory leadership contenders were queuing up on last night’s TV debate to pledge their loyalty to adult social care and their desire to see it properly funded. Now that there is a queue of Conservatives who are finally waking up to the adult social care crisis facing this country, what assessment does the Minister make of the amount of money needed to plug the gap?

Rishi Sunak: We are doing that work with our colleagues in the Department of Health as we speak, to ensure an accurate reflection of the pressures as we go into the spending review. Those pressures are real; everyone acknowledges that there is an ageing demographic at the top end of social care, but working-age adults now account for half of the budget. It is right that we get the demographics right and that we go into the spending review with a robust case for the amount of funding that social care requires.

Mr Speaker: I call Clive Lewis. Not here—a second absentee. I hope these characters are not indisposed. We look forward to seeing them again erelong. The important point is that Yvonne Fovargue is here.

Weighting for Deprivation: Fair Funding Review

20. Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Which local authority service areas will no longer be weighted for deprivation following the fair funding review.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Deprivation is an important driver of local authority costs, which is why we have proposed that it will be taken into account in four significant service areas, including adult and children’s social care. Together, these account for up to two thirds of councils’ total spending covered by the review.

Yvonne Fovargue: Will the Secretary of State agree to the Local Government Association’s calls for the Government to publish more of the analysis that has informed the fair funding review proposals?

James Brokenshire: Obviously, work continues and we see the recommendations and representations that have been made. Population is by far the most important factor for more universal services covered by the foundation formula; deprivation was shown to have a small effect over and above this. We continue to keep the matter under review, and will share data as and when appropriate as part of that work.

Topical Questions

T1. Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Last week, as communities celebrated Eid, we also reflected on those lives lost in the tragedy at Grenfell Tower. This House and other buildings were rightly illuminated in green light as part of the commemorations. It is also right that we continue to take further steps to support the community of north Kensington and drive a culture change on building safety.

The serious fire at Barking last weekend was a reminder of the need for vigilance. I visited the community on Monday and have maintained contact with the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, and with Bellway, the developer. I have asked the Building Research Establishment to investigate the fire and the independent expert panel to provide recommendations on any steps that may be required.

Finally, we remain very conscious of the impact of flooding in Lincolnshire and those whose homes have been affected. My Department’s resilience and emergencies division remains in close contact with local agencies who are leading the response, as well as with colleagues in Whitehall.

Bridget Phillipson: I join the Secretary of State in his comments. Rough sleeping is the very visible sign of the levels of suffering and failure that we see in our housing and social security systems. According to the Government’s own figures, rough sleeping has increased by 165% since the end of the last Labour Government. Does the Secretary of State accept that this is just not good enough—that we need to do much more? What is he doing to tackle this scourge?

James Brokenshire: I do recognise the huge issue that the hon. Lady highlights in relation to rough sleeping. While the latest data on rough sleeping—the count last year—showed a small decrease, I know there is more that we need to do. That is why we have our £100 million rough sleeping strategy and work with our rough sleeping initiative in council areas. But her challenge to me is right. That is why I do keep this issue under careful review, and if there are further steps that we need to take, we will take them.

T4. Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Noting that the right to buy has been abolished in Scotland, what efforts is my hon. Friend making to re-energise home ownership throughout the United Kingdom, particularly for first-time buyers?

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): It is very heartening to hear at least someone from Scotland standing up for aspiration and, in particular, home ownership. My hon. Friend is an example himself—a living embodiment—of the social mobility that home ownership can produce, and I congratulate him on his question. He is right that this Government have done quite a lot on home ownership, putting 542,000 people into home ownership who were not there in 2010, and through Help to Buy there is much more that we can do. I urge him to advertise north of the border that help to buy ISAs and lifetime ISAs are available across the whole of the UK, notwithstanding the barriers that are put in the way of home ownership in Scotland.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) amply warrants the panegyric that the Minister has just lobbed in his direction, so I hope he will not take offence when I say that at this sensitive time it might also be prudent to bear in mind that he is, in all likelihood, being lobbied.
T2. [911377] Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): New research by housing association Habinteg reveals that outside London fewer than a quarter of new homes being built would be suitable for older and disabled people, and only 1% are accessible for wheelchair users. What will the Government do now to raise standards so that all new homes are accessible and adaptable for older and disabled people?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady makes a very powerful and important point about accessibility. Everyone should be able to access a home that is right for their needs. It is crucial that we understand how the changes to the building regulations on access introduced in 2015 are working on the ground. She refers to the Habinteg report, and we will look at that carefully as part of a review of those requirements. I am grateful to her for highlighting it to me.

T6. [911381] Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Residents in my constituency village of Burwash have raised concerns about the transparency of the planning appeal process—namely, that the developer seems to have access to information that perhaps residents do not. Does our excellent Housing Minister have any plans to reform the planning appeal process so that my constituents have more comfort and can be more involved in the process?

Kit Malthouse: Forgive the love-in, Mr Speaker, but my hon. Friend is a constant and persistent champion for his constituents in the many beautiful villages that he represents. He is quite right to identify an issue that a number of people have raised with me across the country—namely, the transparency of the Planning Inspectorate. That organisation is in the process of implementing the measures outlined in the Rosewell review in order for planning inquiries to provide more transparency. We are, at the moment, procuring a new online IT system—dread words in Government, I know, but nevertheless we are—that will allow progress of appeals to be tracked, providing exactly the sort of transparency that he is looking for.

T3. [911378] Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Since doing a constituency survey on leaseholds, I have been continually shocked by case after case of unfair charges and rises, such as sinking fund costs going from zero to £250 without any warning. I therefore welcome the Competition and Markets Authority’s investigation into leaseholds, but what assurances can the Minister give to current leaseholders who face increasing costs? Will he put a moratorium on new leaseholds while the CMA does its work, to ensure that there are fewer victims?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady might be interested to know that there are fewer houses being built as leaseholds in England since the mid-1990s. The numbers have come right down, but she is right to highlight the work of the Competition and Markets Authority. As she knows, I called for the CMA to look into these abuses. There have been appalling examples, and she highlights some. We are determined to bear down on this. We have the new industry pledge, but I keep this under close review, given the issues that have been raised.

T8. [911383] Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What plans are there to continue to support Cornwall’s unique culture and language?

James Brokenshire: I commend my hon. Friend for highlighting Cornwall, which I have a close affinity to, given that my family all come from there and my son was born there. I am very keen to see support for Cornish heritage, culture and language. We committed £100,000 to Cornwall Council over two years and continue to work with it to encourage the promotion of Cornish culture, which I know he will continue to champion, and I am pleased to support it on his behalf.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting our review. I am happy to look at all things as part of that review, but she is right to highlight that issue. We are keen to see what we can do to improve the collection process, while maintaining high collection rates to fund the public services we rely on.

Mr Speaker: I call Marcus Fysh. Where is the chappie?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Will the Secretary of State update the House on what he and his Department are doing to ensure that every council is meeting its commitment to obligations under the armed forces covenant?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a powerful and important point. I commend her for the work she has done to champion the military covenant, which every local authority has signed. The Minister for Defence People and Veterans and my Department have just written to councils, to encourage them to have a covenant.

T7. [911382] Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Given that waiting for the social care Green Paper makes Godot seem prompt, will the Minister agree to meet representatives of the Opposition parties, as well as leaders of the all-party Local Government Association, to use the LGAs excellent Green Paper as a starting point for fixing our broken social care system?

James Brokenshire: I continue to have discussions with the LGA and others to underline and champion the importance of sustainable local government finance and delivering good-quality social care. We also have discussions with the Department of Health and Social Care. It is right that we reform and challenge, and I will be taking that forward in terms of the spending review.
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): North Lincolnshire Council recently refused a planning application for a housing development in the village of Goxhill, and North East Lincolnshire Council subsequently refused an application in the village of Waltham. Both were overturned on appeal. The reason for the councils’ refusal was based on a lack of infrastructure, access to public services and the like. Will the Minister consider giving better guidance to inspectors, so that they take more notice of local opinion?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. He will understand that I cannot comment on specific planning applications, but he is right to identify that local communities often feel excluded from the planning process. The solution is for them to put in place a neighbourhood plan. The Government have pledged—and I have pledged, for however long I remain in this job—to strengthen neighbourhood plans, so that local people do not feel like victims of the planning system, but its master.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The Chair must always encourage new, young Members who are trying to develop their craft. I call Jack Dromey.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, the Government promised “Never again”. Two years on, not one penny has been forthcoming to help Birmingham City Council make safe 215 tower blocks, with 10,000 households. The Secretary of State quite rightly met private leaseholders before his recent announcement of the £200 million fund. Will he now meet council tenants from Birmingham? Birmingham MPs have asked that he do precisely that.

James Brokenshire: I recognise the points the hon. Gentleman makes on a number of issues in relation to Birmingham. We continue our discussions with Birmingham, at a whole host of different levels, on the services it is providing and some of the challenges it is dealing with. I will certainly continue to meet MPs from Birmingham and the west midlands, who have been convened in the past on some of these issues. I would be happy to discuss these issues further with them, and also in relation to the council tenants he refers to.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is one of the purposes of this Conservative and Unionist Government to strengthen the Union. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House what his Department is doing to strengthen the Union?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a really powerful and important point on the issue of the Union, which I believe in hugely and passionately, and how we strengthen it and act on that. Through the UK shared prosperity fund, but also through the stronger towns fund, we do have the opportunity to ensure that all parts of our proud Union are playing their role in this country’s prosperity and future, and that is something I and my Department are proud to challenge.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Government have provided some funding for the removal of aluminium composite material cladding, and they are testing non-ACM cladding on hundreds of buildings. The Minister for Housing has accepted that, if that cladding proves to be as dangerous as ACM cladding, it will have to be taken off. In that case, will the Government also agree to provide funding for the removal of non-ACM cladding?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the important point the hon. Gentleman the Chair of the Select Committee has highlighted on building safety. It is why I took the exceptional step of making £200 million available for remediation. It required a ministerial direction to be able to do so, because of its significance. Clearly, we have the ongoing testing of non-ACM materials. I will be advised by my team—the expert panel—in relation to the next steps, and I am clearly keeping the situation under careful review.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): There is no point building thousands of new houses in greenfield areas unless we have the requisite infrastructure to go with them. A recent report shows that North Northamptonshire faces an infrastructure deficit of over £300 million in delivering the houses requested by central Government. What can the Department do to ensure that the infrastructure comes to North Northamptonshire?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is quite right: one of the problems with housing development in the past in this country is that we have tended to build the houses first and cope with the infrastructure last. We have attempted to reverse that equation, and we now have £5.5 billion dedicated to housing infrastructure, which is specifically designed to release land to build the houses the next generation needs. I would be more than happy to meet him to discuss the possibility of a North Northamptonshire bid to the housing infrastructure fund either now or in the future.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): When the Secretary of State meets the Chancellor to do the spending review, will he stress to the Chancellor that while a lot of money has been put into local government, it is inadequate to prevent the closure of libraries, or to cover issues such as social services and particularly youth clubs? Will he ensure that the Chancellor has a look at that and, more importantly, at social care in the community?

James Brokenshire: Through the last local government financial settlement, we increased the funding available to local councils for dealing with some of the issues of social care. If the hon. Gentleman is asking me to champion the needs of local government and to recognise the quality services it delivers, with the amazing work delivered by our councils up and down the country, I can assure him that I will absolutely be doing that.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): The Department recently consulted on extra powers for local authorities and the police to deal with unauthorised encampments, a series of which we have had recently in Newport. Can Ministers update us on the progress being made so that our authorities have the powers they need?
James Brokenshire: As the hon. Lady will know, a number of those enforcement powers are led by the Home Office, and co-ordination between councils and the police is imperative. She will know that I laid a written statement on that a while back. Discussions continue with my ministerial colleagues, because I recognise the pressures. If there are specific examples that the hon. Lady would like to draw to my attention, I would be pleased to receive them.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Further to my last, if a decision could be expedited, the developer is now on the site, so any compensation will escalate.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I refer my right hon. Friend to the answer to my previous question.

Mr Speaker: Or even to his.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Many will have been surprised by the Secretary of State’s complacent comments earlier about Sure Start centres. He will have seen the Action for Children report, which shows a 20% fall in usage, hitting the most vulnerable hardest. Does he understand that not only is that reprehensible, but that it costs us more in the long run?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman will have noted the figures I gave regarding the improved quality of a number of providers and, indeed, of children leaving reception with good levels of development. Obviously, local councils determine how they prioritise their resources, but it is important to look at the evidence.
Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on what the Government are doing to protect people from violent crime.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): It is with great sadness that I stand here today following events over the weekend, including a fatal stabbing in the constituency of the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), fatal stabbings in Tooting and West Ham, and a fatal shooting in Plumstead. Those incidents are subject to police investigations; arrests have been made in some cases, but I know that the House will understand that I cannot go into any more detail on those particular cases at this point.

These events are a stark reminder that serious violence is a continuing threat. There is no single or simple answer, and the police, local authorities, police and crime commissioners and others are working with us, taking action on a number of fronts, locally, regionally and nationally, in the immediate term and in the longer term.

In the immediate term, we continue to support the police response to serious violence. We have made it simpler for the police in those areas most affected to use section 60 no-suspicion stop-and-search powers. The new £100 million serious violence fund is already helping the police in those areas most affected: £65 million has now been allocated and work is under way to deliver the remaining £35 million to support the roll-out and expansion of violence reduction units.

As I think hon. Members acknowledge, however, the root causes of serious violence will take time to tackle. That is why we are focusing so strongly on prevention and early intervention, to stop our young people turning to violence in the first place. We are investing more than £220 million in projects under the youth endowment fund and our early intervention youth fund, and we have run a public consultation on a new legal duty to underpin the multi-agency, or public health, approach to tackling serious violence. We are reviewing the responses and will report as soon as possible.

We also continue to support police co-ordinated action under Operation Sceptre. The latest phase of the operation took place in March and saw almost 11,000 knives taken off the streets. Through our #knifefree media campaign, we have sent new lesson plans to 20,000 teachers in advance of the school summer holidays. Now that the Offensive Weapons Act 2019 has received Royal Assent, we will begin to bring its measures into force, including the piloting of knife crime prevention orders. As the House will know, following the Prime Minister’s serious youth violence summit at the beginning of April, a new ministerial taskforce is driving action right across Government to renew our efforts in tackling serious violence.

We are working closely with police and crime commissioners, including the Mayor of London, the police and other partners to tackle violence and to save lives. We remain determined to protect the public and to stop more lives being taken, but Members will appreciate that there is no short cut to tackling serious violence.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to the Minister for her response and I share her opening sentiments.

There have been four murders in London in four days, with two murders in my constituency in two weeks. I commend Tower Hamlets police for early arrests in both incidents. Londoners do not want to see politicians scoring points and/or playing party politics; they want answers and they want action. Clearly, police numbers have an impact—Towers Hamlets has lost 200 officers since 2010—but I accept that the Minister says recruitment is under way. We need those recruits on the frontline.

What discussions has the Minister had with the Mayor of London and/or the Metropolitan Police Commissioner about the deployment of those new officers and on the impact of the number of police on our streets?

On powers, will the Minister advise on the Government’s position on stop and search? She mentioned it, but the sensitivity of the bad old days of black and minority ethnic men and boys being disproportionately stopped should be prevented by the arrival of cameras for frontline officers. What has been the impact of the Government’s proposal from the end of March to reduce the level of authorisation required from senior officer to inspector?

Will the Minister advise whether section 60 is actually still needed and whether consideration has been given to restoring discretionary powers to frontline officers? Mayor Biggs and Tower Hamlets Council have invested £3 million to fund additional police officers. Will the Minister advise on what discussions she has had with Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government ministerial colleagues in respect of more support for the local authority, and on how the Home Office feeds into the London violence reduction unit, which is trying to replicate the success of the Glasgow violence reduction unit?

This situation cannot go on. President Trump’s puerile intervention is not helpful. We need a more proactive and intelligent response. My constituents are anxious and they are frightened. They see low-level anti-social behaviour escalating to violent crime. We need a holistic approach to be advocated by the Government, the Minister, Mayor Khan and Mayor Biggs. The Government have control of the resources. I know it is not just about money, but it does help massively.

In conclusion, will the Minister advise on what representations the Home Office is making to the spending review to prevent more lives being lost? The police are working hard and they need our support, both moral and financial. Today, we all need to say clearly and bluntly that we join together in stopping this going any further.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his urgent question and for his attendance at the roundtable I hosted recently, along with the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, to update the House on our efforts to tackle serious violence. If I may say so, I think the hon. Gentleman has got the tone right. Putting aside comments from overseas or elsewhere, the job of work is to tackle serious violence.

The hon. Gentleman mentions police resources. He will know that London has already set up a serious violence taskforce and a violence reduction unit. The taskforce has some 300 dedicated officers—I have been out on a raid with them—targeting the hotspot areas within London. The commissioner and others in the
policing world are doing specific work across the country to identify and target hotspot areas. I hope the hon. Gentleman welcomed the announcement in the spring statement of a further £100 million to tackle serious violence. The Met is receiving about £20 million of that to support surge policing. As I say, announcements will be made imminently in relation to the outstanding money and the creation of violence reduction units, as well as those that have already been created.

We have seen a huge increase in stop and search across the Met and other policing areas. We analyse this very carefully, and I am pleased that at the most recent meeting that the Home Secretary held with chief constables, they all reported that levels of complaints about stop and search have dropped dramatically. Many of us understand that to be because of the use of body-worn cameras, which provide reassurance not only to officers, but importantly, to the public.

In terms of discussions with MHCLG, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will have welcomed the recent announcement by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on the specific funding of knife crime projects.

On the spending review, we are working across Government to ensure that we have a cross-governmental spending review programme to help the children who are not just most at risk of serious violence, but have other forms of vulnerabilities, which, sadly, I have to deal with in my brief, including, for example, domestic abuse. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand that I cannot go into the specifics of the spending review at the moment, but the fact that we have seen an increase this year of more than £1 billion, including the £100 million in the spring statement, and that we have the help of police and crime commissioners, is a firm statement of intention by the Home Secretary and the Government. I thank him again for his urgent question.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I was delighted to hear what my hon. Friend had to say about targeting hotspots. Does she agree that it is now clear that properly used and monitored stop and search is part of the answer, and will she confirm that the Government will continue along that line?

Victoria Atkins: I welcome the fact that the right hon. Lady welcomes our action to ensure that stop and search has the trust of more people in communities. We see it as a vital tool within the portfolio of tools that police officers and others have. If she does not mind, I will decline to respond to the point about President Trump, for the simple reason that, as I know from the urgent question, we all have at the forefront of our minds today the four families who have been affected in the most terrible way this weekend. I hope she will forgive me if, today of all days, I do not dive into the political pool.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for her openness in engaging with colleagues on this difficult issue, particularly the roundtable she held a short while ago. Will she confirm that she, her Department and her officials will remain open to a proper independent assessment of all the evidence on the root causes of this issue and will engage with the evidence with an open mind?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for his participation in the recent roundtable. I can reassure colleagues across the House that hon. Members, particularly those representing the constituencies most affected by knife crime, will benefit from regular updates from the Home Office ministerial team. The roundtable was one example of that. We know that drugs and the gang culture around them are key drivers of serious violence—we have only to look at recent reports of what is allegedly happening in Liverpool—and one way we are attempting to tackle that is through the independent review of drug use in the 21st century led by Professor Dame Carol Black. We will consider the results carefully and, as he says, with an open mind.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing the urgent question. I cannot begin to comprehend the sense of loss experienced by those families who have lost loved ones to violence in recent days, and we too sense the profound sense of loss experienced by those families who have lost a son, a brother or a father. The Minister is correct to say that there is no single answer, and we congratulate the Met police on its work over this horrible weekend that we have endured, but does she accept that any strategy to combat rising crime must include hiring more police officers?

I note that the level of complaints about stop and search has dropped, which is very important. As the Minister intimates, that is to do with the use of body-worn cameras, because there is no question but that in the past, indiscriminate stop and search undermined communities’ confidence in the police and therefore undermined the fight against crime.

In relation to the President of the United States implying that the Mayor of London is responsible for the rise in violent crime, the Mayor must be held to account like any other politician, but in 30 years in Parliament I have never heard a President of the United States reference a London Mayor at all. It is hard to escape the conclusion that President Trump may be singling out Sadiq Khan because he is of the Muslim faith. Does the Minister accept that if that were true, many people would find it distasteful?

Victoria Atkins: I welcome the fact that the right hon. Lady welcomes our action to ensure that stop and search has the trust of more people in communities. We see it as a vital tool within the portfolio of tools that police officers and others have. If she does not mind, I will decline to respond to the point about President Trump, for the simple reason that, as I know from the urgent question, we all have at the forefront of our minds today the four families who have been affected in the most terrible way this weekend. I hope she will forgive me if, today of all days, I do not dive into the political pool.

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As the Minister knows, my party fully supports a public health approach to stopping violence, which has delivered significant progress in Scotland and elsewhere, and that the SNP supports and has delivered on protecting police numbers. We support the Government’s commitment to a public health approach, therefore, but when will we see an end to the significant cuts, particularly to local authority budgets, that have seen the safe spaces and key services crucial to such an approach decimated? While we also welcome the Home Secretary’s recent personal commitment to repairing the dramatic loss in police numbers, does the Minister share our support?

Finally, the Home Affairs Select Committee has heard disturbing evidence from young people, particularly young black and minority ethnic people, about their very poor relationship with and lack of trust in the police. We support the Government’s commitment and that the SNP supports and has delivered on protecting public health approach to stopping violence, which has something before it has happened, but we are very early in this stage, as I do not want to announce this very early stage, as I do not want to announce details after the urgent question, but I can assure him that tackling serious organised crime is an essential part of our overall efforts to target serious violence.

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Yet more lives have been lost, more families are devastated, and there are disturbing reports of older gang members paying young people to stab, maim and kill. However, the letter that the Minister has just sent to the Home Affairs Committee suggests that the surge funding for policing is for only one year, which limits police forces’ ability to recruit the officers they need, and also that the youth endowment fund will support only £6 million-worth of projects this year, which is a drop in the ocean compared with the scale of the cuts in youth services and interventions. Does the Minister not understand the real concern about the lack of grip, the lack of urgency, and the lack of scale in the Government’s response? Can she really put her hand on her heart and say, in the light of this escalating violence, that the Home Office is doing enough?

**Victoria Atkins:** The hon. Gentleman is always a constructive and critical friend of the Government in this sphere. I will deal with his last point first. We have to reiterate to young people, particularly in the areas most affected by serious violence, that the police are on their side. I do not underestimate the complexity of this piece of work. It will take a great deal of time for the police to rebuild their relationships. Just a couple of weeks ago, I invited into the Home Office current and former gang members to listen to them myself and hear about their day-to-day lives, the challenges they face and their thoughts on how we can improve not just the rates of serious violence but their lives more generally. I have taken great inspiration from those conversations, as well as from my meetings with the families of victims from across the country. There are various plans in motion to assist with the public relationship between the police and young people in particular, and there is one in particular I want to focus on. I hope the hon. Gentleman does not mind if I do not go into detail at this very early stage, as I do not want to announce something before it has happened, but we are very conscious of the need to build relationships between the police and the people they are trying to protect.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): While there is a definite link between drugs, criminal gangs and knife crime, and while the police response must involve a surge in visible policing and discretionary stop and search, surely we must place greater emphasis on intelligence-led detective work to break up the criminal gangs, and on exemplary sentences for the gang leaders who are caught.

**Victoria Atkins:** There is an understandable tendency to focus on the law enforcement response and on our early prevention strategy, but an important part of this formula is the behaviour of serious organised crime gangs. These are the people who exploit our young people and children, these are the people who try to extend their drug markets across the country, and these are the people whom we absolutely must target if we are to bring an end to this. Along with the Minister for Security and Economic Crime, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), I have emphasised the need to target serious organised crime, including the profits that the criminals make from their disgraceful, disgusting business. I shall be happy to discuss the issue with my hon. Friend in more detail after the urgent question, but I can assure him that tackling serious organised crime is an essential part of our overall efforts to target serious violence.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Our current focus is obviously on the tragic events that took place in London over the weekend, but may I urge the Minister not to lose sight of the growing concerns of my constituents, from Barton in the north to Cleethorpes and the villages in the south? Thankfully, Humberside police numbers have been increased significantly and they do some excellent work, but they need continuing reassurance that resources will be made available to provincial forces such as theirs.

**Victoria Atkins:** It is always a pleasure to answer a question from my constituency neighbour. We might be separated by a constabulary boundary, but I absolutely understand the ripple effect of serious organised crime and of county lines gangs in areas such as ours. That is why one of our first actions to help those force areas that...
might not have the experience of gangland activity of some of our larger urban or metropolitan forces is the setting up of the national co-ordination centre on county lines, in order to help spread good practice. I am pleased to say that in just the few months it has been operating that centre has caused more than 1,000 arrests and the safeguarding of more than 1,300 vulnerable people.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Last night my community was violated yet again by a murder; it has been a terrible few years in West Ham, with nine young lives lost. The hon. Lady talks about money but we need proper funding. We do not need projects; we need police officers. We do not need overtime payments; we need something fundamental that raises the level of police activity. We are told that there are 1,000 county lines operations in this country. I want to be assured by the Minister today that there are 1,000 investigations into who is running those gangs and who are ultimately responsible for the murder, exploitation and enslavement of many young people in my constituency.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady has been a consistent advocate for her constituents, who have been so tragically affected by the rise of county lines. I remember a debate more than a year ago in Westminster Hall where she spoke passionately of the impact on mothers affected by serious violence and homicides in her constituency. The National Crime Agency has set county lines and the exploitation of children as a national threat; it is co-ordinating the national level operations because it has the national overview. That is where the national county lines co-ordination centre comes in, to help co-ordinate activities across force boundaries, because as the hon. Lady will acknowledge, these gangs to do not respect constabulary boundaries. We have the extra funding—the £100 million serious violence fund that is going into London and other areas affected—and of course we have just over £1 billion of extra funding for policing nationally. The hon. Lady will know from the many conversations she and I have had about this issue that it is as much about early intervention and prevention as about law enforcement, and the £200 million youth endowment fund, alongside the early intervention youth fund which is already operating and helping up to 29 projects across the country, will help reach those children she cares so passionately about.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How can the anger of the public be assuaged when, notwithstanding the powers granted to the courts, they can at this, including preventive strategies, but when struggling with seriously and profoundly constricted budgets it is very difficult for those preventive measures to have any real meaning. Will the Minister meet me and the leader of Waltham Forest Council, Clare Coghill, to talk about what the council and police are doing and what additional resources they need?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman is a consistent campaigner for his constituency and of course I am happy to meet him. At the risk of volunteering the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, my right hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) said, we cannot go on like this; this has to be addressed. The police and council in my borough of Waltham Forest are throwing everything they can at this, including preventive strategies, but when struggling with seriously and profoundly constricted budgets it is very difficult for those preventive measures to have any real meaning. Will the Minister meet me and the leader of Waltham Forest Council, Clare Coghill, to talk about what the council and police are doing and what additional resources they need?

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The most recent serious act of violence in London took place three and a half hours ago in my constituency: it was a shooting in a perfectly quiet residential street. As my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) said, we cannot go on like this; this has to be addressed. The police and council in my borough of Waltham Forest are throwing everything they can at this, including preventive strategies, but when struggling with seriously and profoundly constricted budgets it is very difficult for those preventive measures to have any real meaning. Will the Minister meet me and the leader of Waltham Forest Council, Clare Coghill, to talk about what the council and police are doing and what additional resources they need?

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): We all agree that early intervention and prevention are part of the public health approach, but I sometimes worry that when we use that language, we are not actually following it through. Cross-departmental working is at the heart of the public health approach, so can the Minister update us on how that is going in relation to education, mental health, youth work, early intervention—Sure Start, for example—and the police? Also, has she done any work on pooled budgets, to ensure that the money follows the issue and that we do not simply have everybody fighting over their own departmental budgets?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. On the work that is ongoing across the Government, she will know about the Prime Minister’s serious youth violence summit, the purpose of which was to drive action across the Government. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that the Department for Education has a huge role to play, as does the NHS and others. Indeed, only last week I visited an alternative provision school to see for myself the work being done on the ground to
help young people who are at risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of serious violence. On the actions arising out of the summit, there is now a specific ministerial group attended by all the relevant Secretaries of State, as well as a unit within the Cabinet Office, to drive this work forward, so it really is at the centre of Government.

On the question of spending priorities, spending review discussions are ongoing and it will not surprise the hon. Lady to know that I have been emphasising the need for us to help vulnerable people—particularly those who might have been subject to adverse childhood experiences—at an early stage in life. That has huge benefits both for the way in which society enjoys itself and for the Home Office and its partners not having to pick up the pieces.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Yet more lives have been taken too early, and yet more families have been left to mourn their loss. Of course the police need resources, but they also need powers. In this instance, knife crime prevention orders are a power that the police and the Mayor of London have asked for. May I ask the Minister when we will be in a position to see these orders rolled out, in the hope that the entire House will give them the chance to succeed?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend is a consistent advocate not just for his constituency but for the young people he has helped to escape a life of crime in the past. He asks about knife crime prevention orders. The Offensive Weapons Act 2019 has recently received Royal Assent, and we are aiming to introduce the secondary legislation that we need to alter to enable the piloting of these orders as soon as possible. We are intending to do this in the autumn. The police asked for these preventive powers, and through the Offensive Weapons Act, we have been able to deliver them.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in welcoming the London Borough of Newham’s recent decision to appoint 30 additional youth workers? Does she recognise that drastic cuts in youth service funding since 2010 have made the current problems worse?

Victoria Atkins: I genuinely thank the hon. Gentleman for all that he does on this issue. It is a particular issue in his constituency, and I respect his work. I welcome that announcement about youth workers. The way in which youth services have been funded is, of course, a point of tension between the Government and the Opposition, but if the London Borough of Newham has been able to find the resources to invest in that, and if it thinks that that is the best way of spending that money, that is the sort of local approach that we fully support. I wish those youth workers the very best in their work in his constituency.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The recent murders in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) have sent shockwaves through our borough. Knife crime in Tower Hamlets has increased by 34% over the past eight years. We are having to come to the House week in, week out to ask the Government to intervene, to provide more policing, more youth facilities and more services, to protect people, to prevent crime, and to prevent the needless loss of lives. Does the Minister agree that this crisis is a national emergency? Although she has been put up to defend the Government and to explain the situation, this is not good enough. The Government must take serious action and invest serious amounts of money to tackle this problem, or we will sadly be back here again next week and the week after to raise these issues. Things cannot go on like this.

Victoria Atkins: I respectfully remind the hon. Lady that if she reads the serious violence strategy, she will see the key drivers of serious violence that have been identified by my excellent Home Office officials. Looking at the evidence, she will also be reminded of the fact that those drivers include drugs, and she will know of our international work to draw together colleagues from across the world to share intelligence and operational best practice as to how to tackle serious violence. For example, at the Prime Minister’s knife crime summit we heard from an eminent professor from Chicago about how violence in the home is a high indicator that someone will be either a victim or a perpetrator of violence on the streets. That is why, for example, the domestic abuse Bill, the introduction of which I hope the whole House supports, is a key piece of work. Although I absolutely hear and understand representations about resources, we cannot just look at this as a resources issue. We must look at the wider key drivers of crime, which include drugs and violence in the home.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): May I say to the Minister that anyone watching this session will be looking on with a sense of incredulity? Where is the passion, the indignation, and the horror about what is happening on our streets, not just in London but across the country? Violent crime is soaring and has been for months. Members across the House have raised the matter with the Government, but all we get is, “A million here, and a million there,” which is peanuts given the problems we face. This is a national emergency! Cobra should meet, and the Government should bring the same urgency and dynamism to the situation that they would bring if there had been—God forbid—a terrorist attack. It is about time that the Minister got a grip on the situation. For that matter, where is the Home Secretary? I have raised this matter again and again. He is absent without leave, busy fighting for the Tory leadership when he should be here doing his day job.

Victoria Atkins: This is not about my tone or the hon. Gentleman’s tone; it is about action to help the families most affected by serious violence. I, for one, think there is a little too much anger in politics at the moment. Anger is not going to solve the problems of serious violence. It is our expectation that all our partners across the country will work together to address this, particularly through the new public health duty on which we recently consulted. It is by working together, and not through shouting and banging tables, that we will make progress.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Why does the Minister think we are still seeing an escalation in violent crime? She has read out a list of measures and projects that the Government are implementing, so why are we not seeing results?

Victoria Atkins: I am always very careful with statistics, because I am conscious that any use of statistics involves a family’s son, daughter, brother or sister, but I ask the hon. Lady to look at the Metropolitan police’s most recent statistics on knife crime in the city.
Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I recommend to the Minister the youth violence intervention programme run by Redthread, which sees trained youth workers embedded in A&E departments at certain hospitals in Birmingham, Nottingham and elsewhere to intervene and win the confidence of young victims of violent crime at a time that can make a real difference in breaking the cycle of their involvement in violent crime. It is a great project, but what assurance can she give me that such projects will receive the sustainable funding they need so that they can be rolled out into every A&E department in the country?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning the work of Redthread. The Home Office is investing in Redthread’s projects in Nottingham, Birmingham and London hospitals, and I have seen its work at close hand. I am very impressed by what Redthread does.

We will, of course, look at rolling out the project further, but I hesitate because some A&E departments thankfully do not see the levels of knife crime that perhaps London, Nottingham and Birmingham do. We have invested in those hospitals because we are targeting funding at hotspot areas, but we will look at where the project could assist by being rolled out further.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Minister should not selectively use statistics. Violent crime is significantly up, and we warned the Government when they were cutting police numbers that it would have an impact on crime. We were told that it is not about numbers but about the effective use of our police forces. She must now regret cutting 20,000 police officers, which must have an impact on what we are discussing today. What we want to hear from the Government is not about projects but about how much they will put into the police and how many of the police officers we have lost will be replaced.

Victoria Atkins: I am not selectively using statistics. I referred to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) to the Metropolitan police statistics precisely because of the action that the commissioner has taken in London, including setting up the serious violence taskforce, which, as I said earlier, dedicates 300 officers to hotspot policing across the capital. The commissioner has said that the recent figures show a decline in the increase, which is what I was talking about. It was not selective at all. I am just looking at the most recent evidence we have.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I inform the Minister that Opposition Members do not feel anger but passion, upset and worry about the numbers of young people affected, including those who have lost their life in my constituency, and about the apparent lack of urgency from this Government in addressing what is a national crisis. We saw many lives taken in London this weekend, and I was at a knife crime forum in my constituency on Friday to meet families, stakeholders and constituents who are worried and angry about the lack of action by this Government.

Is it not now time for the Government to take this seriously and recognise that when they cut funding for the police, for education and for youth services, it means we no longer have enough youth workers to work with our young people? Will she finally take note and make a significant investment in youth services so that our young people have a future and a hope?

Victoria Atkins: Action we have taken in the past 12 months includes: the serious violence taskforce, chaired by the Home Secretary and attended by the Mayor of London; the ministerial taskforce, chaired by the Prime Minister, to drive cross-governmental action; the establishment of the national county lines co-ordination centre, which has seen more than 1,000 arrests and more than 1,300 people safeguarded; the Offensive Weapons Act 2019, which is tightening the law on knives, acids and firearms, including through knife crime prevention orders; Operation Sceptre, which has been rolled out by police forces in weeks of action, the most recent of which saw nearly 11,000 knives taken off the streets; the anti-knife crime community fund, which funds small local projects—68 of them last year; the £22 million early intervention youth fund, funding 29 projects across the country; the #knifefree national media campaign, which has had more than 6 million views and 20,000 teachers receiving lesson plans in June; investing in Redthread intervention work in A&E departments in London, Birmingham and Nottingham; setting up the £200 million youth endowment fund; closing the public health duty consultation at the end of this month—and we are responding as quickly as we can; setting up an independent review on drugs; commissioning and receiving voluntary commitments from major retailers to prevent the under-age sale of knives in stores and online; giving more than £1 billion extra to the police this year, including £100 million from the serious violence and with the help of police and crime commissioners; making it easier for officers to use section 60 stop-and-search powers; investing £96 million to support victims and witnesses, through the Ministry of Justice; and supporting a new national police capability to tackle gang-related activity on social media.

That shows the complexity and range of the actions we are taking. I hope the hon. Lady is asking the same question of the Mayor of London, because we all bear a responsibility—[Interruption.] The hon. Lady laughs as I say this and does some funny actions. I do not know why she is taking this in such a light-hearted fashion. This is deeply serious. This is the commitment of the Government and our local partners, and we all should really be working together to stop this violence.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Whether we are talking about police officers required to tackle county lines from Liverpool to north Wales and Cheshire, or police officers needed to tackle the issues that my colleagues have mentioned in London, it must be clear to the Minister that there are not sufficient numbers of police on the streets. The Home Secretary himself, in his leadership bid, has said that we require 20,000 more police officers. Will the Minister tell us when she intends to secure additional officers? I am talking not just about through the spending review, but now.

Victoria Atkins: The right hon. Gentleman will be delighted to know that PCCs across the country are recruiting up to 3,000 new officers as a result of the new settlement that we—[Interruption.] My right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service reminds me that Labour Members voted against this new settlement. As I was saying, this is as a result of the £1 billion extra we are investing in policing.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her measured response. The violence over the weekend continues to cause great concern. Does she agree that to combat the violence there is a need for a joint strategy, both nationally and locally? Nationally this should be done through Government policy resourcing and funding, and locally it should be done alongside chief constables, with community policing. Together, they can address the crime, reduce the violence, restore confidence among the general public and make the streets a safer place to walk again.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his suggestion. We have previously looked into the idea. As we discussed during consideration of the Offensive Weapons Bill, there is a balancing act to strike between kitchen knives having a legitimate use—we all have sharp-pointed knives in our kitchens—and the real harm that these objects can cause if they fall into the wrong hands or are taken out of the kitchen or the home. Thus far, we have concluded that changing the design of knives would not assist, but I am always very open to looking into the idea. I will continue to review the evidence, but we felt that for the moment there were better ways to achieve the balancing act between the legitimate and illegitimate use of kitchen knives. Of course, helping mums, dads and carers to understand that if they are worried about their child, there are places they can go to seek help, particularly through the #knifefree campaign, may be one way for parents to understand how they can control what happens to the knives in their kitchen drawers.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Does the Minister not understand that we are reaping the whirlwind—that £1 billion has been taken out of the Met budget and we are being asked to be grateful for the small amount we are now getting back—and that youth services have been decimated, including in my own borough, where all funding was removed and we lost two thirds of all early-prevention services? Even Westminster City Council is now beginning to recognise, years later, the need to give something back. It is simply not good enough to read out a list of initiatives that are now expected to come into place. We do not want anger from the Minister; we want urgency.

Victoria Atkins: I am a little confused, because earlier the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) urged me to be angry. I am sorry that the hon. Lady takes issue with that. I am not angry at all, in that this has always been my approach. I have prosecuted serious organised crime and I have seen the terrible aftermath of these gangs through my work in the criminal justice system. This requires a methodical, cool-headed analysis of the evidence. The reason I read out the list was to give a flavour to the House of the range of activities that is happening on a national and local basis to tackle knife crime. Of course, there is so much more that local authorities are doing, as we have heard from hon. Members already, but, to my mind, this is about a methodical and hard-headed approach to looking at the evidence to see what works. That is precisely why I assume that she will welcome the emphasis we are putting on the evaluation of the various charitable projects that will be funded through the Youth Endowment Fund. We have made that an absolute requirement of the way in which the fund is run, so that we can discover what works and what does not work and invest in those projects that do.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): May I impress on the Minister the feeling that an Opposition Back-Bench MP has when attending a vigil of thousands of young people and are somehow made to feel responsible for the loss of a loved one? There is this utter sense of helplessness when you have had Backbench debates, when you have had a one-to-one with the Secretary of State—who by the way is not in his place today on this most important of topics—and
when you have had a one-to-one with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to talk about early intervention. You have ticked every box: you have had the community meeting; you have had the listening meeting; and then you get the reply. This is after you have been to the vigil and held in your arms the mother who is crying, and the sister of the young man who was stabbed. The mother says, “Dear Catherine, my youngest son has been mugged twice in three months. What are you doing about it?” We feel the frustration, the anger and the tragedy of it. Please, we must do something much more than just put in place programmes and strategies. We must look at the £1 billion taken away and the £1 million being given back. It just does not add up.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I know that constituency colleagues—constituency MPs—will be at the forefront of having to deal with the effects not just of the immediate family of those affected, but of the wider community. I do understand that. It is why I always say that the most important part of my role is meeting the families of victims. It seems to me that every time we meet across the House and every time we meet the victims, we learn more about the complexity of the causes and what we can do to help. I personally have benefited from the meetings that I have had in informing our work.

Resourcing is an issue that Opposition Members raise continuously, and I understand why, but we cannot escape the fact that the key driver of serious violence is the drugs market, and it is the serious organised crime gangs that are driving this. That is why our national efforts through the National Crime Agency are so critical.

The hon. Lady will also welcome the fact that the Mayor of London has set up the serious violence taskforce with the 300 dedicated officers who will go to hotspot areas. If there are issues with operational matters on the ground, I please ask her to raise them with him, because just as I benefit from hearing from colleagues across the House, I am sure that he too benefits from hearing from constituency MPs.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Here we are again after a weekend of shocking violence. My heart goes out to the families, friends and communities affected by these tragedies. Clearly, we must do better. What has clearly echoed across the Chamber is that this is about prevention. In her statement, the Minister mentioned the public health approach. Does she agree that we need a lot more training for the trauma-informed intervention in education, in healthcare, in prisons, in the police and in youth services?

Victoria Atkins: I think that that is right. Let me give an example of some of the actions that have not been mentioned today already. We are acting ahead of the response to the public health consultation with a rolling programme of engagement events for all relevant agencies and bodies, the police and so on across the country to help them understand how they can share data better. The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) mentioned speaking to an A&E consultant. Sharing that data on an anonymised basis can help the police to target streets, areas and wards that may have a particular problem or be a hotspot. We are very much acting on the basis of spreading advice and best practice across the country, before looking at what further steps we need to take regarding the public health duty that we have consulted on.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): In the answers today—and in the absence of the Home Secretary—the Government look aloof and simply as though they are not taking a national crisis seriously enough. Why is the Home Office still withholding tens of millions of pounds from the Met that its own advisers on the English Cities Fund said London requires for major demonstrations, sports events and visits of foreign dignitaries? When will that money come through to fund the extra thousands of police officers that London desperately needs?

Victoria Atkins: I have the advantage of my right hon. Friend the Policing Minister next to me, who informs me that the Met has already received emergency grants in that regard. I will write to the hon. Gentleman with the details of those emergency grants.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The west midlands is just as important as London, and over the last 10 years we have lost about 3,000 policemen. Logically, we cannot expect the same level of service; crime will go up. Over the last weeks in Coventry specifically, there have been stabbings—one fatal and one very serious. The police in Coventry are firefighting, and I have raised this issue many times. It is no good the Minister going through a list of all sorts of initiatives. The Government have to reassure the people out there because that is their duty, and the only way they are going to reassure people is with adequate policing. It is fundamental for the Government to protect their people, but they are not doing that at the moment.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to learn that his chief constable is one of the chief constables the Home Secretary meets regularly to discuss their approach to serious violence. West Midlands police is also one of the forces receiving extra money for surge policing through the £100 million spring statement money. I am pleased that the chief constable is setting up his own violence reduction unit; when I say “his own”, I mean that he is leading that work in the west midlands. We expect to see the results of that unit soon.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Last week we brought to Parliament the concerns of the 100-year-old community of Slade Road—a once fine community with Victorian houses and people who have lived in them for successive generations that is now wracked with crime. Fear stalks the streets and local people are angry about what has happened to the community in which they were born and brought up. Is the Minister seriously suggesting that there is no link whatever between the loss of 2,100 police officers in the west midlands—and 21,000 nationwide—and rapidly rising crime? Will she agree to meet local residents, the police, the local authority and me to discuss an action plan to restore peace to the streets of Slade Road?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman brought to life in this Chamber the impact of antisocial behaviour and crime on Slade Road in his constituency in his Adjournment
debate last week. At the risk of repeating my answer to the previous question, the chief constable of West Midlands police is one of the chiefs that the Home Secretary meets regularly to share best practice and to hold to account for serious violence in their local areas. The chief constable is in the process of setting up the violence reduction unit in the west midlands, and we expect to see the results of that unit very soon. The hon. Gentleman will also know that West Mids is one of the constabularies that has received money through the extra £100 million in the spring statement. I would, of course, be delighted to meet him and his constituents.

Listeria: Contaminated Sandwiches

4.39 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement on the listeria outbreak related to contaminated sandwiches in hospital trusts.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I would like to update the House on the actions the Government are taking to protect the public following cases of listeria in hospitals linked to contaminated food. The NHS has identified nine confirmed cases of listeria in seven different hospitals between 14 April and 28 May this year, all linked to contaminated sandwiches from a single supplier. All the known cases involve in-patients. Very sadly, five people have died. I would like to express my condolences to the families of those who have lost a loved one. I promise that there will be a full and thorough investigation, with severe consequences if there is any evidence of wrongdoing.

Lab testing indicated a link between two cases in Manchester Royal Infirmary and one case in Liverpool. Contaminated sandwiches were identified as the likely cause by Public Health England. The manufacturer—The Good Food Chain—and its supplier, North Country Cooked Meats, have withdrawn the sandwiches, and voluntarily ceased supply of all products on 7 June. They are both complying with the Food Standards Agency on a full product withdrawal. The other cases have been identified at these hospitals: Royal Derby, Worthing, William Harvey in Ashford, Wexham Park, Leicester Royal Infirmary, and St Richards in Chichester.

The risk to the public is very low, but any patients or members of the public with concerns should contact NHS 111 or, of course, 999 if they experience severe symptoms. Listeria infection in healthy people may cause mild illness but is rarely fatal. However, for certain groups it can be much more serious, as we have tragically seen. The NHS, Public Health England and the Food Standards Agency have acted swiftly to identify, contain and investigate the cause of this listeria outbreak. These deaths should never have happened. People rightly expect to be safe and looked after in hospitals, and we must ensure that we take the necessary steps to restore that trust that the public deserve to be able to hold.

This is not just about ensuring that the food we serve in hospitals is safe—the NHS served 140 million main meals to in-patients last year—but, importantly, is also about ensuring that food given to patients is healthy, nutritious, and aids their recovery. So I can inform the House that we are launching a root-and-branch review of all the food in our hospitals—both the food served and the food sold. The Government will work with the NHS to build on progress in three vital areas. First, there is eliminating junk food from hospitals. Since the introduction of the NHS action on sugar scheme, we have halved the sale of high-sugar soft drinks, and trusts are taking action to remove unhealthy food and drink items and replace them with healthier alternatives. After all, hospitals are places for good health. Secondly, on improving nutrition, new national standards for all healthcare food will be published this year. All patient menus will have to ensure that minimum patient nutrition
[Matt Hancock]

standards are met. Thirdly, on healthier choices, we will work closely with the Hospital Caterers Association and others to ensure that healthier food choices are available across the NHS.

The review will identify where we need to do more, where we need to do better to improve the quality of food in our hospitals, and how we help people to make healthier choices. I know that this is an issue that many colleagues in the House feel strongly about, as do the public. We will do everything we can to ensure that the food we eat in hospitals is both safe and healthy.

Jonathan Ashworth: Let me say at the outset that despite our often sharp political differences across the Dispatch Box, the Secretary of State has my commiserations over his entirely noble ambition to want to be the Prime Minister of this country—but perhaps, given Brexit, he has had a lucky escape.

Moving on to the substance of what we have to discuss today, our thoughts really must be with the families of those who have lost their lives. This is, first and foremost, an issue of patient safety and standards of care. Every patient deserves the very safest possible care and absolute confidence about the quality and safety of the food that they are offered. I am pleased that there is an investigation, and I welcome what he said about serious consequences if wrongdoing is found. I am also pleased that he talked about a root-and-branch review, which we have been calling for. As I understand it, NHS Improvement was already reviewing the hospital food plan, which was delayed from April. Is this a new review or an existing review that now has new obligations? Can he explain to the House how the review he has announced interacts with the existing NHS Improvement review?

I know that the investigation will want to get to the bottom of what went wrong and why, and it will no doubt make recommendations for the future, but we would be grateful if the Secretary of State offered some clarification. The first case showing symptoms of listeria was on 25 April, and sandwiches and salads were withdrawn on 25 May. When were Ministers informed, and what action was taken?

I am grateful that the Secretary of State listed the other hospital trusts affected, which include the one in my Leicester constituency. As I understand it, the Good Food Chain was supplying sandwiches to 43 trusts. Can he tell us the status of investigations or what investigations have gone on in the other trusts that he has not listed today? Does he expect cases to emerge in more trusts, and how will he communicate risks to the public?

What advice has the Secretary of State received from officials that microbiological controls for listeria need to be improved with respect to pre-packaged sandwiches? Will he consider introducing mandatory testing on all batches of high-risk food? Of course, this is not the first time that there has been a listeria outbreak. There was an outbreak in 2016, and in response, the Food Standards Agency investigated and issued a report warning Ministers of the dangers posed by pre-packed sandwiches. Can he outline what measures were taken by Ministers in response to that report in 2016?

I have been speaking to hospital catering staff in recent days, and they raised concerns that tight finances and years of capital cuts have left kitchens substandard, which has driven a move to greater outsourcing of catering, with sandwiches and soups steadily replacing hot meals. Recent data show some hospitals spending less than £3 per patient per day. Does the Secretary of State agree that the review he has announced today should be backed up by investment in hospital catering facilities and legally backed, clear minimum-quality standards for hospital food? Healthcare is not just about medicine, surgery, bandages and procedures; it is about nutrition and hydration too. Patients will need urgent reassurance. Can he provide that today?

Matt Hancock: The shadow Secretary of State raises important questions, and I will try to address them all. Ultimately, I strongly agree with him that this is about standards of care. People deserve to be able to trust that the food they eat and are given in hospital is safe and, indeed, nutritious and good for their health—that is an important part of this too. Clearly, the most acute aspect of what we are discussing is safety and the lack of listeria in food, but it is part of a much bigger picture, which is why we are having a root-and-branch review.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the hospital food plan, which NHS Improvement has been leading. The review will be wider than, but will encompass, some of the existing work that is ongoing. It is about not only how food is procured by hospitals, but the quality of food. Work on the national standards in hospital food is important. It has been ongoing for several years and will come to fruition very soon. More broadly, dozens of hospital trusts have brought their catering in-house and found that they get better quality food that is more likely to be locally produced and is better value for money. We will be examining that model closely, because I am very attracted to it, and it has the potential to reduce the risk of safety concerns such as this.

The hon. Gentleman asked about timings. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy), was made aware of this outbreak on 4 June. I was informed on 6 June, and we published the details of the outbreak on 7 June.

Before that, Public Health England very swiftly identified that there was a link between these particular listeria outbreaks. It is only because of recent advances in genomic medicine and testing that we could work out—that Public Health England could work out—that the outbreak in Liverpool and the outbreak in Manchester were connected, and therefore identify that the source was outside those hospitals, rather than inside the hospitals, and that is what then identified that this was from the food source. The truth is that there are just over 150 listeria cases a year. It is a notifiable disease, so we are confident that we are properly notified of the various cases. Frankly, it was cutting-edge work by Public Health England that allowed us to connect these different cases and work out that a single source was causing these deaths.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the 43 trusts that we know bought from the Good Food Chain. We have of course been in contact with all hospital trusts, whether or not they bought from this individual company, to try
to make sure that we have confidence in their supplies. The Good Food Chain has confirmed that it has followed advice and has disposed of all products. That is what the Good Food Chain company has said to us, but we are of course reconfirming that with the trusts because we want to get this right.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about investment in food and catering facilities. The truth is that it is important to have the best-quality food in hospitals. I am completely open to upgrading hospital equipment if that is what is necessary, and if it provides value for money. I have been struck by the number of hospital chief executives who have said that from the point of view of patient satisfaction, staff morale, and nutrition and the quality of food, bringing such food supplies in-house is the best thing they have done.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that in my constituency of Stone, where the Good Food Chain is situated, there is obviously very deep concern, not least because we had the horrendous Mid Staffs hospital crisis. I had to campaign on that against the Labour Government’s refusal to give a full public inquiry, which our Government did give.

Having said that, is it not the case that the Good Food Chain is only responsible for the products that the patients consumed, and that the bacteria came from another company, which I am given to understand is called North Country Cooked Meats in Salford? I do commend Public Health England and the Secretary of State for the rapid way in which they identified the connections between these different places. Whereas it is absolutely essential that we have the root and branch review the Secretary of State has provided, is it not also the case that while the companies concerned will have to accept responsibility as far as it falls on them, at the same time there are really important reasons to identify exactly what did happen—where the food was contaminated, how it was contaminated—and then to exonerate the Good Food Chain, if in fact that is the case, because it is very unfair for companies to be caught up in something when it was not entirely their fault?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend—[Interruption.]
Not yet. My hon. Friend rightly raises the question of the supply chain, and it is true that the food in question came from North Country Cooked Meats. In turn, we are trying to identify the suppliers to North Country Cooked Meats to get to the real root of this outbreak. He is quite right to identify that this is a supply chain issue, and that there is a complex supply chain in operation.

I join my hon. Friend in commending the work of Public Health England. Within days, it spotted the links between individual cases and, from a local incident, made this into a national incident. At the appropriate moment, it raised the issue with the chief medical officer and with Ministers in the Department, and we could then explain the problem to the public. Its work has identified the problem, and undoubtedly it has potentially saved lives.

Mr Speaker: I hope the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) will not be saddened by the fact that he is not yet a member of the Privy Council. After all, he is a Staffordshire knight, he has served his constituency without interruption in this House for 35 years, and I remind the House that the hon. Gentleman has a whole chapter named after him in the late Hugo Young’s estimable tome on Britain’s relationship with Europe. There is a chapter in the name of Mr Bill Cash.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I, too, would like to express our sympathies with the families of the five patients who lost their lives, but also the four who remain critically ill. Obviously, we do not know what outcome they face.

As the shadow health spokesperson highlighted, these sandwiches were sold to 43 trusts, and while there have been no cases since 25 May, the incubation period of listeriosis is 70 days, so will surveillance of those 43 trusts continue alongside the Health Secretary’s investigation?

The Food Standards Agency published a report in 2014 about the dangers of hospital food. It cited 32 failures, including sandwiches spending hours outside fridges, and fridges often not being cold enough. Indeed, it has been highlighted that hospital sandwiches have been the commonest source of listeria outbreaks over the past two decades.

As the Health Secretary says, simple cases are often a matter of people being unwell for a few days, but listeria poses a major threat to pregnant women, who may lose their child, and is life-threatening for people who are already ill. Will the Health Secretary therefore pay particular attention in his review to why on earth people who were seriously ill or frail were being fed sandwiches? Someone who has no appetite and is recovering from illness is simply not going to be tempted by a pack of sandwiches. That really makes the case for bringing food preparation in-hospital and producing tempting meals, because nutrition is critical to recovery.

Matt Hancock: I entirely agree with and endorse what the hon. Lady has said. She is quite right to point out that a meal has to be appetising as well as nutritious. The best hospitals deliver that, and I would like that practice to be much more widespread.

I reassure the hon. Lady that the 2014 report by the Food Standards Agency was, as I understand it, looked into in great detail and assurances have been made that what it raised has, correctly, been followed through. Obviously, that was before my time as Health Secretary but I have taken advice on precisely the point she raises and I have been assured that what was necessary happened. I am open-minded, however, on what may have happened and what more needs to be done, and the review will absolutely look into that question.

Finally, the hon. Lady is absolutely right about the incubation period. We remain vigilant. Because listeria is a notifiable disease, Public Health England is told of every case and is able to analyse the links from every new case to existing cases. Notification of most cases takes place after the fact, given the nature of the disease, but we are then able to find genetic links, where they exist, and find out whether different cases have the same source.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): As my right hon. Friend said in his opening remarks, one of the cases took place at the William Harvey Hospital in my constituency, and my constituent Tanya Marston, who is, happily, recovering from listeria, says that there should be a very urgent inquiry,
so I welcome the announcement that my right hon. Friend has made today. On the specific safety aspect, however, rather than the wider inquiry on nutrition, what is the timescale for coming to some kind of conclusion so that people can be reassured that hospital food is safe?

Matt Hancock: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and erstwhile campaign manager for his question. I am glad to hear that the patient who is his constituent is recovering. I am informed that all patients are either stable or have recovered, but for the five who tragically died. On the timescale, the urgent task at hand is to ensure that there are no further cases and that there is no more of the food that we know has the potential to cause problems in the food supply chain. That is what is going on right now. The timescale for the review will be a matter of months.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): As the Secretary of State knows, two of the tragic deaths occurred at Manchester Royal Infirmary. Our hearts go out to the families. Nothing could be worse than going to hospital poorly and trying to get better, and then dying because of a sandwich provided by the hospital to aid recovery. Like the Secretary of State, I want to pay tribute to Public Health England and the Manchester Royal Infirmary for acting so quickly in identifying the source and closing it down. As others have said, however, there are some wider questions. First, we need a bit more transparency. It is only today that we have learnt which other trusts have been affected. The what, the why and the how—there are still many questions we do not know the answer to. On food outsourcing, I welcome the review he identifies today, but surely we have to be a lot firmer in identifying that the growth in outsourcing food supplies is leading to some real safety issues and, potentially, to deaths.

Matt Hancock: I agree with the hon. Lady. Lady on the need for food to be produced in-house whenever possible, especially as the evidence from some of the best hospitals in the country is that it is also very good value for money. There really is no case for not doing that and I look forward to best practice spreading across the NHS. I will, like her, do what I can to make that happen. She asks about transparency. I made it clear that there are hospitals trusts where further information needs to be published. There is a need to tell patients first, which is why the information has come out at the pace that is has. That duty of candour is important, but of course the review will lead to full transparency. All that everybody wants to do is get to the bottom of this and learn lessons for the future.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): May I join those who have praised Public Health England? Not every hospital involved has necessarily had fatalities or major problems, but it was very important that Public Health England notified all those who might have been supplied by the same people. May I put it to the Secretary of State that we should not just think that there was one cause of listeriosis? It can come from processed vegetables, processed meats, ice cream and other things. May I ask him to recommend to everyone that people try to ensure there is safe handling, safe cooking and safe consumption to reduce the risk of cross-contamination? When an outbreak happens, that is the way, as well as through the work of Public Health England, that people can help to ensure it does not affect them.

Matt Hancock: I agree wholeheartedly with the wise words of my hon. Friend.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What is happening in hospitals? Surely we should be role-modelling fresh and healthy produce? Giving people packaged produce, including sandwiches, to eat gives them the wrong message about health and rehabilitation. Surely we should be role-modelling correct behavioural choices at every opportunity when somebody goes into hospital? Will the Secretary of State speak to the Government’s behavioural insights team to consider taking that forward? In my experience, kitchens in hospitals do exist. If he looks deeply into the issue, he will find that staff and visitors often have restaurants in hospitals. However, fresh food from those restaurants is not always made available to patients. We need to tackle and stop that inequality, particularly when patients are fragile, frail and elderly.

Matt Hancock: I will happily look into the last point for the hon. Lady. She is absolutely right that a hospital should be a role model of fresh and healthy food, because after all, what is a hospital but a place to try to make us all healthy?

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Although there is no evidence that cost is behind the tragic cases that we have heard about, will the Secretary of State look in his root-and-branch review at the price that hospitals are paying for food? Spending £1 per meal is not enough for a healthy, nutritious meal for patients. Some trusts are spending less than £5 a day on a patient’s food. Will he also look at legislating for safe staffing levels, so that there are enough nurses on wards to feed patients? About a third of patients are eating less than half the food that is served to them and are suffering from malnutrition. Will he look at both those issues to improve patient safety?

Matt Hancock: Making sure that there are enough nurses on wards is incredibly important for delivering good patient care not just in relation to food, but more broadly. My hon. Friend raises the question of price per meal. It is interesting that the hospitals that have brought food production in-house and source not necessarily locally distributed food but locally produced food, have often found that that reduces costs rather than raises them. This is a question not of resources, but of good practice.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I welcome the announcement of the root-and-branch review and I know that patient safety continues to be a top priority for the Secretary of State, but can he reassure me and my constituents that the overall risk of listeriosis remains low?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. Millions of meals are served in NHS hospitals each year. While we regret any death, especially a death that could have been avoided, the overall food in hospitals absolutely is safe.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The NHS is a pioneer of and, increasingly, an international authority on the new science of genomics. Will the Minister confirm...
that without this NHS expertise, the source of the outbreak would not have been identified nearly as quickly and that we could well have been looking at far more deaths than in fact occurred?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point—even more than he says. Without genomics, which the UK is the world leader in, it would have been impossible to link the different listeria deaths. They would have looked like individual cases in separate, individual hospitals. It is only because through genomics it could be worked out that the exact strain of listeria was the same in cases in different hospitals that we could then work out that there must have been a factor at work that was not internal to the hospital. When it was then identified that the food provider provided food to many different hospitals, that link could be made, too. Science and scientific progress are saving lives here.

Recall of Tumble Dryers

5.8 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Urgent Question:

To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on his decision to recall 500,000 unsafe tumble dryers manufactured by Whirlpool UK.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The Office for Product Safety and Standards produces a list of required actions for the business to take, and Whirlpool was given 28 days to respond, outlining the actions that it would take. The response received from Whirlpool was considered to be inadequate. As a result, the OPSS has written to Whirlpool to inform the company of its intention to serve a recall notice under the provisions of the General Product Safety Regulations 2005 in respect of the unmodified tumble dryers that remain in homes in the UK. As required by law, Whirlpool was given 10 days’ notice of that intention, which allowed it time to submit its views prior to the service of the recall notice or to seek arbitration in line with the provisions in the GPSR. Officials in the OPSS are reviewing Whirlpool’s response to determine whether it fully meets the requirements laid down in the draft recall notice.

At this time, all enforcement options remain on the table, including serving a formal recall notice. It would be inappropriate for me to comment further while the legal process is ongoing, but I will update the House in due course. It is important to stress that consumers who have had their affected tumble dryers modified can continue to use them and that those with an unmodified affected tumble dryer have been urged to unplug them and to contact Whirlpool. I encourage all consumers to register their appliances to ensure they receive updates on product modification and recalls. The OPSS will continue to monitor the situation closely and will take any steps it deems appropriate to ensure that consumers in the UK continue to enjoy the high levels of protection they have come to expect.

Andy Slaughter: I thank the Minister for her response, although, given the lack of action by Whirlpool, and indeed the Government, over a four-year period, there are many questions to be asked. If they cannot all be answered today, I would be grateful if she could write to me and perhaps meet me and other interested Members, as this is clearly an ongoing matter.

The fire that destroyed 20 flats in a 19-storey block in my constituency in 2016 was one of hundreds of fires caused by over 100 models of tumble dryer manufactured...
between 2004 and 2015 by companies now all owned by Whirlpool, but when I met Whirlpool a couple of weeks ago, it could not even say how many reports of fires it was receiving each week. This is the most serious consumer safety issue for many years. At one stage, it was estimated that one in six households in the UK had a faulty Whirlpool tumble dryer in use. Why has it taken four years to reach this point, despite repeated requests for recall from the fire brigade and others? What steps will the Government now take to ensure that unmodified dryers are recalled? I heard what the Minister said, but anything less than a recall now would be considered wholly inadequate.

What is the basis for the estimate of 300,000 to 500,000 unmodified machines in service, given that 5.5 million were sold and only 5,000 have been modified since Whirlpool estimated itself that there were 1 million unmodified dryers in December 2017? If it goes ahead, how will the recall process work, as a matter of law and in practice, given that, as the Minister said, it is unprecedented? What progress has the OPSS made on setting up the recall database that we were promised would be live by the end of this year? What further advice is being given to the owners of Whirlpool tumble dryers? Why has Whirlpool still not published on its website the list of model numbers affected, and why is it refusing to give one to Which? and Electrical Safety First? Why did the advice change from the OPSS? It seemed quite happy with the advice in April. Will the Government look again at the modification process and at the evidence compiled by Which? saying that the modified machines are still liable to catch fire?

Finally, does the Minister agree with what her predecessor, the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), said in asking the planted question last week, which is that there remain grave concerns about the “straightness” of Whirlpool? What will the Government do about this company, which has flouted the rules here? Is it not time to get tough?

Kelly Tolhurst: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s concern, specifically for his constituency, given the desperately sad incident that occurred there. He is absolutely right to ask these questions and raise these concerns, as would be any consumer who believed they were at risk.

We carried out the review at the behest of my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), who ordered a review of the Whirlpool modification process in 2018. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the review looked at the effectiveness of the technical modification and the adequacy of the outreach programme. It concluded that the risk was low, and was further reduced by the modification. Following the review, we issued a 28-day notice letter to Whirlpool, specifying issues on which we wanted more information and assurances. We were unsatisfied by its response, which is why, on 4 June, we issued a letter of intent of notice of a recall.

Following conversations that I had with the hon. Gentleman last week, he wrote to me at the end of the week asking for a meeting. As I said to him last week, I should be more than happy to meet him to discuss any of his concerns about the ongoing process. My absolute intention is to ensure that we hold companies to account when we do not believe that they are carrying out their legal obligation, which is to place safe products on the market.

The hon. Gentleman is entirely right to be concerned about the future prevention of fires. I can tell him that, according to Home Office data, there were 224 fires caused by tumble dryers in 2017-18, a 10% reduction on the previous year’s figure of 808. We will obviously do all that is required to ensure that consumers are kept free of harm. We are following due process, in line with the regulations, in order to ensure that Whirlpool carries out its obligations.

I am more than happy to answer any further questions from the hon. Gentleman in detail as the process continues, and, as I have said, I am also more than happy to meet any colleague at any time.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Can the Minister give us some indication of how many machines the Government think are still out there which could be risky, in the light of the high incidence of fires that she has reported?

Kelly Tolhurst: In response to a query from Which?, Whirlpool said that 1.7 million cases had already been resolved. It estimates that another 500,000 machines are still in people’s homes.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Thank you for granting the urgent question, Mr Speaker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on his relentless campaigning, and for securing this important question.

The Government stated their intention to initiate a recall notice to Whirlpool on 4 June, but that only became apparent in the House during topical questions to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on Tuesday 11 June. Can the Minister explain why she did not make a statement about the decision, which she has described as “unprecedented”, but which she considered not to be “unprecedented” enough to inform the House about it?

The issue of Whirlpool and its faulty products has been one of the biggest consumer safety issues for many years. The relevant fault affected more than 5 million tumble dryers under brand names that are now owned by Whirlpool UK, which were manufactured between 2004 and 2015. I welcome the recall notice regarding the 500,000 unmodified products, but I am seriously concerned about the millions of modified Whirlpool products that are still in people’s homes, and whose owners have reported fires and faults despite the modifications.

Which? spoke to more than 30 owners who have said that their “fixed” tumble dryers have caught fire, or have produced smoke or a smell of burning. There are millions of those modified machines out there in people’s homes.

Consumer safety must be our utmost priority, so will the Minister demand a full investigation of those reports, and go further by demanding a recall of the modified products too?

In April, the Office for Product Safety and Standards published findings of its inquiry into Whirlpool’s handling of the risk of the machines. It found that the risk of fire was “low”, and therefore no recall notice action was taken. Which? considered that the “inquiry is fundamentally flawed”, and that “it appears to favour business interests over people’s safety”.

Andy Slaughter}
The investigators failed to speak to any affected Whirlpool customers as part of the review, and further failed to verify the history of the 28 Whirlpool dryers that it tested, which meant that it was unable to draw conclusions about when the machines had been modified and by whom. The inquiry was published in April and the Minister’s subsequent contradictory decision to issue a recall notice obviously raises serious questions about the OPSS. Will the Minister clearly outline why she came to a different decision from the OPPS in April? Does she now believe that the OPSS investigation was fundamentally flawed and will she announce an investigation into that review to look at whether it was properly undertaken and whether there are lessons to learn for the future?

Kelly Tolhurst: I must start by outlining that the protection of consumers, the safety of consumers and the safety of products placed on the market are of utmost importance to me and this Government. I did indeed update the House last week in response to a question about the action that we have taken in regards to Whirlpool; it is part of a legal process, as I have already outlined. All complaints about modified or unmodified tumble dryers that have been duly registered were included in the review. The review was significant: it looked at many areas, took all the data into account, and carried out the assessments, as the hon. Lady has outlined, and I am absolutely satisfied that the review undertaken by OPSS was appropriate and robust.

I have not taken a different decision from OPSS. We were very clear. OPSS wrote to Whirlpool after the review outlining areas where it wanted a guarantee of further work. Whirlpool had 28 days in which to respond. It responded, and the OPSS reviewed that information and was not satisfied, finding that the commitment was inadequate. We therefore decided to issue a notice—an intention to recall. As I have outlined today, we will be reviewing what has been submitted on the market. There is no intention to put, as has been suggested, big business out of business, but to ensure and meet the commitments that Whirlpool has called out, so I say well done. Does she agree that we did not take a different decision from OPSS?

Kelly Tolhurst: As I outlined earlier, the review of Whirlpool was a review of the modification programme. It looked at the effectiveness of the technical modifications and the adequacy of the outreach programme. The review concluded that there was a low risk from unmodified machines, and an even lower risk from modified ones. The wider review was concerned with the actions that Whirlpool took to resolve any risk of lint fires in its machines. I believe that its findings were robust and proportionate. The info that was provided to us via Which? and “Watchdog” and the testing carried out by Which? were also featured and taken into account in the review. However, the review very much focused on the technical effectiveness of the modifications.

The reason that this has taken so long, as the hon. Lady suggests, is that we followed due process in carrying out a substantial review, making our assumptions and providing Whirlpool with laid-down notice to come back to us with what it would do to rectify the situation. I would just highlight that part of enforcing consumer and product safety involves ensuring that we carry out a review when we believe that manufacturers are not fulfilling their obligations under the regulations, and that we follow due process in doing so. We will continue to do that where there are concerns about any product that is placed on the market. We will ensure that organisations and large manufacturers comply with the law.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): All too often in my previous life I saw the damage, despair and devastation—not to mention the risk to life—that fire can bring to a family home. Will my hon. Friend confirm that product safety and standards remain a priority for this Government, and that manufacturers of white goods such as Whirlpool must act promptly and responsibly when faced with the evidence of goods not being fit for purpose? This journey of risk has been unacceptably long, but I thank her for the robust action that she has recently taken.
Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for that. I note his particular interest in this as a result of his past career. He is absolutely right to suggest that we will ensure that large manufacturers such as Whirlpool comply with the regulations if they find that a technical change needs to be made to their products. We expect them to take appropriate action where a risk has been identified. This is indeed a priority for this Government. It has been a priority since I have been in post, and we will continue to ensure that these organisations comply with the law.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): The recall has been far too long coming. As soon as Whirlpool became aware of the problem, it should have acted immediately and recalled every affected machine. As it is, it has sat back and waited years, and consumer safety has been at risk, with the Government finally stepping in last week. The public are rightly terrified of the danger that could be sitting in their homes. People who contact Electrical Safety First, Which? and other consumer bodies are struggling to find assistance because Whirlpool has refused to publish a list of the affected machines. Instead, members of the public have to wade through a series of hidden steps on the Whirlpool website to try to establish whether they have a potential fire hazard in their home. Why has Whirlpool been allowed to get away with that? A list should be readily available, so will the Minister commit to ensuring that Whirlpool publishes one immediately?

Kelly Tolhurst: We are following due process, and we are taking action. This has been an ongoing piece of work. When issues with the modification programme were raised, my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), instigated the review, and OPSS has been working since then and has been in continual communication with Whirlpool. It is vital that we follow due process and, whether the organisation involved is small or large, that we ensure that any action is proportionate and correct. Any consumer with concerns about the tumble dryer in their home to contact Whirlpool immediately.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I do not talk about this in public a lot, but I lost my father in an electrical accident when I was 10, and there has not been a Father’s Day in 40 years when I have not wished that he was still here. Consumer safety must come first, and I thank the Minister for the action she has taken. We have some of the strongest consumer safety standards in the world, but enforcement is sometimes challenging. Will she therefore take this opportunity to consider ways of strengthening the enforcement, and will she examine whether the penalties for producers are effective and strong enough?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I am sorry to hear about her father, particularly since this urgent question comes the day after Father’s Day. She is absolutely right. This action serves as a warning to manufacturers that if they put unsafe products on the market, this Government will act to make them comply with the law. The beauty of the OPSS, which this Government set up in January 2018, is not only that it is a national body that takes responsibility for national crises, but that it supports local enforcers on the ground with scientific and research-based knowledge. I assure my hon. Friend that we are taking the matter seriously, and this is a warning to manufacturers that we will enforce the law if we believe that they are not complying.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on his dogged pursuit of this consumer scandal. Is not too much onus being left on consumers to understand the potential risks to their machines? If half a million Whirlpool machines are still unmodified, how exactly are the Government tracking progress? If they proceed to recall, which they should, how will they ensure that Whirlpool is successful in getting the message through to the owners of all those machines?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady raises an important point on how we reach consumers, and part of the review covered the adequacy of the outreach programme. Our review found that Whirlpool needs to do more in that space, which is exactly why we issued a notice for Whirlpool to tell us what it will do further on the intention to recall. Whirlpool had time to respond, and we asked for further information on how it will get that information out to consumers. That will be a key part of how we review anything that Whirlpool submits to us, and the process will be ongoing if the recall notice is served or if Whirlpool decides to undertake a recall itself.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): We ought to recognise that Whirlpool took over Indesit Hotpoint in 2014. It identified the problem in 2015 and has been trying to take action, but not fully adequately.

Will the Minister ask Whirlpool to make sure that the website better identifies the EU product safety site, as with Creda, Proline or Swan? Will she also ask the search engines, especially Google, to feature product recall information on the first search page, preferably even before the advertisements? Finally, will she indicate that safe products have a green dot inside the door? If people want to know the serial number and model, that is also inside the door.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend. As he requests, I will ask Whirlpool how it can make its website more user-friendly. I cannot give him any guarantees on Google’s actions, but I am sure that is something we can take forward. He has previously raised his final point in the House, and consumers will therefore have heard him. I reiterate that, if consumers are concerned about the products in their home, they can go on the website and call the Whirlpool helpline. If their tumble dryer has been modified, continued use is a low risk. We recommend that unmodified dryers are unplugged and not used and that Whirlpool is contacted.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): By the Government’s own admission, there are 500,000 unmodified machines in existence, which equates to around 700 per constituency. The Minister has just reaffirmed that the Government’s advice is to unplug these machines. How are those 700 people in Delyn supposed to know that?

Kelly Tolhurst: The right hon. Gentleman outlines that there are 500,000 machines, which is not a Government estimate—we have used data to estimate the number of
dryers still in people’s homes. As I said to the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), Whirlpool has an outreach programme to communicate with individuals who have not yet contacted Whirlpool and who it believes to have faulty equipment.

We recommend that anyone who buys any kind of electrical appliance should register it so that the manufacturer can easily contact those who have a particular product—this is not just for Whirlpool but for any kind of electrical product that is sold. It is vital that consumers take the time to register their purchase so it is easy for the manufacturer to contact them if any faults or problems are found with the machine.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on the action she has taken. One of the first cases I received as a newly elected Member of Parliament was on the safety of tumble dryers; the issue came up at my first surgery. As a member of the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, I have to say that I have been singularly unimpressed with Whirlpool’s attitude to this problem. Part of the problem lies in trying to find where these machines are, so is the Minister entirely satisfied with our current system for the registration of appliances in this country? It is sometimes very difficult to find serial numbers and model numbers, especially where appliances have been fitted in kitchens or utility rooms, for example. These are real, live issues. Is she satisfied that this system is adequate for purpose?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for that. He is right to raise concerns about whether the system is suitable, and whether all appliances are easily identified and registered. We definitely need to look, on an ongoing basis, at whether some of the products being placed on the market are easily identified. He is right to highlight the issue with built-in appliances, as it is sometimes difficult to remove them to get the serial number. As I have said, I recommend that all consumers register their appliances on the registration appliance site. We will keep all information under review, but I remain determined to ensure that where manufacturers do not comply with the law we will take enforcement action. That is why I am pleased to be standing here today outlining the steps we are moving through to make sure that we comply with the regulation on the enforcement.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): With an estimated 700 affected appliances per constituency, it is not surprising that I have been contacted by a number of constituents affected, including Linda Thomas, who was advised to contact Peterborough trading standards, it being the trading standards body responsible for this Whirlpool issue. She tells me that she feels very much that Peterborough trading standards are “on the side of Whirlpool and ‘not the consumer’”. What assessment has the Minister made of the impartiality of Peterborough trading standards, in the light of the emails revealed by the BBC as a result of freedom of information requests?

Kelly Tolhurst: Trading standards, in Peterborough or anywhere else nationally, are carrying out, every day, the important work of enforcing safety issues; they are taking lots of enforcement action. I, for one, am very proud of and grateful to trading standards officers, who sometimes work in challenging circumstances but do some fantastic work. One reason the OPSS was set up was in January last year was to look at product safety and standards, and it was the body that carried out the review of the Whirlpool modification programme, working with regional trading standards, including Peterborough’s. Trading standards do have the ability to work with the OPSS on the scientific research and data, using the expertise the OPSS brings to help them carry out their duty locally. Therefore, I very much disagree on this; action taken by any enforcement body is being taken on behalf of the consumer, not in the interests of large manufacturers.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If any of my constituents correctly identify their tumble dryer as a potentially unsafe model, how quickly would the Minister expect them to be given a replacement by Whirlpool?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend asks when his constituents would have a replacement. I would say that the affected tumble dryer should be modified, but any action must be taken swiftly. The particular circumstance, the age of the model and the brand of the model would dictate which action Whirlpool takes.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the Minister for her comments, but I am still extremely concerned that 500,000 machines are at large. As the chair of the all-party group on disability, I am particularly concerned about whether notifications have gone out in accessible formats, because if people have disabilities they might not see a fire so quickly or be able to leave their homes so quickly should one start. Will the Minister speak to Whirlpool and make sure that the notifications are in formats that are accessible for all?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that issue and will do as she asks.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The UK may well have one of the strongest consumer protection regimes in the world, but does the Minister agree that things need to be under constant review? Can she assure me that the OPSS has sufficient resources, powers and skills to do what we expect of it?

Kelly Tolhurst: I can reassure my hon. Friend that the OPSS has the powers and funds necessary to carry out its work. The beauty of the OPSS is that it is absolutely focused on product safety and standards. Part of its £12 million per annum funding is for building scientific and technical expertise. It works with trading standards locally and nationally and provides the national leadership required on national issues such as this one.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): The Minister will know that registration rates for white goods are typically less than 30%, which means that more than 70% of people typically do not register their products. This is understandable—they are frightened of being sent to or contacted for lots of other reasons—so surely it is now time to take the onus off the consumer and have a central register, from the point of sale, that can be used only in the event of a recall.
Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for that suggestion. I will commit today to making that a topic for discussion at the Consumer Protection Partnership, which is the group of organisations that sit together to consider consumer protections. Perhaps we can look into whether that would be more beneficial for consumers. I reiterate that the Government have a recall website that gives the details of all white goods that are subject to recall or fire risk. All consumers should register their appliances. It is down to the manufacturer to make sure that the products are safe, but if consumers take the simple step of registering their goods in the first instance, when they buy them, before any changes are made, that is the best way forward.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Might not many of these tumble dryers have been resold in the second-hand market? If so, what is the Minister doing to assess the dangers of the resale of such machines, bearing in mind that local authority trading standards have been decimated by Tory austerity cuts?

Kelly Tolhurst: As I have outlined, it does not matter whether the product is second-hand or has been with its original owners since purchase. If a dryer is affected and is unmodified, consumers should contact Whirlpool. I reiterate that when the OPSS carried out its review of the modification programme, it took all the data into consideration and the risk was deemed to be low and further reduced for modified tumble dryers. I therefore urge any consumer with a tumble dryer in their home to look to see whether it is one of the products affected and make contact with Whirlpool.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Minister has said that modified machines are low risk, yet last year the BBC’s “Watchdog” live consumer programme uncovered cases in which machines had caught fire even after being fixed. Can modified machines be deemed to be low risk, even though they catch fire?

Kelly Tolhurst: The right hon. Gentleman talks about modified machines. When any information or testing that had been carried out at any particular event by “Watchdog” or Which? was submitted to the Department or to the OPSS, it was scrutinised and looked at during the review of the modification process. The outcome was to put the risk level at low. However, anyone who has a concern about any machine should contact Whirlpool. In actual fact, if anyone has any concern about any electrical appliance within their home, they should stop using it and contact the manufacturer.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): A number of my constituents contacted me with their concerns about Whirlpool. With Electrical Safety First research pointing to the fact that only 10% to 20% of recalled products are ever returned or repaired, we should perhaps consider looking at a statutory basis for online retailers to contact people who bought products online, because they certainly will have a means of contacting their consumers—they will have email addresses and other details for the products that have been dispatched. Perhaps that could be an easier way for some retailers to contact people to get that recall information to them.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting that point. One of the issues that we considered in last year’s review was the outreach programme. There are many ways in which Whirlpool should be able to contact the people who have bought its products. This is very much the responsibility of the manufacturer, and it is one of the reasons we are taking so much care with this review, and why we are asking so many questions. It is the responsibility of the manufacturer to make sure that it has a programme that is sufficient to reach its customers. We are dissatisfied with what it has done. That is why we issued the intention to issue a recall. She is absolutely correct: Whirlpool should be using everything at its disposal to make sure that it contacts anyone who has purchased its product by any means necessary.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The Whirlpool situation has highlighted a problem exposed by the Electrical Safety Council about the difficulty of identifying the owners of the defective appliances it recalls. Can the Minister say a little more about what progress has been made on requiring the registration of purchase of electrical goods at point of sale by the retailer, rather than by consumers registering afterwards? Consumer registration patently does not work, and the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) is not a new one; it has been knocking around for years and the retail industry needs to own up to its responsibility.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I know that he has a particular interest in this matter. He will know that, when I last sat in front of him at the meeting of the all-party group on fire safety, I was very clear that if action needed to be taken I was not fearful of taking it. As I tried to outline to the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), it is a valid suggestion, and I do agree that we need to look at it. That is why I have said here today that I am prepared to bring that to the Consumer Protection Partnership to see whether we can progress it further. He is absolutely right: we need to do all we can to ensure that consumers are protected, but fundamentally I am here today to talk about holding Whirlpool to account, and I am proud to be standing here and doing that. This Government want to ensure that, no matter how big manufacturers are, we will still make them comply with the law.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Where is the Whirlpool list of model numbers that may be at risk?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman. For his question. As I have outlined, anyone who has one of the brands that are affected—Hotpoint, Indesit, Swan, Proline and Creda, manufactured between April 2004 and September 2015—should go to the Whirlpool website and put in their model and serial numbers to find out whether it is an affected model. If they do not want to go on to the website, they should ring Whirlpool’s helpline.
Gulf of Oman Oil Tanker Attacks

5.55 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD)/(Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office if he will make a statement on the attacks on two oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman.

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison): The Government completely condemn the attacks on two tankers on 13 June. This is deeply worrying at a time of already significant tension.

Following our own assessment, the UK concludes that it is almost certain that a branch of the Iranian military, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, attacked the two tankers on 13 June. No other state or non-state actor could plausibly have been responsible. These latest attacks build on a pattern of destabilising Iranian behaviour and pose a serious danger to peace and stability in the region. In targeting civilian shipping, international norms have been violated. It is essential that tankers and crews are able to pass through international waters safely. We call on Iran urgently to cease all forms of destabilising activity, and I reiterated that point during my meeting with the Iranian ambassador this afternoon.

The UK remains in close co-ordination with international partners to find diplomatic solutions to de-escalate tensions. I plan to visit Tehran shortly when I will seek to assist in that de-escalatory process aimed at establishing common ground and a peaceful way forward that will command the respect of all parties.

Jo Swinson: I thank the Minister for that reply.

Tensions are rising incredibly quickly in the wake of the recent tanker attacks in the Gulf of Oman, and, of course, as the Minister mentions, the ongoing destabilising behaviour and threats from Iran to increase low-level uranium production. These attacks must be condemned forcefully by all Members from all parts of the House. The Government have yet to provide conclusive evidence beyond the grainy video footage. While the Leader of the Opposition has been quick to question British intelligence and lay all the blame for the escalation at the door of the United States, the German Foreign Minister has urged restraint in assigning responsibility for the attacks and is seeking additional evidence.

The Minister has repeated what the Foreign Secretary said at the weekend: that Iran is almost certainly behind the attacks and is seeking additional evidence. The Minister has urged restraint in assigning responsibility, which is hugely important, in partnership not just with the US but with our European allies. Of course, as he mentioned, the strait of Hormuz is a vital shipping lane, with nearly 30% of oil exports passing through it. What steps is he taking to protect civilian shipping in the region?

Finally, I want to ask about the impact on UK nationals. There are significant numbers of UK nationals living in the region who will look at these escalations and have concerns. What assessment has been made of what would be needed if an evacuation of UK nationals was necessary in the event that tensions were to escalate further, when were such plans last tested and what confidence does the Minister have that those contingencies, which we hope will never be needed, are in place? Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and her husband have gone on hunger strike in protest at her treatment. What steps are being taken to ensure that whatever course of action is pursued does not have any adverse effect on securing the release of Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe and other British nationals in prison?

Dr Murrison: I thank the hon. Lady for her comprehensive list of questions. I will do my best to answer them—perhaps in reverse order, given that I raised the issue of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe with the Iranian ambassador this afternoon. Our position is that we want consular access to Nazanin, and we have reiterated to the ambassador our concern for her welfare. The hon. Lady will be aware that the Iranians will claim that we have no business in this matter because Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is a dual national, but we will persist.

On what we are doing to protect shipping and individuals, I emphasise that our aim is to de-escalate the situation and turn down the temperature. I believe that our European friends and partners feel the same way. We will continue to act with the E3 in particular to dial this down, and that is our best way forward in ensuring that all are protected—that the vital trade routes through the straits are protected, and particularly that our nationals in the Gulf region are safe.

The hon. Lady presses me on intelligence. She knows very well that I am not going to comment in detail, or indeed at all, on intelligence. What I can say to her is that we make our own assessment. I hope that she will recognise the form of words that I have used, which is well understood. We are as sure as we can be of the source of this latest attack. Indeed, although the hon. Lady has not mentioned this specifically, we also associate Iran with the attacks of 12 May.

In relation to the assessments made by others, I think it is true to say that our means of determining provenance are among the very best in the world. Others will of course make their own assessments, which are of great interest, but I stand by my assessment that I have iterated to the hon. Lady; I believe that it is of high quality and is highly reliable. She mentioned the Leader of the Opposition, and he must speak for himself.

On the independent investigation, the vessels, which since the attack of 13 June were in international waters, remain the property of the ship owners. At the moment, they are being taken to Fujairah in the Emirates. It is for the ship owners to determine what investigation will now take place and who will carry out that investigation. I hope that gives the hon. Lady some confidence that we were approaching the matter in a balanced way, but let me reiterate the Government’s intention to do all in our power to de-escalate this difficult situation.
Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The House will welcome the Minister’s measured statement and, in particular, the fact that he intends to go to Tehran shortly. Will he underline the fact that the Government will use all their influence, particularly with regional organisations—above all, with the United Nations—which is the right place for this matter to be resolved—to de-escalate what is happening in the Gulf? In particular, will he redouble efforts on Britain’s behalf in respect of the Iran nuclear deal to bring all parties back to the table as soon as possible?

Dr Murrison: It is vital that we keep to the joint comprehensive plan of action, as I discussed with His Excellency the Iranian ambassador a short while ago. The International Atomic Energy Agency is currently of the view that Iran is compliant. That is important. Its last determination was made on 31 May, so we would routinely expect one in three months’ time—in August—but the agency does keep the matter under continuous review. Clearly, we want to hold Iran to the commitments that it made with the P5+1 and the European Union, and hope very much that that forms the basis of a productive way forward.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question; I also thank the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) for raising it.

The attacks on oil tankers in the strait of Hormuz are utterly unacceptable, as I am sure every Member will agree. For those of us old enough to remember, they are frighteningly reminiscent of the tanker war of the 1980s, with all the global economic consequences that resulted from that conflict. Just like then, we are at an extremely dangerous juncture, where Iran risks sliding back into a permanent state of isolation from and confrontation with the west. That is, of course, what the theocrats in Iran have always craved and what the Iran nuclear deal was in place to prevent before it was so recklessly and deliberately scuppered by the neo-cons in the Trump Administration, who even now are rattling their sabres in their own craving for war. With that being the case, the question is: where do we go from here?

The Foreign Secretary has rightly warned of the dangers of ever greater escalation in the region and of Britain becoming “enmeshed” in a new conflict, but I would say to the Government that if we face a situation where the theocrat hardliners in Tehran and the neo-con hawks in the White House want to start a regime change conflict in Iran—a country nine times the size of Syria—we have a choice about whether or not to become enmeshed, and it should be this Parliament that makes that choice.

More importantly and more urgently, what we must now do as a country, through the United Nations—as both Secretary-General Guterres and the German Government have called for—is to work to de-escalate the situation as the Minister has suggested, so that it is not just Ali Khameini on one side and John Bolton on the other deciding to plunge the middle east into this catastrophe, but sensible diplomats from all countries working to independently investigate and verify the facts around the tanker attacks, to prevent any repeat of them and, most of all, to stop the descent into a war that we all fear, and getting the nuclear deal back on track instead. What action will the Minister take this week towards each of those ends?

Dr Murrison: I hope the hon. Gentleman got the sense from my remarks that the UK Government’s position is that we need to dial this down. He spent some time talking about the Trump Administration. Our position of course is that we respect the US very much indeed; nevertheless, we take our own view on these matters. We have made our own independent assessment, and have listened very carefully to, for example, our E3 colleagues and the position that they have taken. On the other hand, it would be wrong not to record our deep disquiet regarding the destabilising actions of the Iranian Administration. They are quite clearly using proxies to destabilise the region. As the hon. Gentleman will know from his deep experience of these matters, that cannot be allowed to continue.

We need to make it absolutely clear to Tehran—I will lose no opportunity to do so—that its support for terrorist groups is just unacceptable. I hope the hon. Gentleman will join the Government in condemning absolutely the actions of the Iranian Government in that respect. I do appreciate that he is under some difficulty given the stance taken by the Leader of the Opposition, but the hon. Gentleman is a good man and I know that he takes an independent view of these things. I hope that he will understand full well the danger of allowing the activities of the sort we have seen from Tehran to continue unchecked. Although I have suggested to him that our stance is very much de-escalo—this situation is dangerous, we need to turn the temperature down and we must work with our partners to do so—we do have to make it very clear that this behaviour on the part of Iran is not acceptable and that if it wants a peaceful, productive future, it is going to have to work with us in containing some of the appalling behaviour that we have seen displayed across the region.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Does the Minister agree that responsibility for escalating tension lies firmly with the Iranian regime that has been sponsoring or carrying out these acts of sabotage? When he visits Tehran, will he make it clear to that regime that attacking Norwegian, Japanese and other foreign shipping is far more likely to bring the United States and her European allies closer together than to drive them apart?

Dr Murrison: My right hon. Friend, who knows a great deal about these things, will know very well that when dealing with Iran we are dealing with a number of moving parts, and sometimes it can be a challenge to know who precisely to address. However, if I were offering candid advice, I would say to Tehran: “The worst thing you can possibly do is to attack ships in the ownership of countries like Norway and Japan—that seems to be highly counterproductive.”

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson)—the other Dunbartonshire—on gaining this UQ today. I also congratulate the Minister on the tone that he is taking in terms of trying to turn down the heat.

It is clear that the ongoing tension in the Gulf of Oman is of grave concern to the entire House. I doubt, though, that many of us are shocked that we have reached this present position, because the tension between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran is...
founded in a complex history, predating the Islamic Republic at the times of the tyranny of the Shah and the overthrowing of democratic government. We need to be aware that that informs the present situation.

While SNP Members join the Minister in his condemnation, the idea that the Government’s assessment leads to “responsibility for the attacks almost certainly” —“almost certainly” being the operative words—lying with Iran gives cause for concern. I therefore hope that the call by the United Nations, as we have heard, for an independent entity to conduct an investigation would be the next step. I hope that the Minister agrees.

As we often hear the Government talk of “global Britain”, will the Minister advise the House on what plans they have to urge a re-engagement to de-escalate the tension between Iran and the United States, and other allies such as Norway, which is a close ally of the UK? May I congratulate him on going to Tehran to have these direct conversations?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. In terms of what we are doing, talking is important, because if we do not talk, there is a risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation, and nowhere is that more likely than in our dealings with Iran, with whom, I think it is true to say, we have not always enjoyed cordial relations. I would not want to downplay that at all. The fact that I hope to go to Tehran very soon is perhaps, I hope, evidence of our desire to make sure that we maintain a dialogue on these matters with Tehran.

The hon. Gentleman tried to press me on intelligence matters. I am not going to be drawn on that. I think he must understand from what I have said that we are quite clear where the blame for this lies. He calls for an independent investigation. I hope that I made it clear in response to an earlier question that this matter must primarily rest with the ship owners, since the vessels are currently in international waters—or they were. They are now on their way to the United Arab Emirates.

On the earlier attack on the 12th of last month, that is, of course, since it happened within UAE territorial waters, a matter for the UAE. We are assisting, in a small way, in that investigation. I have to say again that our assessment is that the authority that is highly likely to have been involved in causing that earlier incident is the same one that we firmly believe is responsible for the latest outrage.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) for this urgent question and my right hon. Friend the Minister for his response—a measured response that is helpful to the House. He made clear his determination to calm this situation down. It is a complex and very long-standing situation that has very recently increased quite markedly in vehemence.

Will my right hon. Friend continue to emphasise to all parties the risks and dangers of actions such as those at the weekend, and of words that raise the temperature and increase the risk of an armed confrontation by accident or design? Will he say a little about where we are in terms of the improved financial facility as part of our obligations to the JCPOA, which remains unfinished business? Above all, will we make it very clear to all parties in the region that a further war would be a disaster that could not be confined to its boundaries, that the consequences would be long-lasting and incredibly onerous, and that all states owe an obligation to their peoples to desist from such actions and do everything they can to prevent such a risk of war in the region again?

Dr Murrison: My right hon. Friend and predecessor knows a great deal about this region. I pay tribute to him because I think this is the first opportunity I have had to do so. I congratulate him on his extraordinary service.

In relation to the cost of what might perhaps happen, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. About a fifth of the world’s oil passes through the strait of Hormuz. While there are mitigating things that can be done in the event that the straits were closed off again, the impact would be significant. As he knows, a great deal of Europe’s liquefied natural gas comes from the Gulf. Inevitably, after a fairly short space of time, there would be severe economic penalties. Above all, of course, we are concerned about the human cost of another conflict, which has, sadly, been seen too much in this region over the past few years. That is why the most important thing to do is to turn down the heat. He refers very kindly to my measured and well-chosen words. It is important for all concerned to prevail on those who are principals in this matter to engage in talk rather than the alternative, which would be massively expensive for all concerned.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): While the independent investigations that the Minister has mentioned continue—we all want to see the results of those—the fact is that six vessels have been attacked in just over a month. It has been suggested that one practical step that could be taken is to provide some kind of security escort for vessels in the Gulf of Oman and passing through the strait of Hormuz. I very much support what he said about the need to de-escalate tension. In his reply to a previous question, was he trying to indicate to the House that he thought that such a step might actually make matters worse rather than better? I endorse what he said about this ultimately having to be solved by negotiation. Ultimately, the United States of America and Iran will need to get round a table to sort out the difficulties that currently involve both of them.

Dr Murrison: The right hon. Gentleman is of course correct—ultimately, that is where the solution to this lies.

The right hon. Gentleman tempts me to consider escorts of some sort through the strait of Hormuz. It is not our judgment at the moment that that would be appropriate. I think it would be seen as provocative and escalatory. My view—the Government’s view—is that our interests are best served at this time by trying to turn down the heat on this, and that is what we will continue to do. But clearly we keep all these things under review.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am very grateful for the tone that my right hon. Friend is adopting on this. It is absolutely the right tone to take with a country that has been extremely challenging not just to us but to many countries in the region. Has he reached out to other countries, because it is not just the UK, or Europe, that relies on energy supplies from the
[Tom Tugendhat]

Persian Gulf, but China and India? How has the interaction been with their embassies and in our relationships with those countries in making sure that this is de-escalated?

**Dr Murrison:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Of course we have a dialogue on these matters and many others—particularly with the E3, as I said. He will know that the Japanese and the Germans very recently paid a high-level visit to Tehran. Clearly, they are among our interlocutors. The Foreign Secretary spoke to Secretary Pompeo yesterday to discuss all these measures. We are going to have to continue that dialogue; clearly, we cannot act alone. But my general sense among our European interlocutors at the moment is that we are on the right track and that they desire to see us de-escalate this matter so that a problem does not become a full-blown crisis.

**Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): We have heard an assessment that all the major players in this situation, including Iran, do not want to see it escalate into a war. Does my right hon. Friend agree with that assessment?

**Dr Murrison:** I do, as a matter of fact. I think there is very little for Iran in provoking a conflict. The consequences for Iran would be severe. The consequences for the regime would be severe and unpredictable. I feel strongly that, although Iran clearly wishes to ensure that it is well understood across the House.

**Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Ind): I have listened carefully to the Minister, and I completely agree with him that the Iranian dictatorship is a source of much of the conflict in the region, sponsoring organisations such as the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza and prolonging a brutal civil war in Syria through its support for Assad. Why does he think that so many people always seem to demand more evidence about allegations against Iran or Russia, but rush to condemn America or Israel without any questions at all—like, for example, the Leader of the Opposition, who the Minister rightly said had taken £20,000 from the official state broadcaster of the fascistic Iranian regime?

**Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): I thank the right hon. and wise doctor for his measured response. Does he agree that the raison d’être of Iran is exporting revolution throughout the region and further afield? The hon. Member for Dudley North mentioned the militias aligned to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in places such as Lebanon, where they are trying to destroy the state institutions of that small country, which is utterly negative and appalling. What is obviously needed is fundamental change in the Iranian regime. How do the Minister and his colleagues believe that will be brought about?
Dr Murrison: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We need to be clear about the nature of the regime in Tehran, but we have to deal with lots of regimes across the world, and our best interests are served by talking to them and having a relationship with them. We will agree with them, as it happens, on a number of things—that is for sure—but behaviour of the sort that he has outlined is completely unacceptable. It destabilises the region. It has pushed a number of countries into complete chaos, and it must stop. The future for a great country like Iran is very bright indeed. It is a rich country—potentially extremely rich—and for its people, I would say: for goodness’ sake, let us have a brighter future and start to turn this down and improve our relationships. We will never agree on everything, I suspect, but we need to look forward to a much brighter future. That will not happen for as long as the regime in Tehran continues to sponsor the proxies that he referred to.

Mr Speaker: For the Minister to be commended for his honour was doubtless welcome. To be congratulated also upon his wisdom is doubtless positively exhilarating, and I feel sure that today—at least for now—his cup runneth over in appreciation of his hon. Friend.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It won’t last.

Mr Speaker: I am sure it will.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): These attacks are to be condemned, and I commend the Minister for his cool words. There is, of course, the prospect of other drums beginning to beat, which is ominous. Surely our influence should be used to urge the US and Iran to warmongering. Will he consider whether an international inquiry into these attacks and the wider question of war, and our best interests are served by talking to them and having a relationship with them. We will never agree on everything, I suspect, but we need to look forward to a much brighter future. That will not happen for as long as the regime in Tehran continues to sponsor the proxies that he referred to.

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Dr Murrison: There is an investigation under way already in relation to the attacks of 12 May, and I have referred to that. It is principally the responsibility of the UAE, since that happened within UAE territorial waters. This happened in international waters, and the vessels concerned are heading for the UAE. It is for the ship owners to determine how they wish to investigate the damage done to their vessels. However, we stand ready, with others, to be of assistance wherever we can in these matters. As the right hon. Lady will probably appreciate, we have some expertise in matters of this sort, being a maritime nation, and if any of those skillsets can be of assistance, we will obviously be prepared to offer them.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): So what does the wise doctor think their motive was?

Dr Murrison: I am not sure I am prepared to second-guess the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. My right hon. Friend is a very wise man—very wise, indeed—and he has a lot of experience in these matters, and no doubt he has his own views on the motive behind this attack. I think the important thing is that, whatever the motive, we just need to prevail on Tehran to turn the temperature down on this. I hope very much that we can encourage, procure and broker dialogue that will enable us to deal with this in a pacific way that does not involve further escalation, which is in nobody’s interests.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Mr Speaker, you have heard from across the House that there is complete agreement with the Minister’s desire for de-escalation on this, so is it not extraordinarily irresponsible for anyone in a position of responsibility to suggest that there is in some way a moral equivalence between our greatest ally, the United States of America, and the Islamic Republic, which we know is the greatest exporter of terror and, as the Minister says, is almost certainly responsible for this? To go as far as to suggest that this has in some way been caused by the Americans setting out bait, and that the only fault of the Iranians has been to take the bait left by the Americans, shows that anyone who espouses these views is simply not fit for high office in this country.

Dr Murrison: I do not want to intrude on private grief, but I hope the hon. Gentleman’s remarks have been heard by the leader of his party and those on his party’s Front Bench.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My wise right hon. Friend on the Front Bench is a distinguished man of science, and he has concluded from the evidence that the IRGC is responsible for these attacks on shipping in international waters. At the same time, Iran has announced that it will breach its obligations under the nuclear deal in 10 days’ time. Given that evidence, what further proof does my right hon. Friend require before we take stringent sanctions against the IRGC and against Iran?

Dr Murrison: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend for that. I hope he has sensed from my remarks that the intent is to de-escalate this. I make no apologies for the repeated use of that word “de-escalation”. The sanctions he has referred to—of course, sanctions are always on the table—would certainly escalate this and, in our judgment at this juncture, would make a bad situation worse. However, we of course keep all things under review.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): These are obviously very serious moments. What assessment has been made of the potential impact on the UK, and indeed all our constituents, in terms of fuel supplies in the event that this disruption in and around the strait of Hormuz is serious and sustained?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is right to raise this. I have referred to a fifth of the world’s oil going through those straits, to Qatari LNG that powers up much of Europe and to the effect, potentially, on our constituents’ fuel bills. He may be aware that we have about 90 days of contingency through the International Energy Agency, but of course we do not really want to use that. We want those straits to remain open for the world’s trade, and we will do everything we can to ensure that they do.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I have been on the record in this Chamber many times saying that I am opposed to any territorial military action against Iran. I think that would be a complete and utter escalation beyond anything we would actually be able to control or think stay in place. I have listened very carefully to my right hon. Friend about Britain standing prepared to give assistance, especially in naval matters, and we are of course talking about international waters.
I understand his not wanting to send Royal Navy vessels there at this time to provide support, but may I ask my hon. Friend whether any conversations are taking place with international bodies such as the UN about being prepared, if need be, to offer protection to international shipping in international waters, which of course are nothing to do with the territorial areas of Iran? Indeed, if Iran were telling the truth in saying that it was not involved, it would not have any objection to international escorts for international vessels.

Dr Murrison: I am not sure that Iran would quite see it that way, and that is very important because we do need to try to turn down the temperature on this. The straight answer is that we do not propose, as things stand, to protect those vessels in the Gulf and in international waters, and we protect individuals—both our own nationals and others—in the wider region.

Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Bill
Second Reading

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have considered the Bill, and I have concluded that it does not meet the criteria for EVEL—that is to say, English votes for England laws—certification.

To move the Second Reading, I call not any Minister, but a particular Minister, a perspicacious Minister, a dedicated Minister and, I know, a Minister in a hurry—Rishi Sunak.

6.39 pm

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

This Bill makes a major improvement to the rating system that delivers on Government commitments and addresses ratepayers’ concerns. It will ensure that business rates bills will be updated at more frequent revaluations to reflect changes to the rental property market. In doing so, it will ensure that business rates become more responsive to economic changes.

Business representatives such as the CBI, the British Property Federation and the British Chambers of Commerce have all asked for more frequent revaluations. They were promised that by the Chancellor at autumn Budget 2017 and again at the 2018 spring statement. This Bill delivers on those promises.

Business rates bills are based on the rateable value of the property, which, broadly speaking, represents its annual rental value. The rateable value is therefore the tax base for business rates and it is assessed by the Valuation Office Agency, independently of Ministers.

Since the current system of business rates was introduced in 1990, the Government have had regular revaluations of rateable values, to ensure that they remain up to date. These revaluations ensure that the amount paid in business rates—money used to fund important local services—is distributed fairly among all ratepayers, having regard to their rental value.

Regular revaluations are an important part of maintaining fairness in the system, but the Government must strike a balance between the uncertainty created by regular revaluations—because it is inevitable that rate bills will change at that time—and the stability of businesses being able to plan for the future.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Minister just made an important point about the fact that revaluations are there to ensure fairness in the system. On that basis, does not council tax completely fail the test? If the Minister really wanted to go down in history, would it not be more appropriate to have a non-domestic rating and council tax valuation Bill?

Rishi Sunak: I am not sure I would like to go down in history as the man who revalued people’s homes to tax them more. The Chair of the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government makes a fair point, but the difference is that the statutory basis for business rates requires that the overall revenue raised remains neutral in real terms, taking account of appeals and increases, so it is necessary to ensure that that happens in practice. As a result of doing that every five years since 1990, the Government have enacted a revaluation.
Following the 2010 revaluation, and in the face of the economic downturn, the planned 2013 revaluation was postponed to 2017. That reflected the need at that difficult time to give businesses more certainty. Quite rightly, however, it also led to renewed interest in business as to how often we should in the future revalue for business rates.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I will not be as mischievous as the Chairman of the Select Committee, but there is an issue that needs to be dealt with. Various Treasury and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government reforms have resulted in many reliefs and opportunities for people to run small businesses without having to pay any business rates at all. Is it not time for a fundamental review of business taxation, to make it fair and reasonable and to ensure that those people who operate online also pay their fair share of business taxation, rather than relying on those businesses that happen to be in situ?

**Rishi Sunak**: I feel like I am being pincered by the illustrious senior members of the Select Committee. Of course, the issue of business rates vexes many people, but my hon. Friend is right to point out that, because of the various reliefs enacted by this Government, it is the case that fully one third of all businesses pay no business rates at all, and that is to be welcomed.

Notwithstanding the fact that I would be straying far from my brief and treading on the Chancellor’s toes if I addressed the broader structure of business rates taxation, it is worth saying that when the Treasury last looked at the issue a few years ago, there was no consensus among the business community about what might replace it. On digital taxes in general, although it is not quite the same, the digital services tax mooted by the Chancellor goes in part towards addressing the issue raised by my hon. Friend.

To return to the Bill, the response of businesses to the consultations and engagements was very clear: they thought that the revaluation cycle should be shortened, and the most popular option emerged as three years. Therefore, this Bill makes three changes to the rating system in England.

First, the Bill will bring forward the date from which the next revaluation takes effect, from 1 April 2022 to 1 April 2021. Secondly, the Bill will ensure that, thereafter, revaluations will take effect every three years, so the next revaluation after that will be in 2024, and so on. Thirdly, the Bill will change the last date by which draft rateable values must be published in the lead-up to the revaluation, from the preceding 30 September to 31 December. That period, during which new rateable values are published before the list comes into force, is known as the draft rating list.

Business rates is a devolved policy area, but the Bill also applies in part to Wales. As in England, the next revaluation in Wales will be brought forward to 1 April 2021. I understand that the Welsh Government are considering options for the frequency and nature of revaluations thereafter, so the requirement for three-yearly revaluations does not yet apply in Wales. Entirely different legislation applies in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but I understand that both countries are committed to having more frequent revaluations.

Hon. Members who have been following the proceedings of the Select Committee on the Treasury inquiry into the impact of business rates will have seen a range of business groups support the move to more frequent revaluations. I will end with a quote from the evidence provided by the Association of Convenience Stores:

“More frequent revaluations will allow rateable values to link more closely with the non-domestic property market and three-yearly revaluations strike the balance between VOA resource and accuracy for business.”

In conclusion, I am very glad to be able to make this improvement to the rating system, and I commend the Bill to the House.

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**Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): First, may I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests? I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association. We are very supportive of more frequent revaluations. There are growing calls to make sure that that happens, not only to ensure their relevance but to remove any potential sharp cliff edges—the longer a revaluation is left, the more the valuations between regions drift.

The LGA, though, would like the Government to go further, and asks them specifically to reduce the significant backlog of appeals: there are a staggering 65,000 unresolved appeals from 2010 in the system. That is important because local councils have to have £2.5 billion in reserves, in case those appeals are successful and the risk is carried by council services. The LGA also asks for the appeal period to be capped at six months. Again, that would reduce the financial exposure for which local authorities would have to make provision through their reserves. The LGA believes that that would be more appropriate.

We must consider the impact of revaluations with regard not only to the changing nature of demand—including for retail, office and other types of uses—but to the geographical shift away from our regions to London and the south-east, as shown by the most recent revaluation. The net take for the Treasury has to be broadly the same, and the revaluation reflects the increase in value in London and the reduction in the regions.

In the 2017 revaluation, it was only London that experienced an increase in all values across all sectors: retail was up by 26.2%, industry by 15.1%, office by 21.2%, and other uses by 25.7%. Every other region, bar the south-east, experienced a reduction in retail values, including by 1.2% in the west midlands and by 6.8% in the north-east. Although office values were more mixed, Yorkshire and the Humber experienced a decrease in value of 13.25%, followed by the north-east, which was down by 12.5%. A real shift is taking place away from our regions, primarily in the north, towards London and the south-east.

Let me paint what that picture means in pounds and pence, because that is what the Treasury cares about when it comes to business rates. The square mile of the City of London alone is now valued higher than the whole of Wales. Westminster City Council and Camden Council together are worth more than the whole of the north-west of England. Greater Manchester alone is valued higher than the whole of the north-east of England.
We are seeing major shifts in values across the country, focusing not just on the capital but on the city bases away from our towns.

Why is that important? As more local authorities move towards business rate retention schemes, all with varying degrees of retention and because of that different degrees of exposure, there will be an impact on those with 100% retention in particular. Councils will be asking—following the next revaluation in 2021, should the Bill go through—what safety net will be in place to ensure that councils with perhaps weaker economic bases are not disadvantaged because they have opted into a business rate scheme. That is not because they have not been working hard to drive their local base—many have been doing that, which is why they went into the scheme in the first place—but because the nature of demand in those places has changed so much.

In Committee, when we have a bit of time to secure evidence to test some of these ideas out, I hope there will be a spirit of wanting to work together to try to make the system work. We have heard some pushing demands from Members who, quite rightly, recognise that council tax and business rates are both very important property taxes which also have limitations. It is important that both are sustainable and fair on the payers.

Bob Blackman: The hon. Gentleman provides an analysis, which I recognise, of the changes that took place during the previous revaluation. He also says that there is an opportunity for local authorities to grow their economic base. Has he done any economic analysis of how successful those areas of the country that have seen a greater fall in their valuations have been in attracting businesses, in particular where public services and Government Departments have been devolved to those areas, which can increase the economic basis of those local authorities?

Jim McMahon: We have done that analysis. We have spoken to local authorities that are part of the retention scheme and where they have managed to capture the uplift in growth of values. I should say, however, that in combined authority areas and city regions, where we take the locality in the round we are seeing a shift away from towns to cities. The cities are performing very well and we are seeing stability in the retail and office markets, but we are not seeing the same repeated in the neighbouring towns that can be only a mile or two up the road. In terms of net gain, a lot of them will have to bring forward their strategic plans to ensure they are developing enough big employment sites, because it will eventually come down to square footage as we see the nature of it shift.

Let us be honest: we are talking about an online sales tax. The Government have really resisted that. There are some legitimate reasons to be cautious, particularly in terms of EU legislation and what that might mean for a potential challenge, but the fact is that we have not addressed, even within the business rate regime, how completely unfair it is for the high street anchor stores—John Lewis, Debenhams and so on—which brings in footfall into town centres and supports the other retailers. The Amazon big shed on the edge of the motorway pays a fraction of the business rates to occupy that space, when it is actually a more productive space direct to the consumer. There is a lot of room to go here, not just to rely on an internet sales tax, but to get around a table, work through the detail cross-party and really test what areas are not controversial. Most people who understand this recognise that the system has to catch up with the changing times. That offer has been on the table for a while and perhaps one day it will be taken up.

6.53 pm

Mr Clive Bets (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am the vice-president of the Local Government Association.

I do not want to keep the Minister too long from his exciting bedtime reading, which he was telling us about in questions earlier. In principle, I accept what the Bill tries to do and I think it is a sensible move. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has conducted an inquiry into business rate retention and, more recently, the high street. The view generally has been that business rates should be revalued more often and that three years is a reasonable compromise. Five years is too long, because we get major changes in rating values that we then have to catch up with, and then we have dampening mechanisms, appeals and so on. Any more frequently would be too much change too quickly, so three years is a reasonable compromise on which I think there is general agreement.

I hope the Government really mean it and that we will have three years. In 2015, when we had five years, the valuation was postponed for two years. Why? It was because we were going to have a general election in 2015. That was the reason and everyone knows it. That meant seven years between revaluations, which created an even bigger problem with even bigger changes and a lot more difficulties, from which we are still suffering.

Are there any implications for the business rate retention scheme? Presumably, the Government are still going ahead with the 75% figure. Is it going ahead from next year? We are still not quite sure, in these changed circumstances. Will it have any impact particularly on the issue of resets within the system? Presumably not, particularly if a rolling reset is done. I presume that would be covered and would not be affected, but it would be helpful to have reassurance on that.

I echo the point made by my friend the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). All the evidence we have heard, in our high street inquiry and the business rate retention inquiry—I am currently a guest on the Treasury Committee inquiry into business rates—shows that we just cannot carry on not recognising the change of circumstances, particularly with regard to the high street and 20% of sales now being done online, which is the highest percentage anywhere in the world. At some point, the system will have to change. Amyas Morse, the then Comptroller and Auditor General, made the point to the Committee that simply having a system based on another age and on floor space was taking no account of the changes happening now in modern society. That was not sustainable in the long term and there had to be change.

There could be a complete comprehensive review, moving to a completely different system of raising money from businesses. That is one way. I still think it is hard to avoid taxation on physical buildings and that
they are probably a good basis for a system, but there has been some reform and some addition. The Select Committee’s inquiry into the high street recommended that the Government look at a number of alternatives, including the potential for an online sales tax. That would take the pressure off those elements of business, particularly high street shops, which are most under pressure. That still needs to be looked at.

Finally, appeals are still a problem. We hear that local authorities are holding reserves for very obvious reasons. We have changed the system and we now have a check and challenge. We have been told that it is discouraging businesses from appealing, so there is that disadvantage, compared with having lots of appeals that were bogging down the system. Fundamentally, the evidence showed that the valuation office is understaffed and under-resourced to deal with appeals. That came up in the Treasury Committee inquiry. I hope Ministers will look at that.

Whatever system we have, there has to be a proper appeals system that works expeditiously for the benefit of the appellant and local authorities. A number of issues still need to be considered, but the principle behind this small Bill is a good one that should be supported.

6.57 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I am extremely grateful for the very incisive comments and questions to the Minister by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman).

Labour supports this reform, not least because it is a part of our five-point plan for our high streets. Labour pledged in February 2017 to introduce more regular revaluations, coupled with simplifications in the business rate system. It is to be welcomed that the Government are at last finally getting on board with this essential reform, but the entire business rate system is in desperate need of comprehensive review. The Government’s consultation on the introduction of more frequent revaluations noted some challenges that are yet to be addressed, including: the increased workload resulting from this reform and the need for significantly skilled staff to undertake this work; and the possibility that the move will result in more appeals by ratepayers, placing additional pressure on the Valuation Office Agency.

According to the latest valuation tribunal statistics, there are still 65,000 unsold 2010 appeals and councils have had to divert over £2.5 billion from services to deal with the appeals risk. How do the Government intend to deal with that? The explanatory notes state that the Bill’s provisions “may lead” to the Treasury providing additional funding to the VOA, but it does not guarantee to do so, even though additional valuations and perhaps more appeals arising from them will be required.

While we welcome the changes in the Bill, we cannot settle for this tinkering around the edges while the nation’s high street retailers are struggling so much. Nationwide, every type of retail premises—high streets, retail parks and shopping centres—saw the number of occupied units decline at a faster rate in 2018 than in 2017. The high street vacancy rate rose from 11.2% to 11.5% in 2018 and almost 5% of that vacant space has been empty for over two years, which demonstrates the scale of the challenge.

The Confederation of British Industry has warned that the current business rates system is entrenching regional inequalities:

“The lag between the area’s boom in property prices and its latest business rates revaluation has seen firms suddenly having to cope with an almost 50% increase in their bill.”

On the other hand, areas that have suffered from economic downturn, where major industries have left in recent years, have continued to require firms to pay higher business rates. It can also mean that local authorities are underfunded where businesses are on the rise.

These regional inequalities are entrenched by the business rates system in areas that have already had their finances worsened by the Government’s continuing austerity policies. Between 2010 and 2019, Knowsley, the second most deprived area in the country, saw a spending power cut of £1,406 per household. This is simply a disgrace.

Last month, the UK2070 Commission published research showing that the inequalities that blight economic performance and life chances in parts of the UK are likely significantly to worsen, with London “decoupling” from the rest of the UK unless drastic action is taken. The chair of the commission said that what the Government are doing is just a sticking plaster and that it is “too small, short-lived or disjointed to have a lasting impact.”

When will the Government listen to business and deliver a wholesale review of the system? When, too, will they address the threats to retailers posed by their online competitors and ensure that businesses with physical shops are not at a disadvantage under the business rates system?

We look forward to the Government pressing on further with reform of the business rates system and to hearing what the Minister has to say.

7.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): It is an absolute pleasure to give the closing speech to this part of today’s business. The Bill may be narrow and technical in scope, but in practice it will improve the rating system for all ratepayers. It is the culmination of discussion with businesses about how we can improve the rating system. They wanted more frequent revaluations and that is what we are delivering.

I do not need to tell the House how quickly the commercial property market can change. Trends in sectors, locations and types of property can drive changes in the rents paid by businesses. Currently, the rating system picks up on those changes only every five years. Businesses have told us that five years is too much of a lag in the rating system before rateable values can catch up with rents. It results in ratepayers paying rates based on a rateable value that may no longer reflect their rent. That is why businesses want more frequent revaluations and why we are delivering precisely that with this technical Bill.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I very much welcome the Bill. Will the Minister comment on one aspect that is not covered by the detail of it, but which is very important to people in my constituency who own riding stables and particularly those who provide riding services for the disabled as well as commercial riding stables? We often find that the Valuation Office Agency simply does
Jeremy Lefroy

not have the expertise to deliver an accurate valuation for that kind of very specialist activity, where there is not really a rental market.

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The last time this matter was raised, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) facilitated meetings between the professional groups and the people involved. There were ongoing discussions that became very fruitful.

The Bill will ensure that rateable values and therefore business rate bills are more responsive to changes in the rental market. It requires revaluations after 2021 to take place every three years and I am delighted that Opposition Front Benchers have accepted that. Some businesses have asked us to go further and move to annual revaluations, but we are delighted to have peace reigning in the Chamber today.

Let me try to answer the question about business rate retention from the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. The revaluation does not affect councils’ local income, as there are adjustments to make sure that that is dealt with. As regards resourcing the VOA, that will form part of the spending review later this year.

Mr Betts: The Minister made a commitment that this will be reviewed later this year as part of the spending review. Does that mean that the spending review is going ahead this year?

Mrs Wheeler: Very sadly, apparently I am not running to be leader of the Conservative party—[HON. MEMBERS: “Shame!”] How kind! It is subject to that.

The Bill brings forward the next revaluation to 2021 but ratepayers do not have to wait two years to benefit from our reforms to the rating system. Ratepayers are now benefiting from a multiplier linked to CPI rather than RPI and from a small business rate relief scheme that has removed 655,000 small businesses from rating. They are benefiting from a retail discount of one third off small and medium retail properties. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (LISTS) BILL

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 2 July 2019.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on Consideration.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on Consideration.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—[Amanda Milling]

Question agreed to.

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (LISTS) BILL

(MONEY)

Queen’s recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—[Amanda Milling]

Question agreed to.

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (LISTS) BILL

(WAYS AND MEANS)

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Bill, it is expedient to authorise provision for, or in connection with, changing the dates on which non-domestic rating lists must be compiled.—[Amanda Milling]

Question agreed to.
Local Housing Allowance: Nottingham

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

7.8 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is just over nine years since I became the Member of Parliament for Nottingham South and in that time, I have secured a number of debates on housing and homelessness. I wish I could say that my contributions had led to an improvement in the situation for some of my constituency’s most vulnerable citizens, but I am afraid that things have got worse, rather than better. I suggest that every one of us here will have witnessed a sharp rise in the most visible form of homelessness: rough sleeping.

Back in 2010, the official title never stuck, of 55. In eight years it was no better; it was much, much worse.

In March 2013, I secured an Adjournment debate on the under-occupancy penalty. Despite the best efforts of the coalition Government, the official title never stuck, and we all know it as the bedroom tax. That measure had led to an improvement in the situation for some of our vulnerable constituents on housing benefit living on the breadline and having to make up the difference. The Government’s outdated LHA rates from 2016 show that their policies would cause hardship, poverty and shame.

In March 2015, I led a Westminster Hall debate on affordable housing, and in 2018 I used another Adjournment debate to highlight an Opportunity Nottingham report into persistent rough sleeping. The thing I find most shocking, looking back on those debates, is that on each occasion I was drawing attention to the problems faced by people in the city I represent, not as a result of lack of effort or even just bad luck, but as a direct result of Government policy. What is most shameful is that on each occasion Ministers were warned that their policies would cause hardship, poverty and debt but pursued them anyway.

Last week, the Minister assured us that he wanted everyone to have security in their home and a roof over their head. I hope that he is serious, because if he is, he will not want to continue with policies that he knows will make the lives of people in my city and this country harder and poorer.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady and I came into the House at the same time, in 2010, and these are issues that we are both very interested in. Does she agree that it is nigh impossible for people to find a private rented property within the LHA even in what are often known as council estates and that this must be urgently reviewed in areas where the number of houses does not tally with housing need? This causes landlords to push for more to cover their overheads, to the detriment of our vulnerable constituents on housing benefit living on the breadline and having to make up the difference.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman pre-empts much of my speech, but he is entirely right.
Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): As usual, my hon. Friend is making a passionate case for our city. The bedroom tax was cruel because even if an individual complied with what the Government were trying to coerce them to do, there was not the housing there for them to go to, and we are seeing that repeated with the LHA. She correctly highlights the gap that people must make up just to get a roof over their head. Does she share my concern that my constituents in the north of the city, like hers in the south, are going without essentials—food, heating, things for their children—just to maintain these tenancies and that that is a sign of a system that fundamentally is not working?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and I will seek to explain precisely the problem our constituents are facing. The problem is that the gap they are seeking to fill between the LHA they receive and the rent they need to pay is not trivial but significant. According to Shelter, the gap between 30th percentile rents and the LHA rate in Nottingham is £15.17 a month for a room in a shared house; £55.01 for a one-bedroom flat; £54.57 for a two-bedroom property; £56.61 for a three-bedroom property; and £121.93 per month for a four-bedroom house. These are not trivial amounts. Trying to cover the shortfall is leaving people in a very vulnerable and insecure position and, as my hon. Friend has said, in poverty.

Jim Shannon: I am sure the hon. Lady, like others, will know from her constituency experience that whenever people’s income is reduced because of rental accommodation or benefit changes, more often than not they are pushed towards food banks. In my constituency, the Thriving Life food bank has been extremely busy due to benefit changes, rental accommodation not being available and being unable to pay the money. As a result, they are falling back on food banks—which we are very glad to have, by the way—with dismayingly regularity.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point, and I cannot imagine how many people would get by without food banks, but some people will not go to a food bank—perhaps because they are too proud—and so will be going hungry, sitting in a cold house because they have not turned the heating on or sending their children to school in clothing that is too small or simply not appropriate. I have heard of children going to school in their pyjamas because they do not have proper clothing. It is shameful.

Martyn Neal, a senior adviser at the Meadows Advice Group, spoke to Advice Nottingham’s researcher about his experiences trying to support clients with local housing allowance. He described meeting two clients, one already homeless and one threatened with homelessness. The housing plans given by Housing Aid were almost identical and contained instructions to the client to look for affordable accommodation in the private sector. The LHA was quoted as a guide to affordability, but absolutely no other guidance was given about how the client should go about this or what difficulties, if any, they would likely encounter. No other support was offered, at least for the next few weeks.

Both Martyn’s clients were or had been living in the Meadows area of Nottingham and understandably preferred to remain local to be near schools for their children. Martyn says: “Under the LHA, both clients were entitled to a three-bedroom home. I logged onto Rightmove and using a 3-mile radius as a start, which would fit in with school transport rules. I began my search. There was not a single property available for rent less than £50.00 a month above the local housing allowance.

I extended the radius to 5 miles, which revealed one property, in Bulwell”—which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris)—“this met the local housing allowance.”

The Minister may or may not know Nottingham well. Bulwell and the Meadows are at opposite ends of the city, a tram ride or two bus rides away from each other. The journey is time-consuming and costly, especially for a large family.

Sally Denton, from Nottingham Law Centre, has described the problems that she has witnessed. She said: “In the current rental market where there is a shortage of social housing there is an increased demand on the private sector. This means that landlords can charge more due to the demand.”

She said that tenants “cannot do anything to challenge the level of rent and cannot move to cheaper accommodation as it does not exist.”

She added: “We see clients regularly who are struggling to pay for unaffordable rents. If an unexpected expense occurs, or there is a change in income (like the 5-week wait under Universal Credit), people can very easily fall into rent arrears and risk losing their homes.”

Nottingham Law Centre is not alone in identifying this problem. Terry Alafat, the chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Housing, has said:

“Our research makes it clear just how far housing benefit for private renters has failed to keep pace with even the cheapest private rents.

We fear this policy is putting thousands of private renters on low incomes at risk of poverty and homelessness.”

How can the Minister preside over a system that forces people to put themselves at risk of debt and eviction? I am sure that when he responds to the debate he will talk about the Government’s targeted affordability funding, but while that is of course welcome, it is nowhere near enough to address the problem. In Nottingham, the targeted affordability funding means that the LHA rate for three and four-bedroom houses has increased by 3% in the last year. The monthly shortfall for an LHA tenant renting a three-bedroom house at the 30th percentile is now £56.61 rather than £60.22, and for a four-bedroom house it is £121.59 rather than £126.14. Yes, that is an improvement, but does the Minister really think that it is sufficient?

While the freezing of LHA rates is creating this issue, a much bigger problem is the lack of affordable housing. Since 1980 Nottingham has lost 22,010 social homes through Right to Buy, and although Nottingham City Council, Nottingham City Homes and other local housing associations have built new homes, there are nowhere near enough to make up for those that have been lost. Indeed, the problem has accelerated since discounts were increased in 2012. In the last year there were 664 applications to Nottingham City Council for Right to Buy, whereas 134 homes were bought in 2012-13. There is a huge gap between the demand for and the supply of social housing. Nottingham City Homes made 1,431 new lets in the last year, but the housing register stood at 8,393.

Of course, some of those on the housing register are in permanent accommodation, but I know from my constituency casework that too many are inadequately
housed, such as young families living with their parents in overcrowded conditions or in properties that are unsuitable for their needs—perhaps forced to live in high-rise housing. According to a survey carried out by Inside Housing in 2017, nearly 40% of council homes sold under Right to Buy have been resold and are being let in the private rented sector, at higher rents and, even with LHA restrictions, at a higher cost to the taxpayer. What discussions has the Minister had with his colleagues in the Ministry of Housing. Communities and Local Government about this ludicrous situation?

I am proud to represent a vibrant and extremely popular university city, but the rise in the city’s student population has also contributed to the lack of affordable family housing. Landlords have sought to capitalise on the student market by converting family homes into highly profitable shared accommodation. That increase in the number of houses in multiple occupation does not even help the under-35s whose LHA rate is restricted to the shared room rate. Many private rented properties in Nottingham are student-only lets. As students make up the majority of tenants, if someone entitled to LHA lived in a student let, the whole cost of the council tax would probably fall on the non-student tenant. Even when there appears to be an abundance of private rented accommodation, much of it is closed off to my constituents who receive LHA.

Unfortunately, however, that is not the only reason property is closed off. Shelter has revealed that many landlords discriminate against people on universal credit, and the position is no different for other LHA claimants. With the cost of renting so high and the rates so low, private landlords are reluctant to let to LHA claimants; 43% bar them completely, while a further 18% prefer not to let to them. What plans do the Government have to ensure that landlords cannot discriminate in that way?

The struggles that my constituents are facing are being replicated across the country. Last week the Supreme Court ruled in favour of Mrs Samuels, a single mum with four children, who was found to be “intentionally homeless” by Birmingham City Council because she did not use the subsistence benefits, intended for essential living costs, to pay the shortfall between her LHA and her rent. Shelter estimates that the majority of LHA households—65%—in private rented accommodation also face a monthly shortfall. Its survey of private renters detailed some of the impossible trade-offs that families receiving LHA are having to make. For example, one in three renters has cut back on food for either themselves or their partner, and 37% have been forced to borrow money to pay their rent in the last year.

This cannot go on, but last week the Minister seemed unwilling to address the issue. Can he tell me what assessment he has made of the hardship suffered by households as a result of the freezing of LHA rates? Does he accept that the freeze has increased homelessness in Nottingham and across the country? Is he really saying that families should be forced to live below the breadline and use subsistence benefits to pay their rent? The Supreme Court ruling in favour of Mrs Samuels set a precedent, and his Department needs to respond urgently.

There is a very clear solution: 92% of local authorities responding to the Local Government Association’s LHA survey thought that lifting the freeze on LHA rates, and better aligning them with rents, would help to reduce homelessness in their areas. The Residential Landlords Association has said:

“The LHA has a ‘double whammy’ effect that is driving homelessness. This double whammy means that; first, tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit are more likely other tenants to have their tenancy ended by their landlord; and, secondly, these households are finding it increasingly difficult to find suitable, affordable accommodation in the private rented sector.”

The Chartered Institute of Housing has said:

“We are calling on the government to conduct an immediate review and to look at ending the freeze on Local Housing Allowance.”

Shelter, the Child Poverty Action Group, and many other housing and homelessness charities are saying the same thing. It is time to act and lift LHA rates, so that housing benefit covers the true cost of renting in the private sector.

The Government have pledged to halve rough sleeping in this Parliament, and to end it by 2027. I’m afraid that that shows a real lack of urgency, but how can I take the commitment seriously when Ministers have repeatedly ignored warnings over the past nine years, and have pursued the very policies that have caused homelessness to rise? They have cut Supporting People funds, changed the basis on which LHA rates are set from the median to the 30th percentile of market rents, restricted people aged 26 to 35 to the shared room rate, introduced the bedroom tax, subjected families to the benefit cap, and restricted and then frozen LHA rates.

I do not hold the Minister responsible for things that happened before he was even a Member of Parliament, but I will hold him accountable for his actions now. Before he became a Minister, he chaired the all-party group on ending homelessness. Now that he is in a position to make a real difference, will he do so?

Matt Downie, director of policy and external affairs at Crisis, said recently:

“Homelessness is not inevitable—there is clear evidence that it can be ended with the right policies in place. The government must urgently reform housing benefits for private renters, so they not only match the true cost of renting but also keep pace with future rent changes.”

Will the Minister end the freeze on local housing allowance, and if so, when? Will he provide additional targeted affordability funding to help those who are struggling to pay their rent right now? Will he ensure that LHA rates are restored to at least the 30th percentile of local rents? Given that this is a housing crisis, will he call on his colleagues at the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to act now to provide more social housing and controls on rent rises? Now that he is in a position to help to end one of the causes of homelessness, will he do the right thing?

7.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): I thank the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Heidi Allen) for securing this debate. I have not yet had an opportunity to visit Nottingham in my role but I look forward to doing so, hopefully over the summer.

Since taking up my post two months ago, I have been keen to engage with as many people as possible, including key stakeholders such as Shelter, Crisis, Homeless Link and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, to understand housing issues from all perspectives. Like the hon. Lady,
I have a keen and long-standing interest in housing and ensuring that people have a safe, decent and affordable place to live that meets the needs of the household, and I would like to start by confirming that we have committed to end the freeze on local housing allowance in March 2020.

Reform of housing support was a central part of this Government’s plan to create a welfare system that both supports the most vulnerable and is fair to taxpayers. To help ensure a fair balance between these two elements, LHA rates are not intended to meet rents in all areas. The intention behind the welfare reform programme is that the same considerations and choices faced by people not in receipt of benefits should be faced by those claiming benefits, and the LHA policy is designed to achieve this.

Between 2000 and 2010, housing benefit expenditure had risen by over half in real terms, reaching £25 billion in today’s prices. If left unformed, by 2014-15 housing benefit would have reached £29 billion. That was not sustainable.

The measure to freeze LHA rates for four years from April 2016 built on reforms introduced in the previous Parliament, which saved £6 billion in total by 2015-16. Savings from freezing LHA rates are estimated to be around £655 million for Great Britain over the four-year period of the measure. Our reforms provide greater fairness and are part of our wider goal to move people from welfare and into work.

However, we have recognised that some places have seen big increases in rents, so we have made provision to further help people in those areas. That is why we have used a proportion of the savings from the freeze to create more targeted affordability funding, which is used to reduce the gap between frozen LHA rates and the 30th percentile.

Initially, targeted affordability funding was based on 30% of the savings from the freeze, but at autumn Budget 2017 we invested an additional £125 million in targeted affordability funding for the final two years of the freeze—2018-19 and 2019-20. This was based on 50% of the savings rather than 30%.

This additional funding enabled us to increase 213 LHA rates—there are 960 in total—by 3% last year, in 2018-19. This year, a total of £210 million has been made available, the highest amount of targeted affordability funding since its introduction in 2014, enabling us to increase 361 LHA rates by 3%. As a result, it is estimated that this year 500,000 households will benefit from an increase of around £250 per year.

In addition to this targeted affordability funding the Government have provided over £1 billion in discretionary housing payments to local authorities since 2011. Discretionary housing payments allow local authorities to protect the most vulnerable claimants and support households affected by different welfare reforms, including the freeze to LHA rates.

In Nottingham specifically, two of the five LHA rates in the broad market rental area were eligible for targeted affordability funding this year: the three-bedroom and four-bedroom LHA rates, both of which have been increased by 3%.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the Minister for taking an intervention. As he rightly says, the levels for three and four-bedroom properties have been increased. I set out the levels of increase: for example, for a four-bedroom house, it has been increased by £4.55, but that still leaves a shortfall of £1,452 over the year for someone in that position renting that four-bedroom house. The Minister has quoted the rates but the shortfall that people are being asked to make up is huge. Is he really saying that that is the sort of money someone should have to find from their other benefits, whether child benefit or disability benefits? Is that really right?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. That is exactly why we have introduced the targeted affordability funding and we have made available discretionary housing payments, but it is also why more broadly, as I explained in the urgent question last week, I am looking at this in some detail, as I did before being a Minister as part of the all-party group for ending homelessness.

As I said, the three-bedroom and four-bedroom LHA rates in Nottingham have both been increased by 3%. The remaining rates in Nottingham did not fall within the criteria of those rates that had diverged the most from local rents and therefore were not eligible for targeted affordability funding this year, and so remain frozen. As I have said, the Government have committed to end the freeze to LHA rates in March 2020 alongside the freeze on other working-age benefits.

Before I go on, I am aware that the hon. Lady mentioned a few other points which I would like to cover: homelessness, housing supply and “no DSS”. I did a huge amount of work, alongside the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), on the causes of homelessness and rough sleeping as co-chair of the all-party group for ending homelessness. Those causes are understood to be both complex and multifaceted. In order to fully evaluate these factors, we have commissioned a feasibility study and a rapid evidence review of the causes of homelessness in partnership with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This report has now been finalised and we are working on the next steps.

As I said earlier, we want everyone to have security in their homes and a roof over their head, and that is why we have committed over £1.2 billion to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. We published a strategy to end rough sleeping by 2027 and halve it by 2022, and that is backed by £100 million of initial funding. And we have changed the law so that councils can place families in private rented accommodation so they get a suitable place sooner. Last year, statutory homelessness acceptances fell, and we are going to build on this; and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 will mean that more people get the help they need sooner.

The hon. Lady rightly touched on landlords not letting to those in receipt of benefits, also known under the old term of “no DSS”. This is a hugely important issue, and in February, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), announced a Government campaign to end “no DSS” practices. We recently had a No. 10 roundtable on this very issue with a number of key stakeholders, and we are working with those stakeholders to find a satisfactory resolution.
Everyone deserves a safe and secure home, regardless of whether they are in receipt of benefits. Blanket bans do not take account of the individual and their circumstances, which is why we strongly discourage them. We would encourage landlords and agents to consider all potential and existing tenants in receipt of housing benefit and universal credit on an individual basis. We have already seen some positive changes from property sites that have committed to remove “no DSS” wording adverts from across their platforms, and lenders have changed their policies to remove mortgage restrictions that would prevent landlords from renting to tenants in receipt of housing support. Metro Bank is one of the latest to remove such restrictions, and I hope others will follow, but work is ongoing and we will continue to bring the sector together to tackle these practices.

Jim Shannon: It would annoy us greatly to find that rental landlords were discriminating against people because they were in receipt of benefits or were DSS applicants. Does the Minister agree that if there is discrimination, which clearly many of us in this House think there would be, under discrimination laws it would be illegal to do that? Also, what action would the Minister, in co-operation with colleagues of course, take to make sure that did not happen?

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Although that might be discrimination in terms of the terminology we would use, it might not fall under the legal definition of it. As a result, we believe that the best way of tackling this issue is to work with key stakeholders such as landlords and mortgage lenders, as well as with those who provide insurance, because we know that there is a particular issue in that regard. We had a successful roundtable at No. 10 recently, where I genuinely believe we had a good cross-section of all the key players from across the board. We are starting to see progress in this area, and I am sure that by taking this collaborative approach, with the Government working with business, key stakeholders and the charitable and voluntary sector, we will truly get a grip on this issue and tackle it. We do not want to see anyone who is in receipt of benefits being discriminated against in this way.

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the Minister for allowing an intervention before he moves on. I am going to test your patience, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I know that the Minister’s dogs were successful in the dog of the year competition not so long ago, as were my own, and I just want to raise a point about pets. Has he had a chance to consider the fact that another hidden way of excluding people in an overheated rental market is to adopt a no-pets policy? The Opposition have said that we want to get rid of that policy in tenancies, and I wonder whether the Minister has considered that as well.

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman is a dog owner, and I am as well. I would not be without our Charlie, and I think that my two daughters would rather throw me out than the dog. In answer to his question, this is an action issue for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but I can assure him that I am working closely across the board with my counterparts in that Department, and I have a meeting with them tomorrow at which I shall raise that very issue.

The hon. Member for Nottingham South also touched on the question of supply, which follows neatly on from the hon. Gentleman’s point. As I have said, I work very closely indeed on this with my counterparts at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and I am sure that the hon. Lady would expect nothing less. Any changes to LHA rates must go hand in hand with how we look at supply, which is why it is essential that we have those meetings. I have them regularly, and I shall have one tomorrow. It will come as no surprise to her that I will continue to push my colleagues in the Department to look at how we can increase the supply of council, social and affordable housing. She mentioned Matt Downie of Crisis, but she missed the three letters that he now has at the end of his name. I understand that he was recently awarded an MBE by Her Majesty the Queen, and I would like to send my congratulations to Matt, who is a huge asset to that organisation.

As a Government, we are proud of the progress we have made on our welfare reforms. We now have a record-breaking labour market, with over 3.6 million more people in work across the UK than in 2010 and with unemployment at its lowest rate since the 1970s, having fallen by more than half since 2010. This Government will continue to reform the welfare system so that it promotes work as the most effective route out of poverty. That is fairer to those who receive it and to the taxpayer who pays for it. Work is the pillar of a strong economy and a strong society. We believe that work should always pay, and we need a welfare system that helps people into work, supports those who need help and is fair to everyone who pays for it.

Lilian Greenwood: I hear what the Minister says, but he must be as concerned as I am that so many of the people who are now in poverty are also in work. In addressing the issue that we are talking about today, why is it right to force those who are least able to pay for the cost of welfare reform to do so, rather than looking at placing a control on rents as a way of controlling expenditure on welfare payments and protecting those who are most vulnerable from the impact of having to reduce expenditure?

Will Quince: I do not entirely recognise the picture that the hon. Lady paints. There have been huge positive changes for some of the lowest paid in our country. The national living wage has risen to £8.21, increasing a full-time worker’s pay by more than £2,750 since 2016. Our tax changes will make basic rate taxpayers more than £1,200 better off than they were in 2010, and we have doubled the free childcare available to working parents of three and four-year-olds to 30 hours per week, saving them up to £5,900 per child.

I was about to mention universal credit. Universal credit replaces the outdated and complex benefit system of the past, which too often stifled people’s potential, creating cliff edges at 16, 24 and 30 hours and punitive effective tax rates of more than 90% for some. The system was punishing claimants for doing the right thing. In the autumn Budget last year, we listened to concerns about universal credit delivery and funding, and announced a £4.5 billion cash boost to universal credit to ensure that vulnerable claimants and families would be supported in the transition to universal credit and that millions would keep more of what they earned.
We announced a package of additional support worth £1 billion for all those being moved on to universal credit. This includes a two-week continuation of legacy benefits, a 12-month exemption period from the minimum income floor, a reduction in the deductions cap and an extension of the advances repayment period.

In conclusion, this Government remain committed to a strong safety net for those who need it. That is why we continue to spend more than £90 billion a year on welfare benefits for people of working age—

**Lilian Greenwood:** I would not like the Minister to finish without ensuring that I have understood what he is saying. He said earlier that the freeze on local housing allowance rates would end in April next year. Can I check whether LHA rates will also be restored to at least the 30th percentile of local rents, or whether they will just be allowed to rise from the level that they are now? Given that he has said that the freeze will end in April 2020, what additional help will he provide for those who are struggling to pay their rent now?

**Will Quince:** I thank the hon. Lady for her further intervention, just as I was reaching the end of my conclusion. I will comment on what she has just said in a moment. The Government continue to spend more than £90 billion a year on welfare benefits for people of working age, and the freeze to LHA rates and working-age benefits will end in March 2020. In answer to the further questions she rightly asked, that is a decision for the Secretary of State, and I will be working closely with her on that in the coming days, weeks and months.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.47 pm

*House adjourned.*
The Care Quality Commission indicates that four out of five care homes have been rated good or outstanding for safety, with 84% of adult social care providers rated as good or outstanding overall.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): No compromise can be made on the safety of care homes, and that is why the Government introduced robust inspection regimes led by the Care Quality Commission. Latest figures from 3 June show that 80% of care homes have been rated good or outstanding for safety, with 84% of adult social care providers rated as good or outstanding overall.

Emma Dent Coad: I draw the Minister’s attention to one example of a care home run by a private provider: Ellesmere House, which offers residential care for dementia sufferers. In February 2015, there was a serious safeguarding incident leading to the death of a resident after an incident with another resident, yet its latest CQC report underlines continued failures in management. Is the Minister confident that we have a generation of providers with the skills, training and facilities needed to keep dementia sufferers safe and well cared for?

Caroline Dinenage: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. It is of course incredibly concerning when we hear cases of abuse or neglect in care homes. That is why the Government asked the CQC to inspect them in the first place and why we have put in place training through Skills for Care and given councils access to a lot more funding to help support them. However, abuse and neglect of any kind must not be tolerated.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I welcome the fact that the latest report from the Care Quality Commission indicates that four out of five adult social care services in England are rated either good or outstanding, but there is no room for complacency. Will the Minister expand on how she will ensure that that becomes five out of five?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that four out of five care homes are rated good or outstanding. That is largely down to the more than 1.5 million adult social care professionals, who work with great professionalism and integrity. We drive up quality by supporting them better and ensuring that we can recruit more people into this incredible profession. We have had a very important adult social care recruitment campaign called, “Every day is different”, which looks to attract people with the right values into the sector to drive up quality and provide robust social care.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I know from my family’s personal experience that just because care homes have a CQC rating of good does not mean that there are not dangerous and serious issues lurking beneath the surface that impact patient safety and care. Will the Minister outline today what the Government are doing to look into reports from CQC homes that are rated good?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady has often spoken very movingly in the House about her personal experiences, and she is absolutely right: abuse of vulnerable people is absolutely abhorrent. We are very determined to stop it, and we want to prevent it from happening in the first place through the tough inspection regime. We want to shut down poor-quality homes and, most importantly, we have made sure that across the country, police, councils and the NHS work together to help to protect people in the long term.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The integrity of CQC ratings was dealt a mortal blow by the uncovering of abuse at Whorlton Hall by BBC “Panorama”. Watching the abuse on that programme is made worse by the knowledge that the abuse may have started five years ago. The unpublished inspection report from August 2015 described allegations of assaults on patients, the undocumented use of a seclusion room and the use of rapid tranquilisation not backed by an organisation policy. I do not have any confidence that the review called by the CQC will uncover the truth behind that abuse. Will the Minister agree to set up an inquiry into this matter, so that we can establish whether the care regulator is fit for purpose?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is absolutely right: abuse of any kind must not be tolerated, and we have heard horrific accounts of abuse that must be tackled. That is why in May, we announced much stronger commissioning oversight arrangements, where people are put in place out of area. Local commissioners must visit regularly. The CQC has commissioned two independent reviews, and the findings and recommendations of both will be published. The point is that opportunities to intervene have been missed, and we must be open and transparent in getting to the bottom of what happened.

NHS: New Technology

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase NHS access to new technology.
The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): To increase the access to new technology across the NHS, we have expanded the accelerated access collaborative to get the best technologies in faster, and NHSX is delivering our tech vision to drive forward digital transformation of the NHS.

James Cartlidge: I welcome the way my right hon. Friend has really put a stamp on ensuring that technology is at the heart of his health policy. Can he tell me whether the accelerated access collaborative will engage locally, particularly with the sustainability and transformation partnerships, so that it eventually leads to better outcomes for our constituents?

Matt Hancock: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a reason why we care about using the very best technology in the world in the NHS, and that is that it improves treatment for patients. The regional delivery of better technology is critical. The 15 regional academic health science networks are a key part of the AAC and they work closely with local hospitals.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will know that in Greater Manchester we spend over £1 million a year on keeping and storing paper-based assessment records made in the early years by health visitors. Will he work with us to eradicate that cost and get the digital licences we need?

Matt Hancock: Yes, 100%. One of the reasons we have put NHSX in place is to drive exactly this policy agenda, where we can get better treatment for patients and save money.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Earlier this year, the Secretary of State attended the launch of a report on artificial intelligence by the all-party parliamentary group on heart and circulatory diseases. Can I get a commitment from him that AI is very much part of the future through the NHS long-term plan?

Matt Hancock: A most enthusiastic commitment! My hon. Friend has led on this agenda and driven it, because it is all about using technology to save lives. The report that he mentions is optimistic about the power of using data better to ensure that people can live longer.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): On new technology and saving lives, I met the Secretary of State last month to discuss making the innovative enzyme replacement therapy Brineura—the only treatment available for Batten disease—available on the NHS urgently. I have heard nothing since that meeting, and the wait is agonising for the families, so what will he do urgently to make this life-saving treatment available to children in England?

Matt Hancock: I had an incredibly moving meeting with the hon. Lady, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and others, and some of the families and children who have Batten disease. I have since met the chief executive of the NHS. The decision on the availability of the drug in question is, of course, one for the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and NHS England, but I have had those meetings and I continue to make the case.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The electronic prescription service is now used by more than 90% of GP practices, and more than 70% of prescriptions are issued in that way. As well as providing a better patient experience, how much money has this saved for the NHS?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is dead right to say that this provides a better service and saves money. I do not have the figure at my fingertips, but I will write to him with the answer and ensure that it is published for the whole House to see.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Patients in my constituency have to travel vast distances—often in excess of a 200-mile round trip—to be seen at Raigmore Hospital. As and when properly working visual teleconsultations are brought into being, when that technology is developed, may I appeal to the Government to share the technology with the Scottish Government and with NHS Highland?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. Places like Caithness are a great example of where GP consultations that can be done over the phone or over a video conference can save people hours and hours. Of course they sometimes need to see their GP in person, but not always. We are driving this agenda hard in England, and I would be happy to work with the NHS in Scotland to ensure that that technology is taken up there, too.

Male Suicide

3. Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): What has his Department’s strategy is to reduce the level of male suicides. [911403]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Men remain the group at the highest risk of suicide and continue to account for three quarters of all suicides. Clearly, targeting suicide in men must be the main thrust of our suicide prevention strategy. We are investing £25 million to support local suicide prevention plans in every local area, and that funding is testing different approaches and sharing best practice. We also announced £600,000 yesterday to support local authorities with exactly these processes.

Conor McGinn: It devastates me to have to tell the House that St Helens has the highest rate of suicide in the country, and three quarters of those who take their own lives are men. We know that working class men in deprived areas are 10 times more at risk than those in the most affluent areas, so will the Minister recognise class and community, and poverty and place, as key factors in male suicide and its causes? Will she come to St Helens to see and support the vital work that is being done to prevent the tragic crisis of suicide that is affecting more families in my community?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman says, and I would be delighted to go to St Helens, not least because the more we can do to share good practice around combating male suicide, the more we can prevent it. Everybody in this space wants to do more to prevent suicide, and location is important, too,
which is why a big part of my plan is to ensure that we are putting in good measures in the places that attract more suicides.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): A few weeks ago, I held a debate in this Chamber on the subject of suicide in the farming community. What are my hon. Friend’s plans to improve the mental health of males under 40 in rural areas?

Chris Davies: I am delighted that my hon. Friend is highlighting the farming community. He is right that the incidence of suicide is particularly high in that community, not least because those people work in remote areas, have less engagement with others and have access to the means. We must ensure that all vulnerable men feel that they can reach out to people who can support them. I encourage everybody to get the message out that if we see people who look vulnerable or struggling, we should be comfortable about reaching out to them. We have heard amazing stories of when just the simplest intervention, such as, “Are you all right, my friend?” can make the difference between life and death.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): Sharing information saves lives when it comes to suicide prevention, but families are too often unnecessarily excluded because clinicians may be unaware of or do not follow the consensus statement guidance on seeking consent and sharing information in the patient’s best interests. I thank the Minister for meeting me and the National Suicide Prevention Alliance recently. She will know that the Matthew Elvidge Trust has highlighted the importance of how consent is sought, and it has suggested the following wording:

“In our experience, it is always much better to involve a family member, friend or colleague whom you trust in your treatment and recovery... This will result in you recovering much quicker. Would you like us to make contact with someone and would you like us to do this with you now?”

The Minister will agree that there is a huge difference between that and just asking someone whether their mum can be phoned. Will the Minister set out how she will raise awareness of the consensus statement?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her continued interest in this matter. She will recognise the cultural challenge of encouraging all practitioners in the NHS to embrace the change, because we quite rightly have a culture in which discretion is paramount. Practices are in place to encourage information sharing, and I highlight our support for the Zero Suicide Alliance—£2 million was provided last October—and central to its work will be spreading understanding of the consensus statement throughout the NHS.

NHS Staffing

4. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps is he taking to ensure that the NHS has sufficient staff to meet its long-term needs?

Nigel Huddleston: The Secretary of State will be aware that recruitment and retention is particularly difficult for hospitals in special measures, such as the Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, which he recently visited. Such hospitals have to rely heavily on agency staff, which puts pressure on their finances. What specific steps is he taking to help those hospitals with their financial and recruiting pressures?

Matt Hancock: We are working closely with that trust, and it was good to visit and see just how hard working the staff are. They are dedicated to the cause and we have a direct package of support for the Worcestershire Royal Hospital and the trust more broadly because it faces unique challenges, some of which arc not at all of its own making. The staff at Worcester are working incredibly hard to deliver for their local citizens.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My constituents find it very difficult to access their GP, as we have a recruitment shortage in the constituency. The “General Practice Forward View” pledged to boost the GP workforce by 5,000 by 2020. Are the Government on course to meet that target?

Matt Hancock: We retain that target of 5,000 more GPs. We have managed to increase the number of staff working around GPs, because a GP does not need to do everything in primary care, so we have a more mixed workforce with physios and practice nurses working alongside GPs. There is more work still to do, and the NHS long-term plan sets out how we will make that happen.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): The leadership team at King’s College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust has asked for assistance from NHS Improvement to put in post a clinical director at the emergency services department, which has just been rated inadequate by the Care Quality Commission. This vital post, however, remains unfilled. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give that NHS Improvement can help trusts when they request assistance in this way?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend makes an important point. This is a vital post in a hospital and a hospital trust that does amazing work—some of the best medicine in the world is done at King’s—but it also has significant challenges with delivery, especially with respect to meeting financial targets and delivering value for money. King’s needs that support, which we are putting in place. I will raise the specific issue of the post he mentions with the head of NHS Improvement.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Royal Stoke University Hospital, in partnership with Staffordshire University and Keele University, is training the next generation of clinicians, but the Secretary of State will know those universities need to be properly resourced to continue that vital training. What conversations is he having with the Department for Education to make sure that partnership thrives?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We have expanded the number of medical training places; we have more people going into medicine; and we have a record number of GPs in training. This takes
time, of course. I spoke to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education about this recently, and I will make sure that we keep pushing hard.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Our future immigration policy will be key to ensuring that our NHS is sufficiently staffed across the country. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with the Home Secretary specifically on the £30,000 annual minimum income? I believe that limit is very detrimental to the sector.

Matt Hancock: I have had those discussions, and the Migration Advisory Committee has raised a specific concern about social care. We need to deliver better social care, with people coming from all around the world in addition to domestically trained people. I take on board my hon. Friend’s point.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Pinderfields Hospital in Wakefield has struggled to retain midwives. As a result, the trust has proposed to close and remove the popular midwife-led maternity unit in Pontefract. Local mums are up in arms, as it is completely unfair. We keep seeing this pattern. When the NHS is under pressure from austerity, from shortages or from management issues, it is the services in towns that are hit. What will the Secretary of State do to make sure we keep Pontefract’s midwife-led unit open and so the NHS can continue to sustain services that are vital to our towns?

Matt Hancock: The right hon. Lady, as always, puts the case for Pontefract very powerfully. The truth is that we will need more nurses and more midwives, as well as other health professionals, over the next five years because we are putting in a record amount of funding. More people are needed to deliver better services, and I am happy to meet her to discuss this specific case. Coming from and representing towns myself, I understand the importance of keeping services such as maternity services close to the people they serve.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend make sure that his interim people plan looks again at the hugely underutilised resource of the allied health professions, including osteopaths and chiropractors? What is the point of having a professional standards authority to regulate them if the Department will not use them?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend makes an important point, one that we have frequently discussed. As he knows, I am married to an osteopath, so I do recognise the value that osteopaths bring to all of us.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Research shows that the ratio of registered nurses to patients is one of the most important factors in patient safety, so members of the Royal College of Nursing are calling on the Secretary of State to follow Wales and Scotland and to bring in safe staffing legislation. What is his answer to them?

Matt Hancock: Of course we need to have the right number of nurses. We need to make sure that we also put in the funding. If the SNP Government in Scotland had put the same funding increases into the NHS in Scotland, there would have been half a billion pounds more there over the last five years. So let us start with getting the money in that we are putting in in England, but is not fully being reflected by the SNP Government in Scotland.

Dr Whitford: The SNP in Scotland spends £185 a head more than England, so the Secretary of State should check his figures. At over 11%, the nurse vacancy rate in England is more than double that in Scotland. Whereas student nursing numbers have increased every year in Scotland, there are 570 fewer nursing students this year in England. Is it not time to follow Scotland’s approach, reintroduce the nursing bursary and end tuition fees?

Matt Hancock: I am not going to let the SNP spokesman get away with this. Normally, she brings a thoughtful contribution to health debates, but she said that there is more spending in Scotland per head. The truth is this: the increase in spending in England over the last five years is 17.6%, but in Scotland it is only 13.1%. That represents half a billion pounds less: the increase in spending that we have seen in England that they have not seen in Scotland. She should recognise that fact.

Mental Health Services

5. Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure the long-term provision of adequate mental health services.

21. David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure the long-term provision of adequate mental health services.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Under the NHS long-term plan, there will be a comprehensive expansion of mental health services, with additional funding of £2.3 billion a year by 2023-24. That will give greater mental health support to an extra 345,000 children, at least 380,000 more adults, and 24,000 more new and expectant mothers.

Peter Heaton-Jones: Across the country there is a real challenge in recruiting qualified mental health nurses. Will the Minister work with me and the Devon Partnership NHS Trust to encourage as many qualified professionals as we can to come to work at the excellent in-patient wards at North Devon District Hospital?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I completely agree with my hon. Friend; it is important that we have the right workforce in place. That is a considerable challenge, but it is essential if we are to achieve the best outcomes. I am pleased that the Devon Partnership NHS Trust has seen an increase of 47 mental health nurses between February 2010 and February 2019, which shows that it is doing exactly as he says and going out of its way to recruit the best possible people. That work must continue, as is recognised in our “Interim NHS People Plan”.

David Warburton: I recently met representatives from Somerset’s NHS trust and its child and adolescent mental health services to look at young people’s mental health services and I heard some worrying stories of
bed allocation. This has led to teenagers with mental health problems being moved out of the county, sometimes a huge distance from home, or sharing wards with very young children. So what is the Department doing to ensure that young people are not held in care for extended periods, which can exacerbate their difficulties, and that provision is sufficient for them to remain close to family and friends in an appropriate environment?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** It is essential that we end the practice of out-of-area placements because, as my hon. Friend rightly says, being in close proximity to family and friends is clearly going to aid the recovery of anyone suffering from mental ill health. This has been a particular problem for children and young people, and a particular problem in the south-west, but I can report to him that NHS England is making sure that we have more adequate bed provision across the country, and we will continue to drive down these out-of-area placements.

**Dr Paul Williams** (Stockton South) (Lab): Somebody is much more likely to need mental health services if they have experienced childhood adversity. The all-party group on the prevention of adverse childhood experiences has looked in detail at the evidence base on policies to prevent this adversity. What is the best thing the group can do to influence the Government’s prevention strategy?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** I have to say, the hon. Gentleman does it very well: he continually makes noise about this important issue. He is absolutely right that adverse childhood experiences inform people’s future mental health, or mental ill health. We are currently looking at our provision for early years intervention and the first 1,001 days—the hon. Gentleman and I have discussed the importance of that—but we need to make sure that state organisations take advantage of every contact they have with children, to ensure that we pick people up when they are vulnerable.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): My learning disabled constituent, who also has mental health and substance abuse issues, was placed in poor-quality housing and left without food and heating by a local care provider called Focus. What is the Department doing to ensure that subcontracted social care providers are fit for purpose?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** The case that the hon. Lady mentions is clearly very concerning. It is for local authorities to make sure, when they commission care providers, that they are fit for purpose and discharge their responsibilities in the local care plan, but we also need to recognise that people with learning disabilities as well as mental health issues are particularly vulnerable. We need to make sure that local authorities and local NHS services work together more effectively to ensure that care needs are not neglected.

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): I was interested to see recent comments by the Secretary of State regarding the use of music to combat over-medicalisation—I should declare that I am married to a music therapist—so does that mean he shares my interest in the use of music therapy to combat mental health issues, as well as dementia and other conditions?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** I am pleased that my hon. Friend has declared his interest in this matter. He is right that mental wellbeing is about not only clinical interventions but very much the kind of things that he describes—wider social prescribing. We cannot overstate the role of the third sector in giving wraparound support to people going through periods of mental ill health. I am giving clinical commissioning groups the clear message that they need to look at what else they commission in this space, alongside clinical interventions.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): In Manchester on Saturday, people were giving away free “Unknown Pleasures” t-shirts, partly to mark the 40th anniversary of one of the greatest albums ever made. But, as anyone who knows the history of Joy Division will know, there is also the important related issue of male suicide and people being encouraged to donate to charities, particularly those that work with young men at risk of suicide. I was sent one of the t-shirts, Mr Speaker, but I thought you might rule it out of order if I wore it. These charities obviously do great work, but they are trying to fill real gaps in the system. How can we ensure, when we consider long-term health plans and long-term mental health services, that there are not gaps that people fall between?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** The hon. Lady articulates the issue extremely well. The purpose of local suicide prevention plans is very much to make sure that we have a joined-up approach to combating male suicide and to identify exactly where the gaps in the services are. The £600,000 that we announced yesterday for the sector-led improvement package is to enable local authorities to share expertise and to make sure that, holistically, they provide the leadership to make sure that the gaps are plugged. I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s interest in this matter.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): This week, the Children’s Society published research to show that more than 110,000 children and young people were turned away from mental health services because their problems were not deemed serious enough—that is despite suicide rates for teenagers almost doubling in eight years and research from YoungMinds that shows that three quarters of parents feel their child’s mental health has deteriorated while they wait for treatment. Why are so few children able to get the support from mental health services that they so desperately need?

**Jackie Doyle-Price:** As the hon. Lady and I have discussed previously, I would be the first person to recognise that we are not where we would like to be in respect of the provision of mental health services, but that is why we are investing an additional £2.3 billion to expand access for children by 345,000. In addition to that, we are investing in a brand new workforce in all our schools so that we can have exactly that kind of intervention that will not require more lengthy periods of care and treatment. It is essential that we equip all schools and young people with tools to manage their wellbeing.

**Junior Doctor Contract: Exception Reporting**

6. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the exception reporting process in the junior doctor contract 2016.

[911406]
The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): Our junior doctors work incredibly hard caring for patients around the clock. We introduced exception reporting in 2016 and it has been a major step forward in ensuring safe working. The British Medical Association, NHS Employers and the Department reviewed the effectiveness of exception reporting as part of the junior doctor’s contract agreement, which we announced last week. Revisions will be made to exception reporting subject to the endorsement of the BMA.

Justin Madders: Is the Minister aware that research by the Hospital Consultants & Specialists Association shows that, despite thousands of exception reports from junior doctors in unsafe hospital trusts, no changes to shift patterns were made at all. The chief executive of NHS Employers has said that, undoubtedly, there are circumstances where trusts would like to make changes, but because they do not have sufficient staff in place they are unable to do so. What can the Minister do to ensure that, in future, these changes are actually implemented?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right: every exception report has to be addressed. Changing the rota is one possible outcome. He will recognise that there are other possible outcomes as well: the doctor may agree to work extra hours and be given extra time off; timing of the ward rounds in clinics may be adjusted, so that educational opportunities can be taken; and timing of the ward rounds can be adjusted so that support from other senior staff can be there as well. There are many ways around this.

Thames Valley Scanning Contract

7. Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): For what reason he chose not to refer the Thames Valley PET-CT scanning contract to the independent reconfiguration panel.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): I am aware of the views that have been expressed on this matter. I can confirm that, having taken advice, we considered that the letter received from the Oxfordshire health overview and scrutiny committee does not constitute a valid referral under the relevant regulations. However, I have emphasised to NHS England, Oxford University Hospitals and InHealth the importance of continuing local discussions and working together at pace to find a service offer that works best for patients.

Anneliese Dodds: The Churchill’s PET-CT cancer scanning service is world renown, yet NHS England, apparently with the consent of this Government, is forcing it into partnership with a private company. That is what is happening. It is not a discussion; it is being forced into a partnership. NHS England has even warned the trust against staff raising their voice on this issue because of their concerns about patient safety. Surely this unprecedented partnership is illegitimate and must be called in by this Government.

Seema Kennedy: As I have said to the hon. Lady, we do not consider it to be a valid referral. What I would say is that NHS England remains committed to ensuring that the public are involved in decision making. Part of the extensive public engagement included completing a 30-day engagement about the phase 2 procurement proposals in 2016. I understand the strong passions that this has raised on both sides of the House and I urge all parties to continue working together.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I have made it clear to my constituents that, in principle, I have no objection to private companies providing NHS services, but totally legitimate concerns have been raised about the consultation involved in awarding this contract. May I simply thank the Minister for agreeing to meet Oxfordshire MPs this afternoon? I know that she is very much engaged in this issue and, although it may not technically be overseen by the Department of Health and Social Care, I know that she will do all she can to help us to reach a solution.

Seema Kennedy: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I am looking forward to the meeting this afternoon. As I have said, I am assured that the decision will maintain services in Oxford and that there will be improved patient access, with new scanners in Milton Keynes and Swindon for people living there as well.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Surely the reason we have got to this point is that the clinical commissioning group was never actually consulted on what was right for the local population. How can the Minister ensure that, in future, centralised procurement services and local CCGs are always consulted as a matter of course?

Seema Kennedy: As I have said, there has been engagement with local people, Members of Parliament and the local health community. I think that the outcome that we are all looking for is good PET-CT scanners for the people in Oxfordshire and for the whole of Thames Valley.

Free Prescriptions

8. Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to ensure that vulnerable people are not unfairly penalised for incorrectly claiming free prescriptions.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): Last year, prescription and dental fraud cost the NHS an estimated £212 million. It is absolutely right that the Government take steps to recoup that money, so it can be reinvested into caring for patients. Our system for claiming free prescriptions should be simple for people and clinicians to understand, which is why we are currently piloting technology that allows pharmacies to check digitally whether a patient is exempt from charges before prescription items are dispensed.

Anna Turley: I appreciate the Minister’s response, but I am afraid that that is just not the reality out there. One of my constituents—a woman with severe learning disabilities and anxiety, who is entitled to free prescriptions through her employment and support allowance claim—was hit with a £100 penalty charge when the NHS failed to obtain the correct information from the Department.
for Work and Pensions. My office challenged that decision and got the £100 back to her, but the situation was extremely distressing, and the communication is clearly at fault and punitive. Will the Minister implement a review into the prescription penalties to protect vulnerable people?

Seema Kennedy: It is distressing to hear of such a case, and these situations are very distressing for patients and their carers. The NHS Business Services Authority has taken steps to make things clearer, including with an easy-read patient information booklet and an online eligibility checker. We are also running a national awareness campaign, but of course we do need to ensure that people are not claiming for things to which they are not entitled.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I have constituents who are furious at repeatedly receiving penalty notices that subsequently have to be quashed. The system is rubbish, isn’t it?

Seema Kennedy: I do not agree with my right hon. Friend that the system is rubbish. If somebody does receive a penalty charge notice incorrectly, there are procedures in place to challenge that notice. If somebody thinks they have received a penalty charge that they should not have received, they should contact the NHS Business Services Authority.

Mr Speaker: What is not rubbish is the very pithy line of questioning typically deployed by the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). I will call the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) if his question consists of a sentence, rather than a speech.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Access to prescriptions is made much harder given the closure of 233 community pharmacies in the last two years, so will the Minister introduce an essential community pharmacies scheme to support rural pharmacies such as those in Cumbria and keep them open?

Mr Speaker: Well done.

Seema Kennedy: We recognise the importance of community pharmacies. Pharmacists are specialists who have a great role in primary care, which is why they are highlighted in the NHS long-term plan.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Since 2014, 5.6 million penalty charge notices have been issued, including a staggering 1.7 million to people who are entitled to free prescriptions. FP10 prescription forms and the criteria for eligibility for free prescriptions are far from straightforward. Some people in receipt of universal credit are eligible for free prescriptions and some are not—and, by the way, universal credit is not mentioned at all on the form. Those claiming exemption on grounds of low income can see their eligibility change from one month to the next. Is it any wonder that some patients tick their box? What steps are the Government taking to sort out this chaotic system that is too often treating vulnerable people like criminals?

Seema Kennedy: A wide range of activity has been undertaken to help people to understand whether they need to pay for their NHS prescriptions, and I remind the House that 84% of NHS prescriptions are available for free. My Department and the DWP are working together to provide further clarity to universal credit, and hopefully we will be adding a universal credit tick box to the prescription form.

NHS: Changing Places

9. Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that people can access Changing Places facilities when they use NHS services.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Last year, I announced £2 million funding for NHS trusts in England to install Changing Places facilities in hospitals; this is now available for trusts to bid for. We estimate that 250,000 people in the UK cannot use standard accessible toilets, and the fund could help to install well over 100 more Changing Places facilities.

Dr Johnson: Many of the disabled children who use Changing Places facilities also have a life-limiting or life-threatening condition. I welcome the increase in Changing Places facilities, but in this national Children’s Hospice Week could I ask my hon. Friend to go further in protecting these vulnerable children by increasing the children’s hospice grants to £25 million to give them the financial security they need?

Caroline Dinenage: I am really pleased that my hon. Friend has mentioned that it is Children’s Hospice Week. It is a great opportunity to pay tribute to the incredible work that children’s hospices do up and down the country, supporting some of our most poorly children and their families. I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she does on the all-party parliamentary group for children who need palliative care. The short answer to her question is yes; the NHS will match fund CCGs that increase their investment in children’s palliative care, including hospices, by up to £7 million. That is increasing support to a total of £25 million a year by 2023-24.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): There are only about 40 Changing Places facilities in the NHS at the moment. I congratulate the Minister on the work she is doing on this, but will she continue to work with campaigners like Lorna Fillingham in my constituency to make sure that it not only happens quickly and on a timely basis but that we build on it in the future?

Caroline Dinenage: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman because it was he who introduced me to Lorna Fillingham and the amazing Changing Places campaigners in the first place. It is really down to their incredible work that we have seen the growth of this very important issue. There are about 38 Changing Places facilities on NHS England estates at the moment, but the £2 million pot will definitely help to improve that number significantly.

NHS Staff Retention

10. Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the retention of NHS staff.

[911410]
13. Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the retention of NHS staff.  

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): The interim people plan sets out how the NHS will become a great employer with the culture and leadership needed to retain staff. NHS programmes to retain its highly talented staff are already having an impact. There are now more nurses working in the NHS than at any other time in its 70-year history. In addition, about 1 million NHS workers will benefit from the new Agenda for Change pay and contract deal.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the recent announcement of a consultation on NHS pensions arrangements for senior personnel. I hope that that will look at the taper impact, which raises the effective tax rate to an unacceptably high level. Retention of key personnel is critical across the Shropshire health economy, as well as in other parts of the country. Can my hon. Friend reassure me that senior-level changes in Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust’s management will not delay the Secretary of State’s consideration of the Independent Reconfiguration Panel’s report on proposed acute hospital reconfiguration?

Stephen Hammond: I thank my right hon. Friend for his welcome for the pensions proposals and the consultation. The Department has received initial advice from the Independent Reconfiguration Panel on the Future Fit hospital reconfiguration. The Secretary of State is currently considering that. He will respond to the IRP’s advice in due course, and I will ensure that he informs my right hon. Friend.

Greg Hands: May I thank the Secretary of State again for saving the A&E department at Charing Cross Hospital, which was a very, very popular move? Our brilliant hospital will benefit from the work that the Government are doing to increase the number of nursing associates across the NHS. What more can we do to get more nursing associates at Charing Cross Hospital, Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, and across the whole NHS?

Stephen Hammond: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments on saving the hospital department—that is very important. He is right to raise the important role of the nursing associates, who deliver hands-on care in a range of complex settings. Thousands of nursing associates began training in 2017 and in 2018. Health Education England is leading a programme to recruit more than 7,500 into training in 2019, and I am sure that some of them will benefit his constituency.

15. Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Bradford NHS Trust is pressing ahead with plans to set up a wholly-owned subsidiary company. Last week, 97% of Unison members voted for strike action. Given that the trust is currently run by a temporary chair and a temporary chief executive, and is acting on guidance from a now-defunct body, will the Minister, to improve retention, call on the trust to drop these plans and keep the NHS family as one?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady knows that a wholly-owned subsidiary is created as a legal entity. It is 100% owned by NHS organisations. It is also the case that local trust board members sit on the boards of those subsidiary entities. It is therefore appropriate that the local organisation takes that decision.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (LD): The King’s Fund says that the earnings threshold in the Government’s immigration proposals, which was mentioned earlier, will definitely impact on the ability to retain and attract NHS staff. The proposals for a transition period during which many social care workers would only be allowed to come here for a limited time with no entitlement to bring dependants will, again, negatively impact on the ability to retain staff. When will this Government realise that immigration is good for our public services and good for our country, and that badly thought out policy in this area that impacts on the retention of NHS staff is wrong and nonsensical?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right—immigration has benefited the national health service. This Minister, this Secretary of State and this ministerial team celebrate the fact that global immigration has benefited the NHS. From 2021, the new system will allow people with skills to come to the UK from anywhere in the world. It will remove the cap on skilled migrants, abolish the requirement to undertake the resident labour market test, and should improve the timeliness of being able to apply for a visa.

NHS Funding: Cambridgeshire


The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): NHS England is responsible for the allocation of resources to clinical commissioning groups. Funding is distributed on the basis of a weighted capitation formula informed by the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation. Population estimates are provided by the Office for National Statistics. This year, as the hon. Gentleman will know from a debate that we had last week, ACRA recommended and NHS England accepted a wide-ranging set of changes to that formula. Those changes are likely to benefit his constituency.

Daniel Zeichner: We had a discussion last week, but the Minister was unable to answer my question so I will try again. Is Cambridgeshire’s clinical commissioning group correct that it will have less money to spend on providing health services next year than it does this year?

Stephen Hammond: As I pointed out to the hon. Gentleman last week, we recognise that historically, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough CCG has received less funding per person than neighbouring CCGs, but as I also pointed out to him, the CCG has received an absolute increase of 5.7% in 2019-20, bringing the funding up to £1.1 billion. We had a disagreement about the figures, because I could not agree the figures that he provided. As he knows, I have promised to write to him when I have been able to resolve his figures.
Childhood Obesity

12. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of progress in implementing Childhood obesity: a plan for action, chapter 2, published in June 2018. [911413]


The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): The Government are taking a world-leading approach to obesity. We have held consultations on ending the sale of energy drinks to children, calorie labelling in restaurants, restricting promotions of sugary and fatty foods by price indication, and further advertising restrictions, including a 9 pm watershed. We are considering all the feedback, and will respond later this year.

**Paul Blomfield**: Alongside prevention, we have to do more to help the growing number of children who are already overweight or obese. It is more than a year since the Health and Social Care Committee highlighted the lack of tier 3 and 4 services. Voluntary groups such as Shine Health Academy in my constituency fill the gap. They take children on referral from GPs, but they do not receive any public funding. There can be no other serious health condition affecting children where the NHS says, “Sorry, we can’t help.” Will the Minister take action and agree to meet me to discuss it?

**Seema Kennedy**: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman that childhood obesity is a massive challenge to our nation. It is a problem internationally, and we are taking serious steps to tackle it. I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to hear more about Shine.

**Ellie Reeves**: Public health budgets have fallen by over 5%, with millions more in cuts anticipated. In both Lewisham and Bromley, the ring-fenced public health budget has fallen by 2.6% this year. The Government expect local authorities to play a greater role in tackling obesity while simultaneously cutting funding to councils, schools and the NHS. When will the Minister take action to tackle childhood obesity by restoring funding for public health?

**Seema Kennedy**: I have set out to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) the measures we have taken. Through the childhood obesity trailblazer programme, we are working with local authorities—I am hoping to visit one in Blackburn later this week—that want to see how they can use their powers to best effect, doing things such as limiting new fast-food outlets. We have spent billions of pounds over the past five years. The public health grant will be subject to the spending review.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Given that 46% of food and drink advertising is spent on unhealthy food—and unhealthy foods are three times cheaper than healthy food—will the Minister follow in the footsteps of her predecessor, and go to the Netherlands to look at the Marqt supermarket, which has 16 stores around Amsterdam and does not market any unhealthy food to children? It is a profitable business and a model for our supermarkets, so will she go and look at it?

**Seema Kennedy**: I thank my hon. Friend for his interest in this area. The Amsterdam model has been very successful, but it is not just about food—it is about place and culture. I would hope to be able to visit the model very shortly.

**Mr Speaker**: If the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) has been trudging round Amsterdam in pursuit of the public interest he is a remarkably assiduous and dedicated fellow. We are all deeply obliged to him—it is way beyond the call of duty, but we are appreciative none the less.

We now come to topical questions. I call Justin Madders.

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab) rose—

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab) rose—

**Mr Speaker**: The hon. Gentleman will think it is a conspiracy, but he will get his moment in a moment. I call Mrs Hodgson.

**Mrs Hodgson**: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Government’s second childhood obesity plan will celebrate its first birthday a week today, but we will not be celebrating. The Government have ducked and dived on their responsibility to the children in this country and have failed to produce any policies as a result of the six consultations the plan has promised, but the rate of childhood obesity is still at a record high. Instead of waiting for the chief medical officer to report on obesity, will the Government act now to tackle the childhood obesity crisis, and introduce and implement the policies they have consulted on already?

**Seema Kennedy**: We have a very ambitious aim to halve childhood obesity by 2030. We are still considering all the answers to the consultations, and we are hoping to respond to them very shortly.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [911426] **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): This week is Children’s Hospice Week, Loneliness Awareness Week, National Breastfeeding Week and Learning Disability Week, and today is International Fathers Mental Health Day. The Government have made plans to more than double funding for children’s palliative care and end-of-life care services, developed a loneliness strategy and launched a consultation on folic acid in flour to support expectant mothers, and yesterday the Prime Minister announced a package of further work to support people from all backgrounds in the UK with their mental health. I and my brilliant ministerial team will continue to drive forward the health of the nation.
Mr Speaker: We are indebted.

Justin Madders: I want to bring to the Secretary of State’s attention some mental health waiting times that my constituents have recently come to me with. Someone with an urgent referral for trauma counselling is looking at a minimum six-month wait. A teenager who has attempted to take her own life is waiting over a year to see a psychiatrist. Several adults have been told there is a three-year wait just to get a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. These waits are appalling. The Secretary of State billed himself as the leadership candidate for the future, but he is the Secretary of State for Health now. What is he going to do to address this appalling waiting system?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman is right that we need to ensure that access to mental health services improves. As part of the increase in funding we are putting into the NHS, the biggest increase is in mental health services, and it is a critical part of what we need to do to address the sorts of problems he rightly raises.

T3. [911428] Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Will my hon. Friend take up as a matter of urgency the recommendations of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee report on eating disorders treatment, which we have released today to follow up on the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman’s report from 2017, named “Innecing the alarms”? Does she agree with us that too many people are dying from eating disorders, which still have the highest mortality rate of any mental health condition, and that much more must be done to train health professionals, support sufferers and their families, and enhance and accelerate treatment and care in the community?

Mr Speaker: Far too long!

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank the Committee for its report, which follows the health ombudsman’s report on the tragic death of Averil Hart. It is clear that we have made significant improvements in eating disorder provision since then, but there is still more to do. We have made considerable progress with regard to treating children, and that progress now needs to be translated to the care of adults with eating disorders. My hon. Friend is right that it is the mental health disorder that has the highest mortality rate. At any one time, 1% of the population will be suffering from an eating disorder, and we need to make this more of a priority to make sure that services are available.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Indeed. I dare say that this is the Secretary of State’s final outing at Health questions, because we believe he has secured transfer to pastures new. In his time here, he has failed to deliver a social care Green Paper and failed to deliver a prevention Green Paper, while he is privatising Oxford cancer scanning services and we have hospitals charging £7,000 for knee replacements. Does he really think that is a record deserving of Cabinet promotion?

Matt Hancock: I am agog—and aghast. Over the last year, we have not only delivered £33.9 billion of increased funding, but we have produced the long-term plan for the future of the NHS. Starting this year, with the money already flowing, we are seeing the biggest increase in funding for community, primary care and mental health services. We have developed our work on the prevention agenda, and we have instituted a new verve and energy into the adoption of new technology in the NHS. I look forward to driving forward all these things in the future.

Jonathan Ashworth: Will the Secretary of State tell us about the verve and energy in his own constituency in Suffolk, where 32 health visitors are being cut because of his cuts? He is apparently now supporting a candidate who wants £10 billion-worth of tax cuts for the richest in society. Will that not mean further cuts to public health, further cuts to social care and, ultimately, cuts to the NHS as well?

Matt Hancock: For the majority of its 71-year history, the NHS has been run under the stewardship of a Conservative Secretary of State. At this moment, it is getting the biggest funding increase and the longest funding settlement in its history, along with the reforms to make sure that everybody can get the health care that they need.

T4. [911429] Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to improve the diagnosis and treatment of prostate cancer, in particular increasing the use of new technologies such as gel spacers, laser ablation and MRI in diagnosis?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): More than 94% of men survive prostate cancer for one year, and 86% for five years, but there is more to do. That is why last April the Prime Minister announced £75 million over five years so that 40,000 men can take part in innovative research into early diagnosis and treatment. The long-term plan sets out our commitment to speed up the path from innovation to business as usual, spreading proven new techniques and technologies faster. Safer and more precise treatments in diagnostic techniques will continue to improve prostate cancer survival.

T2. [911427] Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): Kensington has an ageing population, many of whom will need residential care at some point, yet our council seems determined to move needy elders out of the borough, far from family and friends. Our last ever council-owned care home was sold off to a provider of caviar care, which lets luxury flats at £300,000 a year, with care, plus caviar, on top, for those who can afford it. Will the Minister explain what, if any, statutory obligations councils are under to provide affordable residential care for their residents? We are not all billionaires in Kensington.
The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): The Care Act 2014 gives councils a responsibility to provide residents with a choice of quality care options in a local area. More broadly, we are backing up councils with increased funding. Over the last three years, we have increased funding in real terms by 8%. That has given councils access to about £10 billion to help ensure that there is provision in local areas.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Secretary of State assure my constituents in Kettering that taking advantage of the local government reorganisation in the county to establish a combined health and social care pilot is one of his Department’s very top priorities?

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): The House will not be surprised to know that the hon. Gentleman has raised this with me and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on a number of occasions. I am happy to reconfirm to him that we do consider it a top priority to make sure that all of his constituents get the care they need.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): With abortion rates for women over 30 rising, I am sure the Secretary of State will agree with Professor Lesley Regan, the president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, who said: “Women must have access to effective contraception and sexual health services to enable them to take control of their health and fertility by preventing unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections.” Does the Secretary of State also agree with Professor Regan’s comments on the need to end the fragmentation of commissioning, and the underfunding of services that disproportionately affect women?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is quite right. As part of the long-term plan, we have considered the best way to commission sexual health services, which were moved over to local authorities five years ago. We think that the responsibilities are sitting in the right place, but we need to see far more co-commissioning, where local authorities and the NHS together ensure that there is more joined-up provision, rather than the siloed provision that she mentions.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I welcome the successful trial of the new NHS app. How does the Department plan to use APIs to allow third-party developers to improve the app for patients?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is quite right to celebrate the development of the NHS app. More than 80% of people are now able to use the NHS app to link to their GP practice. Our plans for the year ahead include API-based connections to a number of third-party products, including the NHS app. More importantly, I want the opening of this system to allow other innovators to be able to develop products for patients to use in a way that we have not imagined before. I want a load of innovations so that people can get the best possible access to their NHS.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In York, it has taken 46 weeks for children and young people to commence the diagnosis process for autism—and demand and the number of referrals is going up. It takes a further 12 months, once there is a positive diagnosis, for parents even to access the SEND—special educational needs and disability—course. Precisely what service improvements can families expect to see in the next 12 months, and how will they be achieved?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to draw attention to this issue. We are very concerned about the diagnosis times, which is why we are reviewing our autism strategy this year and are extending it to include children, whereas before it catered only for adults. We want to ensure it remains fit for purpose. We have launched a national call for evidence and have already received in excess of 1,000 responses.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Patient safety in the NHS depends on compassionate care training and staffing levels, but it also depends on patient safety systems. What progress is the national health service making towards implementing those systems in every place where patients are cared for?

Caroline Dinenage: Patient safety, as my hon. Friend suggests, remains an absolutely key priority for the NHS. NHS Improvement and NHS England are developing a national patient safety strategy, which will sit alongside the NHS long-term plan. It will be published this summer and will build on existing work to provide a coherent framework that the whole NHS can recognise and support.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): There are fears that NHS medical data could be on the table as part of a desperate post-Brexit trade deal with the US on digital services, where patient data would be mined by companies to develop medical technology that would then be sold back to the NHS. What guarantees can the Secretary of State give that private companies will not be profiteering from NHS assets in that way?

Matt Hancock: I wish my hon. Friend, with whom I have worked closely and whom I admire very much, great success in her leadership bid. I wish her more success than I had. With the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) sitting next to her, I am sure they will run a great race. I want to reassure her that, as I said the week before last, the NHS is not on the table in trade talks. We now have that assurance from the Americans. NHS data must always be held securely, with the appropriate and proper strong privacy and cyber-security protections.

Mr Speaker: I am sure the Secretary of State means well, but I am not entirely sure that the hon. Lady’s joy at the endorsement from the right hon. Gentleman was undiluted.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will the Secretary of State support one of the key recommendations of the joint report from the Health and Social Care Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee into the future funding of social care, which is for a German-style system of social insurance?

Caroline Dinenage: Absolutely. We are very keen to look at the Select Committees’ recommendations and the contributions of all key stakeholders. We are committed...
to ensuring that everyone has access to the care and support we need. The Green Paper will include ideas to protect people from high and unpredictable care costs.

T9. [911434] Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): Over the weekend, I was contacted by a number of parents of severely disabled children with very distressing news. Up until now they have been receiving five pads a day, because their children, grown up or otherwise, are very severely disabled. However, they have been told by the clinical commissioning group that has been cut to three. This is incredibly distressing. Some of the parents are on universal credit and the additional cost they will have to pay themselves will be £80 a month. That is unacceptable. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and representatives of my constituents, the parents of these very disabled children from Eastbourne, so that we can try to sort this out before it really gets out of hand?

Matt Hancock: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this case. The ministerial team has not seen the details in advance, but if he would like to write, the appropriate Minister will of course meet him.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): The inquiry into the contaminated blood scandal, the biggest treatment disaster in the history of the NHS, is currently taking place in Leeds. What is the Department doing to compensate the victims of this scandal and to make sure their voices are heard?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend will wish to know that we are collaborating fully with the inquiry, and it has raised with us several issues about payments. We have made available an additional £30 million to give to those affected and will consider any conclusions the inquiry ultimately draws.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): As the Minister will know, two weeks ago I went to the Netherlands with Teagan Appleby’s mother, Emma, to collect one month’s supply of medical cannabis. The Department laid down the requirements for Emma to meet with Border Force, and she met them by providing a UK prescription. Will she meet the Secretary of State and Ministers meet to ensure that there is no more ambiguity in a policy that currently criminalises parents in possession of a UK prescription bringing their much-needed medicine into the country?

Matt Hancock: As the hon. Lady and other colleagues know from having worked on this important issue, we acted swiftly to change the law to make sure that medicinal cannabis was available. Those patients for whom it is clinically appropriate can now be prescribed medicinal cannabis. As she knows, whether to prescribe is a clinical decision, but those prescriptions are available and flowing and are being issued where it is judged clinically appropriate for the patient. We will continue to work on this to make sure we get it right.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): My constituent Max is aged eight and has Batten disease. He is one of only two sufferers of this disease who are not receiving the medicine that can improve their quality of life and keep them alive. Eleven other children in this country with Batten disease are receiving the drug, which is very effective but very expensive. The drug manufacturer has offered six months’ free supply to Max and the other person not getting it and has made other proposals to NHS England, which is currently refusing even to have meetings with the drug company to discuss how my constituent, this dying child, may receive the drugs he needs. Will my right hon. Friend intervene and use whatever reserve powers he has to ensure that my constituent gets this life-saving drug?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend speaks for the whole House about the need for these rare diseases to be given the attention they need so that sufferers such as Max can get the medicines if at all possible. As he knows following our meeting, the formal legal responsibilities lie with NHS England and NICE. I have raised this case, and that of others mentioned earlier, with the chief executive of NHS England and will raise it once again following this Question Time. We will do all we can to resolve this.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): Thousands of my constituents will be left without access to dental care because a Swiss-owned investment firm has decided to shut three practices in my city. What is the Department doing to ensure that the people of Portsmouth have access to vital oral health services?

Seema Kennedy: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s concern. As I understand it, the Colosseum dental group practices will remain open until 31 July. NHS England has put in place plans to ensure that where possible patients currently undergoing dental treatment will complete their course of treatment before the practice closures and is working with other local dental practices to provide additional capacity to treat patients as well as considering the longer-term options for procuring dental services in the Portsmouth area.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I declare an interest as a doctor’s wife. If the sub-dean at Chelmsford’s brilliant new medical school continues to teach the students and work in the hospital, she faces a 90% tax rate. If she continues to do the weekend hours the hospital needs, she faces having to pay more in tax than she is earning. Will the Minister look again at the taper, which is driving our consultants out of our hospitals?

Stephen Hammond: As I said in response to an earlier question, we are putting out a consultation on pensions that will allow for looking at a number of issues, including the taper.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am very sorry, but, as in the national health service—under Governments of both colours, I emphasise—demand invariably exceeds supply. I will take the remaining questioners whose names are on the Order Paper and who wished to ask substantive
questions but did not manage to get in. That seems only fair, as they have been bobbing up and down for the duration. Let us hear them.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Regardless of which type of Brexit we face this autumn, bureaucracy, customs charges and stockpiling costs will inevitably drive up the price of imported drugs and medical devices. Will the Secretary of State undertake to provide additional funds for NHS England and the devolved nations to cover those Brexit-induced costs and to avoid cuts in clinical services?

Matt Hancock: Additional funds have already been provided to ensure that medicines are available throughout the country, whatever the Brexit scenario.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Given the increased likelihood that the next Prime Minister will be determined to leave the European Union at the end of October, deal or no deal, will the Secretary of State update the House on what preparations are currently being made to protect the import of critical supplies such as insulin and radioisotopes?

Matt Hancock: Meeting the need for unhindered medicine supplies was an incredibly important piece of our Brexit planning, which was successfully completed ahead of 29 March. Of course we are updating those plans as we speak, but the ability to reassure people that there will be no impact on the supply of medicines is an important part of that work.
**Syria: Civilians in Idlib**

12.45 pm

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South)(Lab)[Urgent Question]: To ask the Minister for the Middle East what assessment he has made of attacks on health facilities and the fate of civilians in the Idlib area of Syria, and if he will make a statement.

**The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison):**

The Government are extremely concerned by the current escalation of violence in north-west Syria, and are appalled by the disgraceful and wholly unwarranted attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure such as hospitals and schools. The UN has confirmed that since the end of April at least 25 health facilities—including at least two major hospitals—and 37 schools have been damaged by airstrikes and shelling in north-west Syria. These attacks are a clear breach of international law, and we call on the regime and Russia in the strongest possible terms to cease them and end the suffering of those in the Idlib governorate.

The deteriorating situation is causing immense suffering to a civilian population who, as the hon. Lady will know, are already highly vulnerable. Even before the current escalation of violence, nearly 2 million people in the region had already been forced to leave their homes at least once, and nearly 3 million are in need of humanitarian assistance.

Let me take this opportunity to highlight, briefly, the assistance that we are providing for those who are in such dire need across north-west Syria. Last year alone, the UK provided over £80 million in humanitarian assistance in the region, which included supporting the provision of food, shelter and other essential items for those caught up in the conflict. We are continuing to support that effort this year as well. In response to the recent situation, the partners of the Department for International Development are scaling up their humanitarian response to meet the growing needs on the ground by, for instance, supporting health facilities.

A further escalation of violence, triggering waves of displacement, would be likely to overwhelm an already stretched humanitarian response. Once again, I call on all parties to cease violence in Idlib, to respect previously agreed ceasefires, and to bring an end to the needless and deplorable attacks on civilians, hospitals and schools in the region.

**Alison McGovern:** The first thing that has to be said, Mr Speaker, is that, as you and I both know, it should not be me who is standing here. It should be Jo Cox, and, three years after her brutal killing, we miss her every single day.

The second thing that I must do is thank you, Mr Speaker, for welcoming the surgeon David Nott to Speaker’s House to discuss his book and his work, Mr Speaker, is that, as you and I both know, it should not be me who is standing here. It should be Jo Cox, and, three years after her brutal killing, we miss her every single day.

As the Minister has said, the conflict in Syria has escalated once again and despite talks of so-called reconstruction it is far from over. Just in recent months reports say that nearly 500 civilians have been killed due to airstrikes.

This is a complex conflict but I want to focus on simple facts today and, as the Minister has described, we have seen yet again the bombing of hospitals. Reports from the region tell of scores of hospitals being attacked, and millions of people in the Idlib area are in desperate need of healthcare.

A bad situation is being made much worse by our failure to enforce the basic rules of conflict. What representations has the Minister made to UN agencies about fixing this system, because people there are saying the UN system is simply not working—the co-ordinates of those hospitals are not safe with the UN, and the protection that should be in place for medical systems in Syria, even at this late stage in the conflict, has now failed? What meetings has the Minister had to discuss this with UN agencies, what action is he proposing to take, and what work is he doing with our colleagues in the international community to fix this broken system?

Secondly, I would like to ask some questions about UK aid. The Minister mentioned food and basic supplies, but what about medical supplies, and what assessment have the Government made of the current risks given the political situation we are now facing in relation to Syria and the effectiveness of UK aid? It is a simple thing, surely, to get basic medical supplies that are needed over the border to the doctors who require them. Also, what action has the Minister taken to prioritise civilian access to medical supplies?

Finally, it is Refugee Week this week, and I do not always thank the Government but on this occasion I would like to thank them, and specifically the Minister for Immigration, who is not in her place at the moment, for her decision to extend the VPRS—Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme—that brings vulnerable refugees to our country. But we need to go so much further than that. We have failed to deliver against the values of this country when it comes to the victims of this conflict. What conversations is the Minister having with his colleagues in Government about getting more vulnerable Syrians to the UK for safety and shelter, and will he meet me and a delegation of Members of Parliament to discuss that point? We have failed Syria but we need not to continue to fail Syrians; will the Minister help us get more Syrians to safety?

This weekend many people will gather in towns and cities across our country for “Great Get Togethers”: they will remember our colleague Jo, and they will think about what we have in common, not what divides us. So I simply finish by asking the Minister to work with all of us across this House for the people of Syria.

**Dr Murrison:** I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, and of course I join with her in her heartfelt tributes to our colleague Jo Cox.

The hon. Lady will know that we committed £400 million in the Brussels conference in March to Syria. That puts us in the premier division of donors to this. [Interruption] She shakes her head, but that is a huge amount of money.

The hon. Lady asked what we are doing about refugees and she will know full well that in general refugees are best helped close to their homes so they can return to their homes, but she will also be aware of the refugees we have taken from this region to the UK, and I hope
she will salute the local authorities who are warmly accommodating those refugees, including my own local authority.

The hon. Lady asked what we are doing with our partners. She might be aware that on 10 May and 14 May the UN met in emergency session to discuss the deteriorating situation and she might also be aware that later on today it will be meeting in emergency session to discuss this deteriorating situation, and the UK will play a full part in that discussion. The important thing is to get back to UN Security Council resolution 2254; it is the cornerstone and basis of any long-term settlement in Syria.

The hon. Lady asked about other partners to this, and I am sure she will share my concern that the Sochi agreement of last year between two of the principal players in this has unfortunately not been carried out in the way we would wish and that the deteriorating situation is in significant part due to Russia’s attitude towards what appeared at the time to be a very promising new beginning. I entirely agree with the hon. Lady that we need to work with others to attempt to bring some sense to the warring parties in this, but I emphasise that the UK is simply one player in this, and it is of course a multi-dimensional jigsaw.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and I thank too the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), my co-chair of the all-party group on Syria.

The much respected and senior British military officer Colonel Hamish de Bretton-Gordon has just returned from Idlib where he is an adviser to the Idlib health directorate and he says this today:

“Nearly 700 civilians have been killed this year in Idlib and there are 500,000 internally displaced people crammed into Idlib “many without homes living in the open and off scraps”. He adds that there is “evidence of another chemical attack. There have been 29 attacks on hospitals by Russian and Syrian aircraft with many now out of commission. A handful of hospitals and doctors are now trying to care for 3 million civilians.”

The Minister will know that the Foreign Office is collecting evidence of those involved in atrocities and breaches of international humanitarian law. Can he confirm that the Foreign Office is seeking to identify, name and shame not only the aircraft attacking these hospitals, which are mainly marked with red crosses, but the pilots and people operating those planes? This is clearly a breach of international humanitarian law; it is arguably a war crime and we must ensure, wherever we can, that there is no impunity for such grotesque actions.

Dr Murrison: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend; either the regime and its supporters’ statements are wildly inaccurate or its targeting is wildly inaccurate. He will know that the UN provides co-ordinates of sensitive sites including schools and hospitals. He will share my despair at the number of those institutions, including two major hospitals, that have been damaged in this, and I am sure he will also share my enthusiasm that those who responsible for this are, sooner or later, brought to book.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) for asking this urgent question. I feel she spoke for the whole House when she spoke of Jo Cox at the beginning of her speech, and I thank the Minister for his response.

Once again we find ourselves here in this place shocked and appalled at the threat to hundreds of thousands of civilians in Syria. We had Aleppo, we had Raqqa, we had Ghouta, and now today it is Idlib: homes and livelihoods destroyed; civilians and children fleeing and dying; and, yet again, hospitals bombed and deliberately targeted.

Three years on from UN Security Council resolution 2286, medical facilities are still being hit in Syria—an unthinkable 29 hospitals in the past six weeks according to some reports. Amnesty International says these attacks targeting hospitals constitute “crimes against humanity”. The International Rescue Committee says that these attacks continue to happen with “absolute impunity”. This is shocking and reprehensible; even wars are supposed to have rules.

What steps is the Minister taking with our international partners to ensure that these appalling attacks on health facilities do not go by with impunity and, as he says, that these people are brought to book? Can the Minister tell us more about the UK’s promised protection of civilians strategy—exactly when it will be delivered and whether it will be accompanied by a clear framework for accountability and implementation?

It is absolutely necessary that we urgently get all sides around a table to find a peaceful, political resolution to this horrific conflict. That is the only thing that will bring the carnage in Idlib to an end. That is the only thing that will protect the lives of those health workers still operating in Idlib and the civilians they are working to save. So what is the Minister doing to realise this? That peace must be achieved, and let me end by echoing the words of the president of Médecins Sans Frontières who put it so simply when she called on all warring parties to:

“Stop bombing hospitals. Stop bombing health workers. Stop bombing patients.”

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks and questions. It is important that we work with international partners to apply pressure to those who are responsible. He will be well aware of the difficulty of working with the regime in Damascus and its supporters, but the Sochi agreement at the end of last year held out such promise. Those were baby steps, perhaps, but it was the start of a process that might have brought some sense to this troubled region. I very much regret that Russia has decided to take the steps that it has and I prevail on it, even now, to think about its responsibilities that it signed up to with Turkey at Sochi.

It is important that the UN continues to meet in emergency session. I look forward to its deliberations this afternoon and we will take a full part in them. Ultimately, UN Security Council resolution 2254 has to be applied. That is the only way that we can restore peace and equanimity to this very troubled part of the world.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): It is definitely a war crime to attack either a school or a hospital—there is no doubt about that. Do we have good evidence that
Russian aeroplanes have attacked such targets and if so, are we raising the matter in the Security Council, which is in emergency session, as the Minister stated?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. Russia is clearly a party to the current situation. It is supporting the regime and is responsible for a lot of the trauma that is now afflicting the Idlib governorate, and it must be held to account. It must be answerable for the consequences of its actions. As my hon. Friend said, the deliberate targeting of schools and hospitals is a crime. It is caused by criminals and, as with criminals everywhere, they must ultimately be called to account.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): We also pay tribute to Jo Cox’s memory in the House today and to David Nott and his incredible work as a surgeon in Idlib; he recently won the Robert Burns humanitarian award for what he has done.

We in the Scottish National party are shocked and horrified by the reports that, since Syrian regime forces and their Russian allies began their offensive in Idlib in April, more than 24 medical facilities have been attacked. Tragically, the targeting of healthcare facilities is not new in Syria’s civil war. The US-based Physicians for Human Rights documented more than 500 attacks on medical facilities between 2011 and 2018.

The deliberate and strategic bombing of hospitals carrying out their medical functions is a war crime. These latest attacks have eliminated vital lifelines for civilians in desperate need of medical care and medical centres are no longer sharing their co-ordinates with the UN for fear of being a target of Syria and their allies. However, the prevention of and protection from mass atrocities remain almost wholly absent from the UK’s national framework of civilian protection. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to cover this glaring omission? Furthermore, will he ensure that the upcoming review of the Government’s protection of civilians in conflict strategy reflects the changing nature of modern conflict, which blurs the lines between combatants and non-combatants?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. He must know that what we are able to do depends very much on access and safety and whether or not we can get to those who are most in need. At the moment, that is extremely problematic. We would prevail upon all parties to this to allow humanitarian access and to allow those of us who wish to protect civilians to be able to access those civilians wherever they are, so that the necessary protection can be afforded. However, he has to understand the difficulty of ensuring the safety and security of those now delivering aid, and I pay tribute to those who provide aid under extremely difficult circumstances. He will be aware that a number of those individuals in our troubled world today have paid with their lives for that. It is absolutely a duty that we in Government and our agencies have to ensure that they are not put at risk more than is absolutely necessary in trying to do their vital work.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I very much support what the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) said about taking on more refugees from the area, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration for her decision. What does the Minister think can be done to help to make the good Russian people aware of what is being done in their name by their Government? Surely they would be as horrified as the rest of us by the deliberate targeting of hospitals, schools and other humanitarian facilities.

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is right to say that the Russian people would indeed think that, if they knew the full extent of the actions being taken in their name by President Putin’s Administration. This is a terrible calumny. It is a devastating thing for which Russia must ultimately assume responsibility. We have to hope that members of the Russian Administration are ultimately called to account for these atrocities. Knowing the Russian people as I do—I suspect that my hon. Friend knows them rather better than I do—I know they are good people and often misunderstood, since they are often seen through the prism of Moscow and the terrible acts, I am afraid, that President Putin and his people are too often associated with in our world today.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) not only on securing this urgent question, but on the very moving way in which she introduced it, and I absolutely share and endorse her tribute to Jo Cox.

It is heartbreakingly to read the testimony coming out of Idlib, and it is horrific that there have been 257 attacks on hospitals and medical workers in the last year alone. I say to the people who are carrying out these attacks that it is beyond grotesque. The fact that doctors feel they can no longer share co-ordinates with the United Nations is also a damning indictment of the international community’s failure to protect some of the most vulnerable. I am reassured that the Minister wants to see people brought to book, but what further support could the UK provide to the United Nations or others to gather evidence, so that when the time comes and justice can be done, the information will be there?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Lady knows that this is an ongoing piece of work, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) rightly referred to. It does not relate simply to this current offensive; it goes back a long, long way. In particular, we have been at the forefront of condemnation of the regime with respect to chemical weapons, which are an abomination. All those who have been involved in the use of these illegal weapons must be called to account.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): This shocking new bombing campaign will lead remorselessly to more innocent loss of life, and up to 2 million people could be displaced into Turkey. I recently met a constituent who works very closely with charities that operate there and in the area, one of which is Syria Relief. What engagement has the Department had with charities on the ground, such as Syria Relief, which can do this work and have the local knowledge? Is work ongoing in that respect?
Dr Murrison: The truth is that we engage on an ongoing basis with charitable organisations, but I will not comment specifically on those organisations, really for their security. Much of our effort is channelled through the UN and its agencies, but I salute those across the charitable sector who engage in this extremely difficult and traumatic work. I will continue to engage with them as much as I can, the better to understand the challenges they face and their experiences on the ground.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): The Minister and everyone who has spoken has rightly pointed out that this is a complex political situation, and that it is complex for us to do anything about it. However, there is one piece of the jigsaw that we are entirely responsible for, and that is the number of refugees that we allow into this country. I speak as someone who has refugees from Iran and Kosovo in my own family who grew up in a place that has always provided a safe home for every wave of desperate refugees, and I ask the Minister, in the light of what we know is going on in Idlib: can we not do more to bring more people here?

Dr Murrison: The first thing to say about the recent onslaught in the governorate of Idlib specifically is that virtually all those involved are internally displaced people within that governorate. They are therefore not accessible, and it would simply not be practical to remove them to a place of safety in this country. The hon. Lady knows very well that we have been generous in relocating people who have been triaged by the United Nations, with the most vulnerable and needy being relocated to this country. We have all taken people from right across the demographic, but the UK has been particularly impressive in relocating vulnerable people, including women, children, elderly people and disabled people. That is the mark of a truly humanitarian nation, and I am immensely proud of that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Can I just be clear about the Government’s position on civilians in Idlib? Is it the Government’s view that the Russians and the Syrians are being reckless and careless in the delivery of their ordnance, or is it their view that they are deliberately targeting medical facilities?

Dr Murrison: Our investigation into this is ongoing, and I am not going to pre-empt the outcome of our investigation into attribution or, indeed, intent. All I would say to my hon. Friend is that it seems to us that a very large number of schools and hospitals, including two major hospitals, have been hit, and that a regime and a country that were intent on protecting civilians, particularly the most vulnerable, would do their utmost in any conflict to avoid those targets. I see no evidence of that having been done, and the consequences are as we have seen. It is vital, if those institutions have indeed been deliberately targeted, that the criminals responsible should be held to account.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): What is the Government’s latest assessment of the assertions about a chlorine chemical weapons attack in the Idlib area on 19 May? We have heard the Minister’s responses—“Let’s bring people to justice. Let’s find who they are. We really implore the Russians not to do this”—but this is happening every day. We are a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, and we are supposed to eyeball those who are committing these atrocities and deliberately targeting hospitals, but what are we doing, other than saying, “Oh, well, let’s take them to court at some point in the future”? That is not remotely good enough. The UK and our allies need to show some backbone in this and show that there are consequences for these grotesque war crimes, because every day that Russia gets away with this makes the world a less safe place. It is not being governed by the rules that we are supposed to have set up so that we can all live under international law.

Dr Murrison: First, I have an apology for the hon. Gentleman. Yesterday in the urgent question, I think I associated him with the Opposition Front Bench. I am afraid that this was a facet of my general excitement on that occasion, and it was of course entirely wrong. My apologies to the hon. Gentleman. I share his frustration—I really do—and I hope that that has come across, at least in the tone of some of the things I have been saying, but doing other than the things that we are doing with our partners and through the United Nations. Ultimately, this has to be dealt with not by escalating the situation but by dialling it down and ensuring that we restore the focus on UN Security Council resolutions. Although I am all ears, I doubt very much that the hon. Gentleman has many suggestions beyond that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response. In my constituency, we have six Syrian Christian families who have been relocated under the Government scheme. The community and church groups are helping those families with accommodation, education for their children, pastoral care, language instruction and furniture and clothes. Other members of those families are threatened in and around the Idlib area, and I spoke to the Immigration Minister about this the other week. Will the Minister work with her to reunite those families in the United Kingdom, and particularly in my constituency of Strangford?

Dr Murrison: As I indicated in my remarks, my local authority has also been active in this area. It is important that the process should be conducted properly, and that relocations to places of safety in the United Kingdom should be done on the basis of assessed need. We all know of heart-rending cases, particularly involving families and children, where the best option is indeed relocation to this country, and I am proud of what this country has been doing in that regard. Ultimately, however, I do not think that this situation will be resolved simply by removing people from their homes. The sense we get is that most of those families stated that they would wish to return home, and I am proud of the fact that this country is in the premier division of providing financial assistance to ensure that proper humanitarian aid and support is given to those in the region itself.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South for securing this urgent question and for reminding us of the legacy of our dear departed colleague. I would like to ask the Minister to think again and to talk to his colleague, the Minister for Immigration. Her announcement yesterday about the resettlement schemes was welcome,
and he is right to say that this country gives an enormous amount in aid, but my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) is also right to say that we could do so much more. There are 12 million people who have been displaced by this conflict in Syria, of whom 6 million are internally displaced and at least 6 million are in the border countries or not far off. The Minister is right to say that we want people to stay close to their country of origin, but we could be resettling so many more people and giving them a home, safety and sanctuary. I think that that is what the people of the United Kingdom expect from us in living out our values, so will he think again and talk to his colleague, the Immigration Minister, about increasing those numbers?

Dr Murrison: I am pleased that the hon. Lady welcomes yesterday’s statement, which indicated that these matters are always kept under review. The Government will have heard the views being expressed across the House on this matter, but I come back to the central point that we have relocated people. They tend to be the most vulnerable, and that is important. One of the things that characterises this country—I hope she will endorse this—is that we have looked after, first and foremost, the most vulnerable: women, children, the disabled, the elderly and the sick. That is a tribute to the people of this country and their generosity, and I do not think it is right simply to dismiss some of the other aid and assistance that we have been giving in this terrible situation.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): My constituent Sarah Ainsley, who is a sixth-former at Woodbridge High School, came to see me recently to express her concern about the Syrian refugee situation closer to home in Calais, where conditions for refugees—particularly young people coming of age—are not what we would expect for any of our children, and we should not expect them for children and young people in those circumstances. What assurances can I give her that the Government are taking that issue seriously in their circumstances. What assurances can I give her that the Government are taking that issue seriously in their circumstances. What assurances can I give her that the Government are taking that issue seriously in their circumstances. What assurances can I give her that the Government are taking that issue seriously in their circumstances. What assurances can I give her that the Government are taking that issue seriously in their circumstances.

Dr Murrison: The hon. Gentleman will have heard yesterday’s statement and will hopefully have been reassured, at least in part. The situation in Calais clearly goes well beyond Syria and is part of a much bigger piece. I hope that he will agree that the way to resolve that situation is to ensure that we prevent people from making perilous journeys in the first place. That is the view taken by both the French and UK Governments. Although it is a big piece of work and will take a long time, the imperative has to be to deal with the things that drive people to make that journey and end up in the unsatisfactory situation in France that he describes.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The signatories 70 years ago to the fourth Geneva convention, which is international humanitarian law, would not have been surprised that the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) has had to request this urgent question.

As a constituency MP with more than 40 Syrian families seeking refuge in my home town of Clydebank in West Dunbartonshire, it is my duty to represent them here. I have two specific points to raise with the Minister. First, in engaging with the United Nations, we may be reforming international humanitarian law, we need to recognise that NATO leads on what is now called the importance of civilians in operational planning to ensure the protection of civilians. Secondly, with any increase in refugee numbers, will he assure existing refugees across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland that the necessary investment to ensure their safety, wellbeing and health will not only continue but increase?

Dr Murrison: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman’s local authority area has been helpful in accommodating refugees. My experience in my constituency is that they have been warmly welcomed, and I have been pleased with how they have been accommodated in my small part of the south-west of England. Refugees clearly need to be provided with the necessary resources to sustain themselves and to look forward to a potential long-term future, meaning all the things that those of us who are fortunate to have been born and brought up in a pacific part of the world take for granted. I am sure that applies in his constituency, as it does in mine.

The hon. Gentleman is of course right to underscore the importance of the protection of civilians. As I said earlier, the difficulty in Syria, as in many conflicted parts of our world today, is with providing access to civilians. Our first duty must be to ensure that those who are undertaking that work are safe, and we will continue to ensure, so far as we possibly can, that that is the case.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is right and proper to think about why refugees are refugees and to think about ultimately getting them to return to their homes. However, as other Members have pointed out, right now, today, tomorrow, and the next day, people are being killed. This place is a hell-hole on earth. We have two big bases in Cyprus, which is close by, with 3,500 service personnel and helicopters. Why can we not go in now and get these people out in good numbers and take them to Cyprus? It is not far away, but it is safe enough for them.

Dr Murrison: In relation to the current escalation, as I said before, these are internally displaced people. They are within the Idlib governorate, so it is not simply a question of airlifting them to Cyprus, even if Cyprus were to agree to such a thing. However, we hope that the displaced people who are outside Syria will feel able to return home when it is safe to do so. It is not the United Nations’ assessment at the moment that it is safe for them to do so, but that assessment must ultimately change. It will change, and at that point we will do our utmost to assist them to return to their homes, which I would maintain is the wish of the vast majority of refugees and those who currently find themselves displaced.
EU/British Citizens’ Rights

1.24 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union if he will make a statement on what efforts the British Government have made to fulfil the instruction of this House, dated 27 February 2019, to seek agreement on EU and British citizens’ rights and in particular the protection of British citizens in the EU in the event of no deal.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa). It is testament to his passionate defence of the rights of EU citizens and UK nationals that the amendment he brought before this House was passed unanimously—a rare feat. I congratulate him on his work.

I thank my hon. Friend for organising a recent meeting with representatives from British in Europe and the 3million to discuss their proposal to seek a joint UK-EU commitment to adopt part 2 of the withdrawal agreement in any scenario. The Secretary of State was grateful for the opportunity to hear their views and the views of my hon. Friend on that matter. As my hon. Friend will be aware, we have written the EU’s chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, to report those views, particularly to make it clear that in a no-deal scenario adopting the citizens’ rights agreement is far superior to 28 unilateral solutions. I have also had representations from the devolved nations of the UK indicating their support for that approach. For example, Mike Russell, the Scottish Government’s lead Minister on EU exit recently wrote to the Secretary of State to set out the Scottish Government’s support for adopting the citizens’ rights agreement.

The Government have been steadfast in their commitment to protect the rights of EU citizens. They are our friends, colleagues and neighbours, and we want them to stay. We are already implementing our no-deal offer to EU citizens in the UK, and the EU settlement scheme opened successfully on 30 March, with over 750,000 EU citizens having now applied. The Secretary of State wrote to the EU to seek its views on adopting the citizens’ rights part of the withdrawal agreement in any scenario, and Michel Barnier responded on 25 March. Last night, the Secretary of State issued a response to Michel Barnier, reporting recent conversations with my hon. Friend for South Leicestershire, the 3million and British in Europe, and asked for officials to be able to continue to work together to explore how best we protect the citizens’ rights in all scenarios.

In the response, the Secretary of State reaffirmed that adopting the citizens’ rights part of the agreement as a UK-EU solution will offer the greatest protection for UK nationals in the EU and EU citizens in the UK. That is due to the importance of rights, such as the agreed social security co-ordination provisions, that cover areas such as reciprocal healthcare and the accumulation of pension contributions, which require a reciprocal agreement to provide the best level of operation. The Secretary of State wrote to my hon. Friend this morning with a copy of that letter, which was deposited in the Library and published on gov.uk.

Finally, I want to reaffirm that citizens’ rights have been a priority throughout the negotiations, and it is an area that both the Government and this House take extremely seriously. As such, the best way to guarantee those rights, both for UK nationals in the EU and EU citizens in the UK, is for this House to approve a deal.

Alberto Costa: I thank the Minister for his response. I also want to put on the record my gratitude to the Secretary of State for meeting with the 3million and British in Europe a few weeks ago. It is inconceivable that a British Government—let alone a Conservative Government—could allow the rights of British nationals working, living or studying in the EU to vaporise overnight on 31 October. However, we find ourselves in a deeply unpalatable position in which our fellow citizens, and EU nationals resident in this country, have had their rights wrongly placed on the negotiating table.

I am not here to criticise the outgoing Prime Minister. I am here to invite whoever is going to take over, and the current Minister and his team, to ratchet things up a few notches to ensure that the will of this House, which was unanimously passed on 27 February, to carve out the citizens’ rights element of the withdrawal agreement, thereby protecting under international law the rights of British nationals in the EU and the rights of EU citizens here, is carried out. We have seen two letters thus far, and I am inviting the Government to do the right thing, which means ensuring that a task force is set up urgently. Members of the existing Government, senior civil servants and other stakeholders should meet urgently with Michel Barnier, Donald Tusk and other stakeholders in the EU to convey the unanimous will of this House. There is no disagreement across the House or, indeed, across the Brexit divide on the protection of citizens’ rights—no disagreement at all. This is low-hanging fruit, yet, for some reason or another, we simply have not achieved that agreement.

I welcome the Minister’s work, and I know he has done a lot of work in particular on the voting rights of EU nationals here. I compliment him on his work, but when this House is united and when the devolved nations of our country have backed the House of Commons on this issue, there is no excuse for the UK Government to do anything other than intensify their efforts to get an agreement on the rights of citizens.

I end how I started. Never in peacetime, never, have the rights of over 1 million British citizens been placed on the negotiating table like this. I say to the British Government once again that, as a responsible Conservative Government, the rights of our citizens, along with the rights of EU nationals, must be protected whatever the outcome of Brexit.

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend rightly calls on us to ratchet up the pressure, and I assure him that we will. I also assure him that, whoever takes forward the leadership of our party and our country, will feel pressure not only from him but from Back Benchers on both sides of the House to continue pressing on this issue. Of course, we made a commitment to him and to British in Europe that we would respond to Mr Barnier before the next European Council on 20 June. I am glad that we have been able to deliver on that commitment today.

As hon. Members on both sides of the House will know, the European elections were held between 23 and 26 May and Government activity had to respect the purdah period imposed because of those elections,
Mr Robin Walker: It is important that we pressed forward swiftly after that to ratchet up the pressure on ring-fencing, as my hon. Friend said.

Meanwhile, I assure my hon. Friend that there is a large citizens’ rights team in my Department that is working closely with colleagues in other Departments, including the Home Office. The team has been working tirelessly to ensure that citizens are given the certainty they need to plan for life once the UK leaves the EU. Our no-deal policy paper confirms that EU citizens resident in the UK by exit day can apply to the settlement scheme to secure their status in a no-deal scenario. As I mentioned earlier, the settlement scheme, which launched on 30 March, has had over 750,000 applications. Almost 700,000 of those applications have been concluded, with none being refused.

The UK pushed hard in negotiations for reciprocal voting rights, but as my hon. Friend knows, they did not form part of the withdrawal agreement. We have set out that we will seek to agree bilateral deals with all member states to secure those rights for the future. We are pleased to have now made significant progress on bilateral agreements, having signed agreements with Spain, Portugal and, today, Luxembourg. The Secretary of State signed the latter just a few hours ago, and we hope it will set a strong precedent for reaching agreements with other EU neighbours and friends to protect the right of UK nationals to continue voting in local elections.

We are very aware of my hon. Friend’s key point. His amendment enjoyed the unanimous support of the House, of all parts of the United Kingdom and of all parties from all parts of the spectrum of opinion on Brexit. We remain committed to delivering on citizens’ rights, and we are focused on making sure that we reach an overall agreement to secure an orderly EU exit for the UK, but we remain committed to executing the will of this House and we eagerly anticipate Michel Barnier’s response to our letter on ring-fencing.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), who has won respect on both sides of the House and in the country for the way in which he has championed the cause of EU citizens in the UK and of British citizens in Europe. We were pleased to back his cross-party amendment on 27 February.

The hon. Gentleman is right to be worried that, as Conservative Members apparently prepare to crown a leader who seems willing to take the country to a no-deal Brexit, EU citizens face new uncertainty. Many of the disastrous consequences of a no-deal Brexit have been spelled out, not least by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who has talked of the deep damage it would do to our economy and our living standards. It would have helped if the Prime Minister had not spent so long talking up a no-deal Brexit as a viable option, but insufficient attention has been paid to the consequences for citizens’ rights. Lives have been thrown into uncertainty by our current situation.

It did not have to be like this. If instead of making bargaining chips of EU and British citizens, as the hon. Member for South Leicestershire pointed out, the Government had accepted our motion back in July 2016 to provide a unilateral guarantee to EU nationals in the UK, we could have quickly secured reciprocal agreements to protect the rights of Brits in the EU27. Those agreements would have stood ring-fenced, insulated from the calamity of the Government’s withdrawal agreement.

It was clear in December 2018, when the Government backed off from their vote on the deal, that this issue would have to be addressed, so why did it take the action of the hon. Gentleman and the vote of this House to secure that action from the Government? After Michel Barnier wrote to the Secretary of State on 25 March, why did it take three long months for him to reply?

It has taken this urgent question to bring the issue back to the Floor of the House. Why did the Government not report back to the House sooner? The deep uncertainty facing the 3 million EU citizens in the UK and the 1.2 million Brits in Europe, who are by far the biggest national group affected by Brexit, is of huge importance, so why are the Government not treating it with that urgency?

Mr Walker: There is a great deal on these issues on which the hon. Gentleman and I agree. I suspect we take the same dim view of the attractiveness of any kind of no-deal exit, but where I disagree is on his narrative about the Government’s urgency. We have always put citizens at the forefront of negotiations, and we reached an agreement with the EU on the detail of a citizens’ rights agreement some time before the House voted on the amendment in February.

The EU has said repeatedly throughout this process that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. We have challenged that in taking up the call of my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire for ring-fencing, and we will continue to press the case for ring-fencing, but it is a bit rich for the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) to suggest that the Labour party takes this more seriously than my party does when the Opposition Benches are a gaping empty space for this urgent question.

It is vital that we all work together, reflecting the cross-party nature of the amendment to secure these rights. In that respect, I hope the hon. Gentleman will welcome the progress that has been made today and the further progress that we intend to make in the months to come on the issue of voting rights.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): A number of my constituents or their family members, even children, are caught up in this, and many of them have contacted me. Whatever one’s views—whatever my views and whatever their views—of our future relationship with the European Union, they frankly do not deserve the very real anxiety this is causing.

Given what the Minister has said today about where the block now lies, it is not now a lack of will on the part of Her Majesty’s Government, although they could have gone a lot further before the withdrawal agreement was set. Will he convey to Mr Barnier my sentiments for those of my constituents who are the replies to the Secretary of State’s letter? This is not a game. This is the lives of people living in my constituency and in many other constituencies. The very real anxiety of which I
spoke is there, and Mr Barnier can address it. He must understand that before he replies to the Secretary of State’s letter.

**Mr Walker:** I fully appreciate my hon. Friend’s point. The Secretary of State’s letter to Mr Barnier has gone, and there is a copy in the Library, but this is something we should reiterate to our European counterparts at every opportunity. We have all said this, and the EU has said, I trust in good faith, that it wants to put citizens at the forefront of negotiations. We have an opportunity to do so, and we should continue to remind people that it is about individuals living in all our constituencies. We really value them, and we want to provide them with the greatest possible reassurance.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) not only for securing this urgent question but for his tireless efforts on behalf of EU nationals in the UK and of UK nationals overseas. I welcome the assurances in the Secretary of State’s letter, but two big questions still remain. First, why has it taken so long to get not very far? Three years since the referendum, the UK Government have still failed to give the assurances that the Scottish Government were prepared to give the day after the referendum if only they had the powers to do so. I welcome the assurances from the Government, but those assurances ring hollow when we remember the shameful complacency this Government showed two weeks ago when they completely washed their hands of the fact that thousands of these same citizens were denied the basic right to vote in European elections. Why do the Government still insist on a settled status scheme based on, “You apply and we might say no”? And they do say no; far too often, and for no valid reason, they turn down applications from my constituents and others. Why do the Government not go for the scheme the Scottish Government have suggested, which is simply an approach of, “This is your home, thank you for being here, please stay”? Why can we not have a system that recognises residency here as a matter of right, not as a privilege at the whim of the Home Office?

The Secretary of State’s letter said that devolved Administrations support his approach. The letter he referred to from Mike Russell finished with the words that EU citizens “are our friends, our colleagues and our family and they deserve to stay in the place they have chosen to call home without the insecurity that Brexit has created.” If the Government agree with that, why do they not get rid of the insecurity right now, and guarantee unconditionally and permanently the rights of all 3 million EU nationals who currently call these islands their home?

**Mr Walker:** I recognise the hon. Gentleman’s passion to ensure that those rights are guaranteed. If he looks at what we have done in terms of the negotiated agreement and the no-deal paper on citizens’ rights as to what will be done, he will see that that is exactly the guarantee that we are providing. He asked an important question about the nature of the settled status scheme and why we feel it needs to constitutive rather than declaratory. With the best will in the world, a purely declaratory scheme risks causing confusion and difficulty for people further down the line. We saw that with Windrush. We want to ensure that people have a simple way of proving their rights under this agreement and we think a constitutive system is a better way to achieve that. We are continuing to work on this with EU citizens’ groups up and down the country, including in Scotland, to make sure that they have all the information they need to secure that. He says that applications have been refused. There are some applications where people are being asked for more evidence or more detail, but there are no applications that have been refused.

**Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome the urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) on the EU/British citizens issue, as it concerns a large number of my constituents and I am very concerned. I commend the Minister for his statement, his response to this urgent question and the work he has done. The Government have made a commitment, but does he share my disappointment that the EU has not been more positive and proactive on such an important issue?

**Mr Walker:** I do share my right hon. Friend’s disappointment that this has not got further at this stage. Interestingly, a number of MEPs have spoken out asking the EU to go further, as have some of the Parliaments of EU member states, including, recently, the Dutch Parliament, which has called for further progress on this issue. We will continue to press the EU to make progress on this matter because we all recognise the benefits of providing the maximum reassurance to our 4 million citizens.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): The best way to ensure the rights of EU citizens in the UK is for us to stay in the EU. The very least the Government should do is guarantee that we will not leave the EU until those citizens and UK citizens in the EU are guaranteed the exact same rights and status as they have now. This affects more than one in five of my constituents, and their friends and family, so will the Minister commit to that—or are we at the mercy of the Dutch auction that is the Tory leadership shambles?

**Mr Walker:** I respect the passion with which the hon. Gentleman makes his arguments, but he must understand that this country had a vote on whether to leave the EU and that vote was decided by the people. We should now make sure that we provide precisely the guarantees he is talking about for our citizens. As I said in my statement, the best way to achieve that is through a ring-fenced citizens’ rights agreement or a whole withdrawal agreement. That is better than anything we can do or 27 EU member states can do unilaterally.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Many of my constituents are affected by this issue, either because they are EU citizens in Chelmsford or they have relatives living in other EU countries. I am particularly concerned about women who may have taken career breaks to care for vulnerable relatives and who therefore find it more challenging to provide the paperwork to prove where they have been. Clearly, it is in our interests and those of EU member states to resolve this as quickly as possible. Does the Minister have any further indication from
individual EU member states of the progress they want to make, now that the European elections are over and as soon as the European Parliament starts sitting?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend asks an excellent question. We have been meeting a range of EU member states and we always press them on these issues, both in terms of their own unilateral preparations and to make the case for a wider agreement on this front. There are of course a variety of responses. We have seen in the unilateral arrangements of EU member states that every single one has done something to reassure UK citizens, but the level of the response varies. We will continue to press them on this, so that they continue to reciprocate the strong offer that the UK is making.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I find it hard to contain my anger at the charlatans and snake oil salesmen who will again tonight, on television, be claiming that no deal presents no difficulties; it might present no difficulties for them. I wish to ask the Minister a specific question. In response to a letter that I sent to him, the Minister for Europe and the Americas said: “If the UK leaves the EU without a deal, and there is no agreement with Germany to continue reciprocal healthcare arrangements, UK Nationals would no longer receive coverage through the S1 form.”

The advice he gives is for them “to take out German health insurance.”

Can the Minister here today give an assurance to me, and to all UK citizens who might be in that position in any EU country, that the UK Government will pay for their health insurance, rather than them?

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before the Minister responds, let me say that I recognise and respect the very strong feelings on this matter, but I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman, a former Deputy Leader of the House, whom we all hold—or I certainly do—in the highest esteem, would not refer to any Member of this House whom we all hold—or I certainly do—in the highest esteem, would not refer to any Member of this House as a charlatan. I am sure he would not do that. If he were doing so, dexterous as he is in the use of language and given the full vocabulary with which he is blessed, I know that he will withdraw that term and substitute it with another.

Tom Brake: I would like to make it clear that I am certainly not referring to any Member of the House present in the Chamber today as a charlatan or bufoon.

Mr Speaker: I am afraid that I detect the sight and sound of a very large shovel, as the right hon. Gentleman is digging himself deeper. He has made his point with force and eloquence, but I appeal to him, a seemly Member in normal circumstances, to make it clear that he is attacking the views of Members but he would not impugn their integrity.

Tom Brake: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am happy to withdraw; I am not impugning their integrity, but I am certainly attacking their views, which I find outrageous.

Mr Walker: We all want to secure the best possible arrangements on healthcare for our UK citizens overseas. The best way of doing that is through the withdrawal agreement—the citizens’ rights agreement—or, failing that, a ring-fenced citizens’ rights agreement. Separately to that, of course, the Department of Health and Social Care has written to every EU member state to look at negotiating individual unilateral agreements with those member states. The Commission initially told EU member states not to respond to that offer because it wanted to make sure that we could have an overall agreement and to focus on that first and foremost, but of course it is our intention to put in place the best arrangements to support UK citizens on their healthcare, wherever they are and we shall do that through whatever means are available to us.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Some 11,000 of my constituents are nationals of other EU countries— that is one of the highest proportions in this House. Not only are they welcome, but they are essential members of my local community. May I commend the Minister for the work he is doing on the rights of British subjects overseas, because I suspect I also represent one of the highest proportions of those? I thank him for the agreements he has made—he mentioned the one with Portugal and the one with Luxembourg just in the last couple of days. Could he point a constituency MP such as me to where all these agreements are held in a central place, so that when I receive inquiries I can immediately check what each of those EU27 countries are doing?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Perhaps I should declare an interest, because during the week I am one of his constituents, and EU citizens live either side of me in his constituency. I would be happy to write to him and to put a copy of that letter in the Library of the House so that all Members have that information. So far, we have reached agreements with Spain, Portugal and Luxembourg. We hope to come to many more agreements in the months to come.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister says that EU27 citizens can apply for settlement, and I understand that, but my EU constituents have seen how the immigration service works when it is at its worst, rather than at its best. They have seen the egregious excesses of the treatment of the Windrush generation and they have seen how asylum seekers have been treated, and they are not confident that their cases will be treated fairly. I hope the Minister can reassure us—he is a trustworthy man, I am sure. What conversations has he had with his colleagues in the Home Office and in particular with the Minister for Immigration about making sure that the immigration system is watertight, so that EU27 citizens can have absolute guaranteed confidence in the system, which they currently do not have?

Mr Walker: I absolutely recognise the concerns that the hon. Lady has raised. I have had my own challenges in dealing with constituency casework on some of these issues in the past. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration shares my determination to make sure that the settled status system is different culturally—it is about helping people to prove their right to stay and making sure that they get the documentation that they need for that—and she and I continue to work closely on that. More than that, we have also been working with the consulates and embassies of EU member states.
and with diaspora groups up and down the country to make sure that we take their concerns and needs into account. I absolutely assure the hon. Lady of our determination to get the system right so that it delivers for all of the 3 million. We hope that EU member states will make a similar effort for UK citizens—indeed, we will urge them to do so.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Ind): The hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) has been incredibly patient on this topic, as has, indeed, the whole House. In case the Minister has forgotten, the hon. Gentleman’s amendment was passed in February. I genuinely do not understand. We are the ones doing the divorcing. If this matter was a real priority for the Government, why did it take three months for them to reply to Michel Barnier’s letter? I have thousands of EU citizens in my South Cambridgeshire constituency, and I just do not see any urgency at all. Might the Minister offer to update the House at least monthly between now and 31 October, so that citizens can have some assurance that their futures are going to be secure?

Mr Walker: We absolutely respect the urgency of this issue. We took the House’s vote up with the European Union very shortly after that vote. We then had meetings with British in Europe and the 3 million to make sure that in taking the matter forward we would accurately represent their views. In the meantime, as I have explained, we have had the purdah period for the European elections. It is right that the Secretary of State has been at the General Affairs Council today to press the issue, and that he has sent the letter. We will absolutely continue to update the House as and when progress is made on the matter. The hon. Lady has to recognise that currently the broader negotiations are not necessarily moving forward until we have clarity on the issue of the next Government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: What a rum business—I did not see the feller standing before. I call Nic Dakin.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): When is this finally going to be sorted?

Mr Walker: The simplest answer to the hon. Gentleman’s question is that it would have been sorted already if we had all voted for a withdrawal agreement and secured it.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The Erasmus programme is probably the most successful student exchange scheme in the world. My local university, Bangor University in Wales, shares in that success, with around 100 agreements in 20 countries. The university sector is devolved, but I note that in his initial response the Minister did not mention any communication with the Welsh Government, although he did mention communication with the Scottish Government. What meetings and communication has he had with the Welsh Government to ensure that Welsh students and staff in the EU27 and the EU staff and students in Wales have equal rights in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

Mr Walker: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we have had meetings with the Welsh Government, and I have met universities in Wales to discuss this issue specifically. As he will know, the Government are supporting an association with the Erasmus scheme and have provided specific guarantees for funding the scheme, even in the event of no deal. We will continue to discuss the issue with all the devolved Administrations. Just to correct the hon. Gentleman slightly: I did mention the devolved Administrations—plural—in my initial statement.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): I commend the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) for his courage and integrity in securing this urgent question. I notice that the number of Members in attendance from Her Majesty’s official Opposition has been somewhat sparse, but we in Her Majesty’s unofficial Opposition, the great remain alliance, are happy to defend the rights of our EU citizens. To that end, will the Minister give the House an undertaking that at the conclusion of the exchanges on this urgent question he will go and speak to the Prime Minister’s aides and all those who advise her? She is looking for a legacy, and there could be no greater legacy in the next four weeks than for her to secure the rights of our 3 million EU citizens and the 1.4 million British people working in the EU and do the right thing by them. Frankly, after three years, and with only four months to go before we are due to crash out without a deal, this is simply not good enough. This matter must be resolved. Human beings must no longer be used as bargaining chips.

Mr Walker: The right hon. Lady makes a serious point, but first let me congratulate her on having invented yet another name for her grouping in Parliament.

The Prime Minister is already agreed on this matter and we are already taking it up as a matter of Government policy, which is why the letter on ring-fencing has gone to Michel Barnier today.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): A significant number of my constituents in Edinburgh South West are EU nationals, and many have been in touch with me to say that such confidence as they had in the British Government’s commitment to their rights post Brexit has been severely dented by what happened, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) mentioned, on 23 May, when many EU citizens throughout the United Kingdom were denied their right to vote. What specific steps is the Minister taking to rebuild the confidence of EU citizens in the UK in the Government’s commitment to their rights, given that many of them were denied the basic right to vote in the EU elections?

Mr Walker: The hon. and learned Lady will have heard from Cabinet Office Ministers about the Electoral Commission’s work to review all elections and how they were handled. The commission will report back on the recent European elections and we look forward to seeing that report. On the concrete steps, it is important that we are pressing ahead to secure bilateral agreements on voting rights, and we have written to every single EU member state on that. It is important that the Government, reflecting the views that we have heard from across the House, sent the letter on ring-fencing last night.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I stay in close contact with members of the 3 million in my Bath constituency and understand their real anxieties, particularly in respect
of vulnerable and elderly EU citizens who do not have access to computers and are not particularly computer-savvy. The Department has set up a little outlet in Bath to which people can come from across the south-west to get help with their application, but it is simply not good enough. People have to travel a long distance, and many elderly EU citizens do not even know that they have to apply for settled status. What are the Government doing to help elderly EU citizens who do not have access to computers? The Government should commit to ensuring that each local authority will have a centre such as that in Bath and that each local authority has the means to contact EU citizens who are older and do not have access to a computer. Will the Minister make that commitment?

Mr Walker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for acknowledging that there is such a centre in her constituency. Progress has been made on widening the range of centres available. The Home Office has provided additional assistance to community groups some of which may be best placed to reach out to EU citizens in the UK. Additional assistance to the tune of around £9 million has been allocated to a wide range of community groups, including groups that support people with disabilities and people who are elderly.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Contrary to what the Minister said earlier, the problem for the Windrush generation was not the fact that their status was declared in law; the problem was that they could not access documents to prove their status. Against that background, why do the Government continue to ignore calls from the 3 million to provide citizens with documentary proof of their status, rather than merely digital proof?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that, across Government, there is a move to go digital—to put more online. It is absolutely right that there should be help for those people who may find that most difficult, and that comes to the substance of my answer to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). The view is also that documents, as a one-off thing, can be lost. It is better for people to have a secure and permanent digital status.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Minister said that 750,000 EU citizens have applied through the settlement scheme, but that means that more than 2 million have not yet applied. Having spoken to many of those EU citizens, including many in the academic sector, in the NHS, and in education, I can tell the Minister today that they are not feeling the love. Does he not realise that by continuing to use language such as “prove their rights” with regard to EU citizens, it sets the wrong tone when we are also trying not just to encourage them to stay, but to guarantee the rights of British citizens in the EU?

Mr Walker: We want to keep reiterating the message that these people are valuable and valued members of their communities. They are making a big contribution, whether they are UK citizens living in the EU, or EU citizens living in our own constituencies, and we should continue to reiterate that, but I make no apology for saying that we want to help people prove their rights under this agreement. That is a good thing to do. We want to secure those rights permanently. The settled status scheme, which was designed to do that, is the best way of achieving that.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The worry for people is that this has been going on for far too long. In the highlands, this issue affects families and neighbours and the very sustainability of communities, businesses and services. It is an aberration to ask highlanders to register to apply to stay in their own homes. Does the Minister not realise that the best thing to do is to simply acknowledge and grant the right for people to stay and live in their own homes?

Mr Walker: We want to acknowledge and grant that right, but we also want to ensure that, in the years and decades to come, these people have the ability to prove that they are individuals who are protected by the agreement that we reached with the EU. That is important and it is something with which we should continue to press ahead.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am sure that the hon. Member for South Leicester (Alberto Costa) shares my concern about the vacant Benches opposition and the fact that, on such a serious matter, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) from the Opposition Whips Office had to scurry up the back to bob up and down to ask a question.

On 21 January this year, the Prime Minister committed to a review of the ongoing concerns of Irish nationals under the Good Friday agreement to exercise their Irish and therefore their European rights in Northern Ireland and across the rest of the United Kingdom after Brexit. Will the Minister tell the House whether he has read the Good Friday agreement? Secondly, will he tell us when the Prime Minister will publish the review before scurrying back to the Back Benches?

Mr Walker: I have read the Good Friday agreement. I read it as the Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Northern Ireland Office, and I have read it as a Minister in my Department. I think that it is absolutely right that we should protect all elements of that agreement. Of course the hon. Gentleman will know that the issue of EU citizens and UK citizens sits alongside the common travel area arrangements and the commitments that we made under the Good Friday agreement, which stand regardless. I am very glad that we have been able to work very effectively with the Irish Government to convince all the other EU member states that those issues should be respected whatever the outcome of the negotiations and whatever the arrangements we reach between the UK and the EU.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Change UK): I would like to know how many of the affected citizens the Minister has actually spoken to. Does he understand the crippling doubt and uncertainty that is affecting so many hundreds of thousands of people, particularly with the spectre of no deal hanging over their heads? Is there somebody else that the Minister should be speaking to at this particularly crucial moment? I am talking

[Wera Hobhouse]
Mr Walker: I have met EU citizens’ groups up and down the UK in a number of embassies and at a number of events that we have held across the country. I have met British citizens and their representatives in a number of EU member states that I have been visiting. I continue to listen to their concerns and to ensure that those are reflected at the highest levels of Government. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) can answer for himself, but I will certainly be making the case to whoever takes on the leadership of our party and our country that securing the rights of EU citizens and UK citizens needs to be a top priority.

Hong Kong

2.4 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the subject of democracy and protests in Hong Kong.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): The huge protest march this weekend was a further demonstration of the passionate strength of feeling among the people of Hong Kong about the proposed amendments to extradition laws. The people of Hong Kong have peacefully exercised their rights in recent days to freedom of speech, assembly and expression, all of which are guaranteed by the Sino-British joint declaration of 1984 and enshrined in Hong Kong Basic Law.

The most recent march was, thankfully, free of the scenes of violence witnessed during protests on 12 June. I note the allegations of inappropriate use of force by the Hong Kong police, which should, of course, be fully investigated by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government.

It is positive that, on 15 June, the Government committed to pause, reflect and consult widely before taking further action. However, it is clear that this commitment did not fully address the concerns of the people of Hong Kong. I welcome Chief Executive Carrie Lam’s statement today, in which she said that she would not proceed with the Second Reading of the Bill if the fears and anxieties of the people of Hong Kong could not now be addressed.

In considering the way forward, it is vital that Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy and the rights and freedoms set out in the joint declaration are respected in full. Those principles, along with the commitment to one country, two systems underpin Hong Kong’s future success and prosperity. As a guarantor of the joint declaration, the UK has a responsibility to monitor its implementation. This is a responsibility that we all take very seriously.

The joint declaration is a legally binding international treaty between the United Kingdom and China, and it remains in force. It is as relevant today as it was at the time of the handover in 1997. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer both raised the situation in Hong Kong and the importance of upholding the joint declaration with Chinese Vice Premier Hu during the UK-China economic and financial dialogue that took place in London yesterday.

The permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office also held a meeting in the Foreign Office with the Chinese ambassador yesterday, reinforcing our view that the joint declaration is an extant document underpinning one country, two systems and it is guaranteed until 2047. It must be upheld. I can assure the House that the UK Government are, and will remain, fully committed to the preservation of Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy.

I am delighted that, in addressing this matter on the Floor of the House for the fourth time in six sitting days, there is such widespread support from all corners.
[Mark Field]

of Parliament for the rule of law, independence of the judiciary and the freedoms for the people of Hong Kong.

Mr Carmichael: I thank the Minister for that answer and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question. There are literally millions of people in Hong Kong who follow the proceedings in this House and who look to us for support in their fight to protect their human rights. It matters to them there that we here remember their position, and it is right that we should recognise your role, Mr Speaker, in getting this issue ventilated in the House.

The news that the Executive in Hong Kong had suspended the legislation for the extradition amendments was welcome as far as it went, but the message should go out from this House that it did not go far enough. We in this House stand with the 2 million people who took again to the streets in Hong Kong on Sunday to say that suspension is not enough. That legislation must be withdrawn for good. Will the Minister make it clear to the chief executive that that is the position of this country and that that is what her Administration must now do?

In recent weeks, the Chinese Foreign Ministry declared that the Sino-British joint declaration was meaningless and that it no longer had any realistic meaning. I welcome what the Minister has said on this today, but will he assure us that that will continue to be put forcefully to the Chinese Government at every opportunity, because for a fellow permanent member of the UN Security Council to take this view undermines the very idea of a rules-based international order. Will the Government now demand of the Chinese Government that they should reside from the view that they have previously expressed in relation to the joint declaration? It is a binding bilateral treaty registered with the United Nations. China cannot be allowed to pick and choose the obligations in international law that it will observe and honour.

People across the world were shocked to witness the violence used against peaceful protesters in Hong Kong last week. Legitimate democratic Governments do not use tear gas and rubber bullets against their own people when they choose to exercise their democratic right to protest. We hear that the Chief Executive is due to make an apology today to the people of Hong Kong for her handling of the affair. Does the Minister agree with me that that apology should extend to those who were harassed and injured as a result of what was done, and can we in this House send the message that we continue to watch what happens in Hong Kong and we will not sit mute as those who protested then are prosecuted when the spotlight of world attention has moved on?

The events of recent weeks in Hong Kong have been horrifying, but they should not have been surprising. For years now, the People's Republic of China has been salami slicing the commitments it gave under the joint declaration. Sadly, the Executive Council has too often been complicit in that, but the commitments that have been broken are commitments to which this country has been a party. Will our Government now send the strongest possible message that we will not stand by and allow that process of salami slicing to continue?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. As the House knows, it is not for the Chair to arbitrate between the Government and the Opposition—but I am sure that all of the Members will agree that it is important that we stand by the commitments that have been made in this House and the commitments to which this country has been a party. Will the Minister make it clear to the Chief Executive that that is the position of this country and that that is what her Administration must now do?

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I hear what the Minister says about this being a matter for the Hong Kong Government, but does he agree that some 2 million
people repeatedly taking to the streets in Hong Kong is a sign of wider concerns about Hong Kong’s increasing democratic deficit over the past few years—with booksellers being abducted, democratically elected representatives not being allowed to take their seats and academics being imprisoned over freedom of speech? It is not just about the proposed extradition Bill; there are concerns much more widely about freedoms in Hong Kong. Does the Minister agree that the Hong Kong Government should be initiating democratic reforms to avoid a repeat of such incidents?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Hongkongers are used to having rights, freedoms and the rule of law, but they do not have access to the political levers that citizens of other advanced economies take for granted, so when their Government try to push through a law that the great majority of the public bitterly oppose, they cannot simply vote that Government out of office; and because so many opposition legislators have been removed, they also cannot rely on their elected representatives to block the law. As a result, action on the streets has tended to be the only answer. We think there should and must be another way. Perhaps we will discuss later during this urgent question some of the democratic reforms that might be put in place.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question; I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing it.

Hong Kong is one of the most important international cities in the world, but in the past fortnight it has been plunged into utter chaos. Over the weekend, 2 million people took to the streets to protest against the extradition Bill. That is nearly one third of the entire population of Hong Kong. Although the Opposition welcome the suspension of this disastrous Bill, suspension is not enough. The Bill needs to die. It is an affront to democracy and the rule of law in Hong Kong, and a fundamental breach of the one country, two systems principle. A grovelling apology by Carrie Lam this morning and the people repeatedly taking to the streets in Hong Kong. Does the Minister agree that the Hong Kong Government should be initiating democratic reforms to avoid a repeat of such incidents?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Hongkongers are used to having rights, freedoms and the rule of law, but they do not have access to the political levers that citizens of other advanced economies take for granted, so when their Government try to push through a law that the great majority of the public bitterly oppose, they cannot simply vote that Government out of office; and because so many opposition legislators have been removed, they also cannot rely on their elected representatives to block the law. As a result, action on the streets has tended to be the only answer. We think there should and must be another way. Perhaps we will discuss later during this urgent question some of the democratic reforms that might be put in place.

I am disappointed that the Minister does not feel able to take a view on the contents of the Bill. We do not have an extradition agreement with China, so why should Hong Kong? I raised my next point during the last urgent question on the subject, but did not get a very clear answer, so let me ask the Minister again: if the Hong Kong Executive decide to push on with the Bill’s implementation, will the Government review the UK’s extradition arrangements with Hong Kong?

Mark Field: The hon. Lady will be aware that extradition issues are a Home Office matter—that is not to try to get out of the issue, but clearly I do not want to step on the toes of another Government Department in making a firm commitment along the lines that she would have me make. We agree very much with her view that although the proposal is not necessarily in breach of the joint declaration, which is silent on the issue of extradition, it is clearly in breach of the notion of one country, two systems as well as the sense that there should be the rule of law and the idea of the common law system that is in place.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, a noted Sinologist—I call Richard Graham.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Hong Kong Government have suspended the extradition Bill, and may withdraw it altogether, because of the freedoms of expression and assembly. That is the direct link to the joint declaration and its importance. It is a tribute to the people of Hong Kong that they have exercised their rights so effectively. I congratulate the Minister and the Secretary of State on their defence of the joint declaration and on their tone, for Hong Kong is a territory whose future we wish to be very bright. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Chinese ambassador has continued to be wrong in saying that the joint declaration is a document that is effectively past its sell-by date, and will he ensure that when, in due course, a new Chinese ambassador arrives at the Court of St James, this point is made very clear to him or her?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend, who is, as Mr Speaker rightly says, a well-known Sinologist and has a lot of experience and knowledge of this matter. He will appreciate that diplomacy requires that I have discussions in private, but I felt it was unacceptable when we heard the ambassador, only last week on the BBC’s “Newsnight” programme, make the statement, which has been made in writing in the past, that this was a historical document that had no relevance to the future of Hong Kong. Nothing could be further from the truth. As I mentioned in my initial comments, the permanent under-secretary had a conversation with him in the Foreign Office only yesterday, making very clear the UK Government’s position on this matter.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) was right in his sentiments about the importance of this issue and in saying that the UK has a particular responsibility to Hong Kong. To be fair, the Minister has acknowledged that himself in maintaining the commitments in the joint declaration, and also in highlighting the importance of the international rules-based order to us all. I know that he agrees, but it would be good if he could reiterate that citizens of a free society must be able to express their views freely without any fear of violence. We need to send that message out from across this House. No protest must ever be met with violence, and any resolution to this crisis must have the protection of the rule of law at its heart. Does he agree that the rule of law and adhering to the rules-based system is going to be key to Hong Kong’s future prosperity as a society, but also to its economy?

Mark Field: I very much agree. I thank the hon. Gentleman, and indeed the SNP, for their very constructive views on this matter. It is very powerful that the House
holds together on this issue. Of course there will be times when we have disagreements on the way in which we go about this, or other bits of business, but I think we are sending a very powerful message to our friends in Hong Kong, but also to the Chinese Government, about the unity of minds on this. Yes, we will very much stand up for the idea of the rule of law. That is vital for the success not just of Hong Kong but of China.

Let me turn to the economic dialogue. As I think hon. Members will understand, these things are organised many months in advance, and it is a coincidence that at the height of the Hong Kong crisis we were having an international economic dialogue here in London. One of the cases we made very robustly was about the importance for China of Hong Kong as a financial, and indeed professional, services centre reliant on a rules-based system but also on a UK legal system. That has provided much confidence for external investors. Without Hong Kong, the ambitions that China has for the belt and road initiative, and other bits of its infrastructure planning for the future, will be much more difficult to achieve. That is very much the case that we make to our Chinese counterparts—that having this special status for Hong Kong is in China’s interests as much as Hong Kong’s.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Whether in respecting one country, two systems or the Chinese constitution that supposedly respects and protects the cultural diversity of various regions within China’s borders, the Chinese regime, as it has consistently shown itself, is not to be trusted. One need only look at the 1 million Tibetans who have lost their lives since the Chinese invasion, the countless hundreds and thousands more who have disappeared or are languishing in Chinese jails well away from their families with no access from their families either, or the 1 million Uighurs currently in so-called re-education camps. I therefore welcome the robust position that the Government are taking and urge them to go further. Will the Minister also remember that it is not just Hong Kong where we need to have serious concerns about the Chinese human rights record?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his great and long-standing interest in the proactive approach that we take to human rights, and the rule of law, in trying to influence these matters. We will raise, regularly and at all opportunities, broader human rights issues with the Chinese authorities. However, as he will be aware, Hong Kong has a special status. The nature of the joint declaration means that Hong Kong is in a different position. There are two systems as well as a single country at stake. While I very much accept what he says about the broader human rights issues, there are some fundamental, distinctive issues in relation to Hong Kong, and it is right that we take this opportunity to put them very firmly on the record.

Mark Field: The right hon. Gentleman makes a good point about remedy. There is not an arbitration process as part of the joint declaration, but it is none the less a document that is very publicly on the record after two leading members of the international community signed it freely some 35 years ago. On a direct legal remedy, I am afraid that I cannot provide the assurance that he might ideally be looking for. In 2016—he has alluded to this—we called out a breach of the joint declaration following the involuntary removal of the Causeway booksellers from Hong Kong to the mainland. This was, to date, the first and only time that we have called out a direct breach of the joint declaration. As he says, the issue of remedy is a complicated matter. However, at a time when China wishes to be trusted and to play a much broader role economically, militarily and diplomatically in the international community, I very much hope that the sense in which it is directly breaching aspects of a joint declaration made some 35 years ago will make it think twice.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Was the Minister struck, as I was, not just by the sheer size of the demonstrations in Hong Kong but by the incredibly peaceful and responsible way in which people protested, which makes the response of the Hong Kong authorities all the more shocking? Does he agree that the right to peacefully protest is one of those essential, cherished democratic freedoms that we believe in and that we believe should be in place for the people of Hong Kong?

Mark Field: I very much agree with everything that my right hon. Friend says.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): As the House is aware, the three pillars of good foreign policy are national security, human rights and trade. Is the Minister completely sure that yesterday’s dialogue with Mr Hu, in which the economic relationship was debated, got the balance right between the human rights question, particularly in relation to Hong Kong, and trade? I ask that because we need to be strong with regard to the trade question, despite the position that we find ourselves in domestically, so that we can have the backbone and the strength to have good relationships on all these other matters. We also need to give assurances to the people of Hong Kong that they shall never walk alone.

Mark Field: I very much hope that we have given the latter assurances to which the hon. Lady refers. We do not see this as a choice between securing growth and investment for the UK and raising human rights—we will always do that. There will be a time to do it, perhaps quietly outside the public domain. I think it is respected more by many of our Chinese counterparts if we do not engage in megaphone diplomacy. Our experience, as we make very clear to our Chinese counterparts, is that political freedoms and the rule of law are vital underpinnings both for prosperity and for stability, and that by having a strong relationship with China, including...
over Hong Kong, we are able to have the more open
discussions on a range of difficult issues, including
human rights in other parts of mainland China.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): For 2 million
people to demonstrate out of a total of 7 million is a
phenomenon in itself, and it would be invidious, in
some ways, to pick any one hero out of those 2 million
heroes. However, will my right hon. Friend join me in
praising the work and bravery of a 22-year-old young
man, Joshua Wong, who has spent more than half of
the past seven years in prison because he believes in the
rights and freedom of the people of Hong Kong?
Further, will my right hon. Friend maintain that it is
wrong to send him to prison for simply asking for the
rights that are enshrined in the agreement?

Mark Field: As my hon. Friend rightly says, it would
be invidious to pick out one individual. We do stand up
for the independence of the Hong Kong judiciary, so
the sense that there was anything improper in the legal
proceedings is not something with which I would necessarily
wish to associate myself. He makes a good case: there
are some very brave people who recognise that this is a
crossroads moment—a vital moment. It is one reason
why it is important that we are standing up for Hong
Kong. It would perhaps be easy for us to step back, and
that signal would be misinterpreted by Beijing. We do
not wish that to happen. We will stand up for one
country, two systems as long as the joint declaration is
in place, not least, as I have again said, because we
believe it is in the interests of Beijing and China, as
much as in the interests of the Hong Kong people.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The Minister
has quite rightly set out the framework of rights that
underpins the one country, two systems approach. Clearly,
the reality on the ground is that democratic freedoms
have been eroded, as of course has the right to privacy,
with increasing covert surveillance. What practical steps
can the Minister and the Government take to put
democratic reform back on the agenda in Hong Kong?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point.
He is right—we have mentioned in recent six-monthly
reports that we have had a sense, as he said, that there
has been an erosion of individual rights. There has not
been an erosion of commercial rights. In many ways,
the commercial thing continues at quite some pace.

Ultimately, it must be for the people of Hong Kong
to determine the way in which they appoint both their
Chief Executive and their Legislative Council. I think
there will be a move towards reform in that regard. As
the hon. Gentleman is well aware, there are safeguards,
and within that there is an electoral system for groups.
As for the election of a Chief Executive, that is largely
led by Beijing. It is worth pointing out that we have
worked closely with Carrie Lam. I have met her on a
couple of occasions, and she is a dedicated public
servant. To be candid about talk about removing her
from office, one should be careful about one wishes for,
because if someone else were appointed, particularly
under the current rules, they could be a much more
hard-line Beijing figure.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The words “rule of
law”, are much used on both sides of the argument,
both in Hong Kong and in the People’s Republic of
China. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the rule of
law is only there if one looks at the rules themselves, at
how they are made, and at punishments? In addition,
they should be underpinned by the universal declaration
of human rights. That is what the rule of law means.

Mark Field: I would agree with what my hon. Friend
says. He takes these matters seriously, and has dealings
with leading figures from Taiwan who are based in
London. He will be aware of the constraints that we are
under in the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence
in standing up for One China. Equally, there is a terrific
amount of work that goes on in relation to trade and in
educational exchanges with Taiwan. Taiwan is succeeding
very rapidly as a country, not least because it stands up
for the rule of law in the way in which my hon. Friend
describes.1

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Without
true democracy there is no real accountability, so protest
is all that the people of Hong Kong have. I hope that
they feel the solidarity from all parts of the House.
What can the Minister tell us about the worrying allegations
of police violence? What more can he tell us about his
inquiries, or inquiries by his Department, into the nature,
extent and possible consequences of allegations of violence
and whether any of the alleged victims are UK citizens?
What more is he doing to impress on the Chinese that
this is not an appropriate response to peaceful protest?

Mark Field: As far as I am aware, there are none who
are UK citizens, and clearly there would be consul
considerations if that were the case. It is worth pointing
out to the hon. Lady that it really is not for us to dictate.
We would like the Hong Kong authorities to recognise
that it is their responsibility, as they did in relation to the
Umbrella protests, in which some police who used
brutality were fined and others were imprisoned as a
consequence. It really is not for us—it is a dangerous
trend to tread if, as an outside Government, we try to
dictate what should happen in Hong Kong when it
comes to what is ultimately a judicial matter. We very
much call on the Hong Kong authorities to take the
allegations seriously and investigate them properly.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I
confess that I have been moved by the passion with
which Hong Kong citizens have sought to defend the
sacred principle of the rule of law, and they have sent an
creditably powerful message across the world that has
certainly been heard in London. The Minister anticipated
my question in one of his answers, but does he agree
that the one country, two systems principle is beneficial
not just for the inhabitants of Hong Kong but for those
in mainland China, because the legal certainty in Hong
Kong offers them a commercial gateway through which
to access the rest of the world? We do not need to find
ourselves in conflict with Beijing in defending the territory’s
unique characteristics.

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend. She is absolutely
right, and that is a message that we try to put across.
She will be aware that Hong Kong, along with Shenzhen
and Guangzhou, is part of a greater bay area. One
hopes that the experience will permeate that part of
mainland China, so that people recognise the benefits
of a one country, two systems approach. While the
guarantee is in place until 2047, it is very much the UK

1.[Official Report, 19 June 2019, Vol. 662, c. 5MC.]
Government’s hope that the benefits of one country, two systems in Hong Kong and perhaps a wider area will exist beyond that time, with benefits for China looking forward. It is important that we make that case to our Beijing counterparts in all that we do in relation to the issue of Hong Kong’s unique position.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing the urgent question. Does the Minister agree that the reality is that all that the People’s Republic of China is seeking to achieve in Hong Kong is the legalisation of what it has been doing for years, which is legally kidnapping people from Hong Kong and taking them to China?

Mark Field: As I have said, and as the hon. Gentleman will understand, we felt that there was a direct breach of the joint declaration in the episode to which he alludes, which happened some three years ago. This is unacceptable. Hong Kong citizens and British national overseas have particular rights that we will constantly stand up for. We feel that it is the wrong way forward—it is not something that we accept, and we feel that such episodes are absolutely in breach of the joint declaration.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will have seen reports from lawyers in Hong Kong that the police in Hong Kong have access to the health authority system to check whether injured protesters have been admitted to hospital. What representations has he made to ensure that the protesters’ civil and legal rights are respected?

Mark Field: I am very concerned by what the hon. Gentleman says on this matter. I think we all know there is great concern about what has been happening in Xinjiang state in north-west China. There is a sense that what is potentially happening for 1 million citizens may apply to many others. We are living in a world with more opportunity for electronic and other surveillance by authorities—and that applies to authorities in the west, as it does elsewhere. There are concerns, and we would be concerned if we heard that individuals who found their face on a CCTV camera were quietly arrested in the months ahead. We will keep an eagle eye on that development, and we hope as parliamentarians that we are made aware of any such breaches, because it is something that our consul general, Andy Heyn, and his team in Hong Kong would wish to make clear to the authorities would be totally unacceptable.

BILL PRESENTED

Universal Credit Sanctions (Zero Hours Contracts) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens, supported by Frank Field, Neil Gray, Rosie Duffield, Mhairi Black, Ruth George, Hannah Bardell, Neil Coyle, Grahame Morris, Jonathan Edwards and Steve McCabe, presented a Bill to amend the Welfare Reform Act 2012 to provide that a Universal Credit claimant may not be sanctioned for refusing work on a zero hours contract; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 406).
six nuclear power stations the size of Hinkley Point C. There would be strong economic returns of a similar scale to other major infrastructure projects.

An appraisal based on HM Government methodology has found that the net benefit of this saving would be £7.5 billion, and this excludes the wider health and productivity benefits. It has been estimated that for every £1 invested by the Government, GDP would be increased by £3.20. More jobs would be created right across the UK. It is imperative urgently to develop a framework to stimulate the market among households and businesses that are able to pay for energy efficiency, with a clear trajectory towards the targets set out in the clean growth strategy. The National Infrastructure Commission has made energy efficiency a national priority, and its first assessment has asked for 21,000 insulation measures a week by 2020, which is a sixfold increase on the estimated 3,500 a week at the moment.

The green finance taskforce has made positive recommendations for energy efficiency, including financial incentives for meeting the energy performance certificate band C 2035 target on all buildings, and it has suggested a capital infrastructure plan for the Government for energy efficiency objectives. The Government’s clean growth strategy target for EPC band C by 2035 is universally recognised as a good level of ambition, with earlier deadlines for the private rented sector and for fuel-poor homes. Policy exists on new build homes, and the future homes standard announced in the spring Budget is most welcome, as is the industrial grand challenge. However, what is missing is a road map for delivering a plan for retrofitting energy efficiency measures into the majority of homes in which most Britons live.

It has been estimated that an annual £5.2 billion investment from public and private sources will be needed to achieve this ambition. In 2017-18, public investment was £0.7 billion, drawing in very little private investment, with most of the money coming from the energy company obligation. The Energy Efficiency Infrastructure Group has estimated that an annual public investment of £1.7 billion would leverage in £3.5 billion of private investment. While the economic arguments for investment in energy efficiency are clear, there will also be huge impacts on the quality of people’s lives. As for many of my hon. Friends’ constituents, nearly half of the constituents of Cornwall live off the mains gas grid, resulting in higher energy bills. Like the majority of people in the UK, they live in homes with low levels of insulation and energy efficiency measures. Average incomes in Cornwall, while rising, remain significantly below the England average, so we have high levels of fuel poverty.

Over the past nine years, I have been working with Public Health Cornwall on an innovative partnership that has brought together businesses and Cornwall Council, as well as health, care and emergency service professionals and many voluntary sector organisations to help people out of poverty and to live in warm homes. This public health approach has literally saved lives. Cornwall’s devolution deal has enabled greater flexibility on the ECO, and it is tackling fuel poverty, too. The partnership’s work has been funded by a mixture of public, ECO and business funding and voluntary donations. Over 20,000 people have been helped to live in warm homes, with new heating systems and insulation installed. In addition, independent evaluation shows that the winter wellness partnership has prevented more than 800 hospital admissions and helped 348 households remain in work or make progress towards work.

In Cornwall, we have shown over time that working with people on installing energy efficiency measures improves people’s health and wellbeing, as well as the environment. In developing a national plan, I would like the Government to set up an advisory body to draw on this learning and that of other local authorities and organisations. Learning from the first-hand experience of people on the frontline in Cornwall and across the country would enable the Government to take an evidence-based approach and to build on what works. After all, we are talking about asking people to make significant changes to their homes, and we need to be as sensitive to people’s feelings as to their finances. It is clear to me and my colleagues here today that we need to turbo-charge our action on home energy efficiency. I hope this motion will be the catalyst for that change, and I very much recommend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Sarah Newton, Richard Benyon, Tim Loughton, Antoinette Sandbach, Zac Goldsmith, Maria Caulfield, Vicky Ford, Steve Brine, Peter Aldous, Derek Thomas and Sir David Amess present the Bill.

Sarah Newton accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 407).
Church Representation and Ministers Measure


2.49 pm

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): I beg to move,

That the Church Representation and Ministers Measure (HC 2167), passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, be presented to Her Majesty for her Royal Assent in the form in which it was laid before Parliament.

The Measure and the new rules it contains emerged from the work of a simplification task group established by the Archbishops’ Council. The task group’s role was to bring forward proposals to remove constraints on the mission and growth of the Church of England resulting from existing legislation and processes. It recommended three major ways in which that could be achieved. First, those processes needed to be made less burdensome to the clergy and laity. Secondly, parishes should be given much greater flexibility over their constitutional arrangements, so that they can operate in the way that is most effective for the mission, life and work of the local church. Thirdly, the administrative burdens for those involved in running multi-parish benefices, especially in a rural context where the number of parishes in a benefice can be considerable, needed to be radically reduced.

The new rules have been completely redrafted and are a great deal easier to understand. They will make it possible for a parish to make governance arrangements that are best suited to the mission and life of the church in that parish. There are some significant safeguards and a small number of the provisions will be mandatory. A scheme for making rules for a parish will have to be approved by the Bishop’s Council, which must be satisfied that the schemes make due provision for the representation of the laity and ensure the effective governance of the parish, among other things.

Another major reform is the provision for joint councils. Under the new rules, joint councils can replace individual parochial church councils. Where that happens, the number of meetings, will be reduced—in some cases, very significantly.

Rules that were thought to be unnecessary and unduly burdensome have been pruned away. Anomalies have been addressed and doubts about the meanings have been removed.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I declare an interest as the son of a late vicar who looked after several churches. Will my right hon. Friend give me some assurances? I very much like the sound of that and whether it is included anywhere in the Measure, but it allows me to make it clear before the House that we are all waiting for the regulations that go hand in hand with that change in legislation. I had an absolutely heartrending email this morning from a woman whose mother passed away just a matter of days after the change in the law. One would have wished the regulations and the law to be coterminal to have made it possible for her late mother to be on the marriage certificate. Since my daughter has just announced her engagement, I sincerely hope that by this time next year the regulations will be in place.

To get back to the substance of the Measure, I should tell the House that it was carried by very substantial majorities in all three houses of the General Synod, and
that the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament has reported that it is of the opinion that the Measure is expedient.

2.56 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): When I was first elected to Parliament, the then Government Chief Whip said to me, “What would you like to do?” and I said, “I would like to be on the Ecclesiastical Committee.” She thought that was so eccentric that it was made absolutely clear that, in that Parliament, I certainly would not be a member of the Ecclesiastical Committee. I did not achieve those dizzy heights until 2010.

For anybody who wants a crash course in Tudor history, the Ecclesiastical Committee is the place to come. It is the absolute quintessence of the British establishment. It is the linchpin of the establishment; it is the very definition of the establishment. If any Member wants to be reminded about glebe lands or the Court of Arches, they too can come to the Ecclesiastical Committee. I think the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who made so many interventions, has been making his own application for the next time there is a vacancy.

The reason I referred to the Tudor pieces of canon law, which have weighed down the Church of England, is that they have become quite burdensome to parish priests. There has been far too much bureaucracy. The Measure is one of a number that have been driven through by the current Archbishop of Canterbury with the support and help of Synod and working groups throughout the Church.

The object is to modernise and simplify the rules of the Church so that it has more time and energy to do the things that it ought to be doing: running social projects, evangelising, preaching the gospel, comforting the sick, helping people who are grieving and celebrating marriages. Those are all things that we really want priests and the Church to be doing, but too much time has been taken up with ticking boxes and filling out forms.

The church representation part of the Measure gives people flexibility on the way they organise their meetings; the Ministers part enables people to be ordained but not tied to a particular parish. That is going to give the Church a lot more flexibility. The Second Church Estates Commissioner, the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), set the case out fully and clearly. I do not wish to say any more, except that we are happy to support the Measure this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Children and Young Persons

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has considered the instrument and has certified that it applies exclusively to England and Wales.

2.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I beg to move, that the draft Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 (Specified Scottish Authority and Barred Lists) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 20 May, be approved.

This order relates to the process by which an individual may be barred from working with children or vulnerable adults, and provides for greater recognition of barring decisions taken in other UK jurisdictions.

As Members will know, the Disclosure and Barring Service makes considered decisions regarding whether an individual should be barred from engaging in regulated activity which means close regular work with children, vulnerable adults or both in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The DBS also maintains a list of individuals it has barred from undertaking regulated activity with children or adults. This process is vital to protecting children and vulnerable adults from those who pose the greatest risk of doing them harm. It supports employers in making informed decisions about an individual’s suitability when they recruit for the most sensitive roles. As Members will know, it is an offence for a barred individual to work or to seek to work in regulated activity.

Paragraphs 6(2) and 12(3) of schedule 3 to the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 provide that individuals previously considered by a “relevant Scottish authority” for inclusion on “a corresponding list” cannot be included in a barred list in England and Wales on the basis of the same circumstances. The order is being made to specify those terms to give effect to paragraphs 6 and 12. The order specifies that the Scottish Ministers are the “relevant Scottish Authority”, and that the lists maintained by the Scottish Ministers under the Protecting Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007 are “corresponding lists” to those lists of barred individuals maintained under the 2006 Act.

As Members will know, criminal records disclosure and barring are devolved matters. As such, it is important that the DBS in England and Wales and their Scottish counterparts work together and mutually recognise each other’s decisions. The existing framework provides that an individual who is barred under Scottish legislation is also barred in England and Wales and vice versa. Therefore, an individual who has been barred in one jurisdiction cannot work with vulnerable groups by seeking employment in another jurisdiction. That can only be right.

The order gives practical effect to that recognition, ensuring that effective safeguarding is maintained across the UK. That means that if a person has been considered for barring in one jurisdiction, they cannot subsequently be reconsidered for barring on the same grounds in another jurisdiction. This avoids the possibility of a “double jeopardy” situation for that person, where the DBS might bar an individual who Disclosure Scotland had previously decided not to bar on the basis of the same information. We say that this is a matter of basic
[Victoria Atkins]

fairness. It is already the case under Scottish law that Disclosure Scotland is not required to consider an individual for barring who has already been considered by the DBS. A similar statutory instrument will be made by the Secretary of State under corresponding Northern Ireland legislation to ensure consistency across all three jurisdictions.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I very much support the measure, but will the Minister just comment on this point? The lists have been brought together much more closely within the United Kingdom—I remember being a Minister in the days of List 99, which was a much more complicated system—but what progress has been made on the exchange of information with other countries? There are people who come to this country from the EU and beyond who pose a risk to children, including an increasing number of professionals in education, health and social welfare. Some have also been found guilty of misdemeanours against children. This is not just a UK-wide problem.

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am extremely grateful to him for bringing his expertise and experience to the Chamber on this important matter. As to the detail on the exchange of information with other non-UK jurisdictions, I wonder if he would bear with me for a moment. I suspect I will find the answer very quickly. If I do not, I will of course undertake to write to him, because that is a specific point. From my time serving with him on the Home Affairs Committee, I know that we looked at this issue very carefully as part of our discussions on, for example, Europol. I hope to be able to assist the House with that particular query in due course, but if I may, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will return to the main business.

There has already been clarification in Scottish law and I am delighted that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will introduce corresponding legislation to ensure consistency across all three jurisdictions. As a result, each barring body will recognise barring decisions taken by each other. By achieving greater consistency between the jurisdictions of the UK, the order enables Disclosure Scotland and the DBS in England and Wales to continue to work together to protect children and vulnerable adults.

I hope Members on all sides of the House will support the order to enable the valuable recognition of barring decisions, and support greater public protection for children and vulnerable adults. I am going to sit down in a moment, but I very much hope I will have discovered the answer by the time I come to respond to my hon. Friend.

Tim Loughton: Allow me to throw the Minister the life raft of additional time. She might also like to comment on what used to be a real problem, particularly for teachers who were new to a school or newly qualified, which was the length of time it was taking for them to get their DBS clearance. Some teachers, in particular where we had shortages, were not able to take up their positions and that caused huge inconvenience. The situation has improved a great deal—it is less bureaucratic and the measure she is bringing in today will help—but can she provide an assurance to the House that the amount of time it takes to give clearance to essential public workers in particular is not still an ongoing problem?

Victoria Atkins: I am able to give my hon. Friend that reassurance. I do not for a moment pretend that we have reached perfection. Through his involvement in the Home Affairs Committee, he will be aware of the Public Accounts Committee reports into the workings of the DBS and the length of time that digitisation and so on has taken. I monitor that issue very closely in my capacity as the Minister with responsibility for DBS, albeit that it is an arm’s-length body, and I am satisfied that what we call the aged list is reducing at an acceptable rate—I am, however, impatient; I would like it to be faster—and that the DBS in Liverpool has been operating with great efficiency in recent times.

The basis of the order is so important. It is to ensure that children and vulnerable people are safe with the people who work with them. We have seen, with many recent allegations in the context of vulnerable adults, how vital it is that people who work with vulnerable adults, perhaps in care homes, are of suitable character and history to work in such a responsible role.

I am delighted to say that I will be writing to my hon. Friend on the specific point he raised with me, because international data sharing is complex.

Tim Loughton: It has occurred to me that I should have declared my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests before I asked the Minister those very important questions.

Victoria Atkins: As always, my hon. Friend is scrupulous in being transparent. We recognise his expertise and experience in this field.

With that, I commend the order to the House.

3.9 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): We will not oppose this statutory instrument today; we actually welcome its introduction. We must ensure that serious crimes, such as child abuse, trafficking and rape, are not dealt with by out-of-court disposal orders—community resolutions—as those do not appear on basic DBS checks and so are not flagged up on applications to work with some of our most vulnerable people.

If we are taking the safeguarding of vulnerable adults and children seriously, we must not simply pay lip service to this protection. Like many in the Chamber, I am a school governor, and I know that schools, employers and community organisations rely heavily on DBS checks when appointing staff and volunteers. They must be able to trust the systems in place when they are responsible for the welfare of children or vulnerable adults in their care. We have heard too many stories of vulnerable people being exposed or exploited at the hands of criminals who are let off by a system of out-of-court disposal orders that by their very nature are omitted from DBS checks. We cannot allow this to continue.

Question put and agreed to.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Madam Deputy Speaker, I should like to note my disappointment that
we did not hear from our Scottish colleagues. I was looking forward to hearing from them, though I am delighted they agree with the order.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Was that a point of order?

**Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Despite the title of the motion, it was certified by Mr Speaker as falling wholly within devolved competence and therefore under the English votes for English laws scheme, so sadly the need for us to contribute on the Floor was limited. Given, however, that the Minister was very complimentary about the Scottish authorities, we thought it important that we at least heard her.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. It is always a pleasure to hear from him.

**Victoria Atkins:** Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am happy to concede: I walked into that one.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Excellent.

**Excise**

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

That the Tobacco Products (Descriptions of Products) (Amendment) Order 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 953), which was laid before this House on 21 May, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

### Backbench Business

#### Cox Report: Implementation

3.12 pm

**Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con):** I beg to move, That this House welcomes the publication of, and recommendations in, the Dame Laura Cox report on bullying and harassment in Parliament; welcomes the implementation of the recommendation to abandon the Valuing Others and Respect policies; expresses concern about damage caused to the reputation and standing of this House by the lack of progress made on other recommendations on historical allegations and the non-involvement of MPs in Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme cases; and calls on the Leader of the House and the House of Commons Commission to push forward the implementation of all three key recommendations in full without delay.

The Cox report was commissioned a year ago, in July 2018, at what we can only call a low point in this place’s history, our reputation having been rocked by allegations of bullying and harassment. Eight months on from the report being published, just one of the three Cox recommendations has been implemented, despite the House of Commons Commission, the body responsible for the employment of staff, stating that it clearly agreed in full with all three of the recommendations made by Dame Laura Cox.

Nothing is more important than the safety and wellbeing of the people we rely on to run this organisation—parliamentary staff, constituency staff, members of the Metropolitan police and Members themselves—and it is completely unacceptable that eight months on, progress in delivering change is so very slow. We rightly consider other organisations that fail to act when serious problems are identified, particularly when it comes to issues of bullying and harassment, and we run the serious risk of undermining the credibility of the House of Commons in speaking out in the future by not having acted swiftly in the wake of the full Cox report findings. This has to change.

There is much more in the Cox report aside from the recommendations, but those specific recommendations call for the abandoning of the valuing others policy and respect policies; for the amending of the independent complaints and grievance scheme, which according to Alison Stanley’s six-month report published on 12 June is bedding in well through the inclusion of non-recent allegations that predate 2017; and for consideration to be given to the most effective way of ensuring that the process for determining complaints of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment by House staff against Members is entirely independent, with MPs playing no part.

It is welcome that one of those recommendations has been put into practice, but that decision was to axe a policy, which is a very straightforward thing to put in place. There has been no change in practice on the other two recommendations. There has been much discussion and consultation—another consultation closed a few days ago—and many plans to set up groups of people to talk to each other and have ideas to bring to the Commission, which could then discuss and think about them and then perhaps do something, but it is unclear when that would be done and who would do it. Let us be clear: there has been no action actively to protect employees in this place.
Not only has the Commission not put in place the changes demanded by Cox eight months ago, but it was made aware that the current policy with regard to non-recent cases could well be unlawful. In its letter of 16 October 2018, the Equality and Human Rights Commission wrote to the House of Commons warning it—warning us—that the House of Commons Commission’s policy of an arbitrary cut-off date of June 2017 for non-recent claims of bullying and harassment could be unlawful because it unjustifiably discriminates against older employees, who are more likely to have a historical complaint, contrary to section 19 of the Equality Act 2010. Despite that, the Commission has failed to act on behalf of Members to bring our policies in line with the law, let alone in line with the recommendations of the Cox report.

Furthermore, the Commission was warned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission that the House could also be in breach of its public sector equality duty—again, laws that we all passed in this place, not just for ourselves but for those outside. The EHRC has been clear that we could well be in breach of the public sector equality duty under section 149 of the Equality Act, and that it may actually intervene on the House of Commons and issue a compliance notice. Again, this has not been addressed by the Commission.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): When I sat on the working group that came up with this, there was a strong desire from those of us in that room that historical cases be part of the process. We were assured at the time that that would be in place—or at least starting to be put in place—by now. What the right hon. Lady is saying is incredibly worrying. Does she agree that we should have pressed ahead at the earliest stage so that if there were further challenges we could have addressed and finessed them by now, rather than waiting for an intervention by the ECHR?

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady brings up a very important point. It goes even further than that. If an organisation is made aware that it could be breaking the law, it does not wait eight months to do something about it; it gets on with it straight away.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who was Leader of the House at the time, did the most remarkable job on behalf of Members, getting in place the very first independent grievance scheme, and we all owe her an incredible debt of thanks for what she has done, but it was not an easy process, and I am sure that she may make a contribution to the debate today to add her perspective on that. We have to make sure that the Commission, which exists only because Members want it to exist—it is there not by right, but because we have decided it should be—is acting in a way that protects us from the inevitable criticism that will come from being found to be potentially unlawful in the way we treat our employees.

Members of the House have given the Women and Equalities Committee a responsibility to scrutinise the Government’s policy on equality, but I do not think that it is just the Government who need to be scrutinised at the moment, and we are actively keeping an eye on what is going on in the House of Commons as well. Working with my Committee colleagues, I have established an inquiry into the gender-sensitive Parliament, and we will be looking closely at how procedures here this place is using to ensure that it is actively taking on not just the key recommendations in the Cox report, but the spirit of that report as well.

The way in which the House of Commons Commission is dealing with this matter is unacceptable, and, I believe, risks bringing us all into disrepute if change does not happen soon. However, I also believe that the lack of action on Cox is symptomatic of much wider management dysfunctionality in this place, and I want to raise a couple of issues that are directly related to that lack of action.

The fact that the Leader of the House will be responding to the debate goes to the heart of the problem. The Government do not run the House of Commons; Members do, via the House of Commons Commission, which is chaired by the Speaker. So why is a Minister responding to the debate? I say this with the greatest respect to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who is an extremely capable individual, but he is not responsible for the matter that I have raised today. While I welcome his contribution, he cannot answer directly the questions that I am asking. At the end of my speech, I shall set him some tasks that he might want to undertake were he to wish to assist Members in resolving this issue.

Members established the House of Commons Commission in 1978 to administer, on our behalf, the way in which this place is run. Unlike almost all other Committees of the House, it has no elected members, and because it is chaired by the Speaker—whose impartiality is key to our debates—it is difficult to achieve clear accountability. Quite rightly, the Speaker does not feel he to wish to assist Members in resolving this issue.

That, I would assert, is why the House of Commons Commission was set up. It would be impossible for each and every one of the 650 Members of the House to actively manage it. By definition, we must have a body that is nominated by us to do these things on our behalf, but when there is no clear accountability or report-back mechanism other than the regular questions that are asked, there is no other proactive way of engaging in debate.

Let me now refer to a matter to which I have referred in the House before. I think that it, too, is at the heart of some of the dysfunctionality surrounding management in this place. I speak as someone who spent 20 years in business before coming to this place. It has always struck me that this place has very opaque management systems, which—for me, at any rate—have just reached breaking point because of the lack of progress in delivering
on the Cox report after eight months. I think that that is reflected in one of the key findings in the report. I shall quote verbatim from page 154. This is not my interpretation of what Dame Laura has said; it is what she has said:

“I have...referred throughout this report to systemic or institutional failings. I believe to a collective ethos in the House that has, over the years, enabled the underlying culture to develop and to persist. Within this culture, there are a number of individuals who are regarded as bearing some personal responsibility for the criticisms made, and whose continued presence is viewed as unlikely to facilitate the necessary changes, but whom it would...be wrong for me to name, having regard to the terms of reference for this inquiry...some individuals will want to think very carefully about whether they are the right people to press the reset button and to do what is required to deliver that change in the best interests of the House, having regard both to its reputation and its role as an employer of those who are rightly regarded as its most important resource.”

Unless we choose to change not only the structures but the management of the House and the people in charge of its management, we face the prospect of continued inertia on this and other reforms that are long overdue.

It was difficult for me to quote Dame Laura’s words, because they are critical of individuals, but we cannot put our head in the sand continually, eight months after the report’s publication. We must stand up and take what we believe to be long overdue decisions. We need the implementation of the report to be completed before the end of the summer recess, in about 10 weeks’ time. In the case of any other business, we would expect, after 10 weeks, the completion of a measure to bring people within the law and to create a process for analysing cases that came forward.

Can the Leader of the House assist Members by putting a motion on the Order Paper to that effect? There is no reason why the House should not debate the issue, and agree—I would hope—that the Cox report should be implemented in full within a reasonable period. I suggest that we issue a request to the House of Commons Commission to deliver that, or else to explain why it has not done so.

It is clear that we also need to consider the modernisation of the Commission itself. I think that what has happened recently requires us to consider the way in which it might be run on our behalf in the future. Such a modernisation should include an elected Chair who would be directly responsible to Members, and could speak here on all Commission matters. There should be a transparent agenda for the modernisation of the management of the House and the way in which business is conducted. The current piecemeal approach is not working in practice. Members need to know how wider change is being implemented, and to know that it is not just being talked about.

This needs to be debated by Members. Would the Leader of the House also consider tabling a motion proposing that we begin to discuss the modernisation of the House of Commons Commission, so that we could take heed of Members’ views and, perhaps, Select Committees could follow them up?

Thirdly, these problems of implementation point to another area of reform. We as a group of people need to take stock of how we shape the role of the individual who runs the business of this place: the Speaker. It is we who have determined that the Speaker is responsible for not only the important procedure and running of the business in this Chamber and elsewhere, but the entire running of the House of Commons, because as chair of the Commission it is the Speaker who is ultimately responsible for the implementation of Cox, the thousands of staff employed here and the complexities of running an organisation of this incredible scale. I would assert that the two roles are individually challenging: having one person doing them increases the risk of the Speaker becoming involved in matters that are not compatible with the important independent nature of the Speaker’s jobs. Any of us who have been involved in employing staff knows that can be one of the most controversial issues we can get involved with; why would we want the Speaker to be involved in something that can be so difficult and controversial?

Will the Leader of the House consider putting forward a motion for debate on the Floor of the House on the role of the Speaker so that the views of Members can be established, and then Select Committees can, if appropriate, take those views forward? If that is not appropriate, perhaps the Leader of the House can advise me on what are the appropriate ways for Members to review and discuss those issues.

It is vital that we find a way forward on all three of the issues I have outlined, because they are all connected to the problems we are experiencing in implementing Cox. But even above that, they are determining how people outside view this place. We must be an exemplar in management, not a laggard. There can be no special pleading for working practices in this place and the fact that they have not changed to reflect the realities of a modern 21st-century Parliament.

The House of Commons is central to our democracy. As custodians of this place we have a clear and unquestionable responsibility to safeguard the effectiveness of the House of Commons, to ensure it is respected and to root out anything that could serve to undermine its standing in the public eye. It can never be an option to seal Parliament in aspic because, as a democratic institution, we have to reflect the country we seek to serve. There is an important place for tradition to root our procedures in precedent, and any change has to be evolutionary, not revolutionary, but we should leave this place better than we found it—more relevant, not less, to those we seek to represent here, our constituents.

There is no lack of good will to change, and the staff of the House of Commons are clearly dedicated to the future of this place, as came through strongly in the Cox report and the research Dame Laura did, but too often that enthusiasm and dedication to change is not forthcoming in practice because of a lack of clear responsibility and accountability. The lack of swift action on the Cox recommendations reflects deep-seated problems with the way the House of Commons is run, and colleagues, it is down to us to change that—no one else.

3.32 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on her speech. She and I work together very closely on these issues, and on issues about this place, Members can often be aligned across parties.

I pay tribute to the staff of the House of Commons: the staff who work for us and the staff who work to make the building work—the staff without whom we could not do any of this. At present, we are the masters of their destiny; we in this Chamber are the masters of
how well the system works for them, and sometimes we are the people who work against them. For anyone who has ever been involved in any sort of employee relations, such a power imbalance should sit uncomfortably: where there is a power imbalance, there can always be exploitation, and, to be honest, what we have here is an opportunity to give power away, to do the right thing. I think we should do that.

Dame Laura Cox’s report was thorough and wide-ranging, and it made clear recommendations that we should absolutely be getting on with, because the people who know that we are not getting on with them are all the people who work in this building. Nothing has changed since we started the whole “Pestminster” thing or even the broader #MeToo movement; it feels as if a moment of blood-letting led to no significant material change in the actual working lives of the people we are here to try to protect.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech and an excellent point. Does she agree that we have to see this not as a solution, but as the first step in solving a problem that goes back decades and that, unless we act, will continue to go on for decades?

Jess Phillips: Absolutely. This going back decades has been discussed, including the idea of historical cases and whether they can or cannot be heard. If we do not sort out what has gone on before, we will never be able to sort out what goes on in the future, and we have to. This is not about drawing a line and hoping for the best in future. Some of the people we are talking about when we say, “Let’s draw a line on the historical cases,” still very much work in this building.

This week and last week, I have been reminded that the system still seems not to have changed much on the ground. Actually, I will go back a step and pay massive credit to the Member of the House, so I will have to learn her constituency: the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom)—we were just discussing whether there is a North Southamptonshire. The systems that have been put in place, if used well and seen through in everything that Cox required, can be the solution, but there is currently a blockage in the system. This week and last week, I have in my diary three different incidents where I have to call or meet people. Those people’s names cannot even go in my diary, because they are so worried about further complaints and about people who either represent constituencies in this place or work in this building. This is still going on. Even with the new systems being set up, people still feel that I am a person that they should come to find out whether this can be trusted. We are nowhere near the level of trust that we need to be at in this building for people to feel that they can go forward and, without fear or favour, make a complaint about somebody, especially somebody who sits on one of these green Benches.

The argument for an independent system is won—certainly not yet in my political party, but in the system that we hope to see set up here. The Cox report clearly identified concerns about the idea of Members of Parliament sitting in judgment over any of this, and the public would have a question mark over that. That system and MPs’ involvement in deciding how the sanctions might be given out can cause by-elections. It is not an unpolitical system. It is something where politics can very much play a part.

I am really pleased that lay members have a balancing vote in the independent complaints system, but there are still real concerns about the idea that we are the ones who get the say, I have absolutely no reason to doubt the complete and utter commitment of all the people on the current Committee on Standards to doing the right thing, but I personally saw how who goes on that Committee is a political decision, because I was stopped by my political party from going on it. The Whips had put my name forward. It appeared on the Order Paper and then it was stopped. I have no idea why my political party did not wish to put me forward to be on the Committee on Standards, but I can guess. I will take it as a compliment that I am actually independent and that I would act fairly, regardless of the situation.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Lady, may I say that I, too, would be very happy to vote for her to serve on the Committee on Standards? I place on the record that as Chair of the Committee on Standards, I would have been delighted if my hon. Friend had been appointed a member of our Committee.

Jess Phillips: I thank the Chair and put on record that she very much welcomed the fact that my name went forward on to the Order Paper—before it was withdrawn—so that I could have been appointed to that Committee.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Is not one of the ironies that although we have elections in our political parties for all the positions on all the other Select Committees, we do not have elections for these places? If there had been an election in the Labour party or, for that matter, across the House, I do not doubt for a single instant that my hon. Friend would have been elected.

Jess Phillips: Indeed. It seems that we are sometimes democratic within my movement and sometimes not.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): As someone who serves on the Women and Equalities Committee with the hon. Lady, may I say that I, too, would be very happy to vote for her to serve on the Committee on Standards?

Jess Phillips: Oh my gosh! It is like a “get out the vote” moment. I am going to stand for something now, because it would seem that I have the will of all the House behind me.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): If only there was an election.

Jess Phillips: Indeed.

What I find about the people who want me to be involved in their cases is that they do not usually have anything to hide. It is a small thing that this is about me, and it is a pleasure that everyone is offering me their kind regards, but this highlights an issue in the system—namely, that the way in which bad behaviour, harassment and bullying are handled in this building can be controlled by patronage, power, friendships and politics. That cannot
be ignored, and while it is the case, people will still come
to people like me and the right hon. Member for
Basingstoke and tell us their stories. Until we get this
right, no system that we put in place will ever have the
trust of the people who work in this building or of those
who interact with them.

I also want to highlight the issue of historical cases.
In the end, Dame Laura Cox said the exact opposite of
what came out of the systems that we created around
historical cases. She said that it would be beneficial for
historical cases to be heard, and not that it would be
legally difficult for people to be held accountable for a
code of conduct that they had not previously signed up
to. I do not personally need to be told not to sexually
harass anyone. I do not need it written down that I
should not murder people in the House of Commons.
That is not what stops me murdering people; there are
many other things that do. The trouble with the issue of
historical cases is that it immediately puts aside some of
the issues and challenges that would have been cleared
up, had those cases been able to be heard. We have to
open up the idea of historical cases. I am perfectly
comfortable with the idea that historical cases concerning
people who are no longer here, for example, are much
more difficult. We have no sanction over people who are
no longer here or who have died, and I can see that there
is nervousness about going back to the beginning of
time in that way.

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for giving
way, and I might well vote for her if there is an election.
On historical cases and the point about people no
longer being here, is there not a danger that the longer
we leave this, the more chance there is of people no
longer being here?

Jess Phillips: Absolutely. That is certainly a concern.
This place has a way of reminding us how welcome we
are at the moment. I have absolutely no doubt that there
are people here whose processes have been in the long
grass for a very long time, and that they will be allowed
to go off to pastures new. Any constituency MP will
know how a constituent feels when that happens in the
police force, for example, when complaints are made
and people are allowed to be retired off.

Lord knows we are doing an absolutely terrible job of
convincing people that we are even equal to the value
of the British people. Politics stinks at the moment, but
we have an opportunity, in trying to do what Cox has
asked of us, to show that we do not think we are above
those cases. We have no design that will not have built into it the
right that if we do not deal with this, people will get
disturbance that will allow this culture to develop, to
fester and to continue to grow over years to come.

Although not many Members are involved in all this, if
we do not have an independent system, it is that breeding
of distrust that will allow this culture to develop, to
fester and to continue to grow over years to come.

Jess Phillips: Absolutely. I want Members in all political
parties—let us not pretend that this is not happening in
all parties—and all the institutions of Parliament and
politics to know that a truly independent system should
protect us from the charge that we can do whatever we
want and that we will stitch things up for our own
benefit. At the moment, it does feel a bit like we can still
do that.

Speaking specifically about my party, I do not know
why there is ever any pushback against the idea of
complete and utter independence when it comes to
complaints, certainly those around sexual harassment,
bullying or racism. When we stand up and speak or go
on Twitter or go to work, we should be held to account,
but not by somebody who can give us a job or who we
can give a job to, because independence protects both
the claimant and the person making the claim. I honestly
do not understand why we are so afraid of it.

The other issue that constantly comes up when discussing how we handle such systems is the idea of a third-party
complaints system and how we can take up complaints
on the behalf of people who are vulnerable and/or
terrified to come forward. Such a process has still not
been ironed out in this place. If a Member sees something
in the bar or somebody comes and tells them something—it
happens to me a lot, and I have to struggle with the
things that I know, which I often wish I could unkown—it
is unclear what to do in those circumstances. The response
is often, “There is not very much that we can do unless
somebody comes forward, and they will have to make
statements,” but there needs to be something in the
system that is better for third-party complaints.

I have worked with the FDA throughout the whole
process from the original complaints to the Cox report
and all the different elements. I share the frustration of
the right hon. Member for Basingstoke about there
being another consultation with another group of people,
because there seems to have been endless different reviews
different sorts of people who might come into this
building. The FDA’s response to the Cox report included
designs for perfectly reasonable independent systems
with appeals processes that are completely fair and
balanced for people both within and outside this building.

This argument goes around a lot, but there is an idea
that we MPs have unusual lives, that we know best and
that how systems work cannot be understood without
MP involvement. I suppose that the Independent
Parliamentary Standards Authority is the example that
is always given. It is a good one, so I can understand
that argument. I am not suggesting for one second that
there is any design that will not have built into it the
idea of vexatious complaints, which are plentiful. I
have had them from other Members of Parliament for
example. I understand that that has to be built into the
system, but we should want to give up some of the
power over the decision making.

Turning to the House of Commons Commission, I am
quite heavily involved in all this stuff—I am knee
deep—but I do not really know what the Commission is
and/or does. I do not know whether there is meant to be
a Back-Bench representative on it, or whether it is just
party political. Somebody once told me that the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) was the Back-Bench representative, but, meaning no offence to him, I did not elect anybody to that role. I have no idea how the Commission works and how I could work with it, and I think we need to look at the level of transparency. We also need to look at how the Commission works with the Committee on Standards and the Procedure Committee. Having all these different things makes normal people who want to do the right thing think, "I can't be dealing with this."

We have a real opportunity, as has been said, to leave the House in a better place than we found it by creating clarity on the structures and power lines to get this right. No matter who our friendships are with and who holds power in this place, we should never fear making and/or supporting complaints against those we like or those we think do a good job in other regards. We have to be honest and fair.

The Cox report is clear and does not beat about the bush in what it asks for. I am not entirely sure what has caused the delay. It certainly was not caused by the will of the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire, and it was not even caused by the will of the House. The House, although sometimes with clever planning, has largely voted through the report’s recommendations. I am not sure why it is taking so long, and we have to ask ourselves what we will do about it and how we will speed it up. It definitely needs speeding up.

I absolutely love the House of Commons, and I think parliamentary democracy is the greatest form of democracy in the world. We have the best democracy because we are directly linked to our constituents. There are very few countries in the world where, on a Friday, a person can go and have a chat with their representative. Unlike in Ghana or India, say, we can genuinely have a cup of tea and listen to what is going on in people’s lives. It is precious, and it needs to be protected against the very dark forces we see at the moment.

We should never give those who wish to damn our parliamentary democracy the argument that we are somehow stitching things up and that we are an elite establishment force who do everything to line our own pockets. We should never give those arguments any credence, because I will not be told by the likes of Nigel Farage that he cares more than I do about the people and about the people who work here. If we do not do something, he will have every right to say those things.

I urge the new Leader of the House to do something to make this happen, and to make it happen quickly.

3.53 pm

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) have secured this debate, and I am proud that this is my first speech back on the Back Benches. Hopefully, I have the freedom to shed a little light on some of those dark spaces.

Before I do that, I want to agree with the hon. Lady. I, too, love this Parliament. I feel incredibly optimistic that, between all of us, we will make this change. Right now, we are still in a difficult place, and I will go through some of that before setting out some recommendations of my own.

I pay tribute to the officials in the office of the Leader of the House and to all the members of House staff who worked so hard to get the independent complaints procedure in place. If anyone is at fault for the lack of progress, it is definitely not them.

As I said, the picture is very complicated. This all began back in November 2017, when the appalling allegations of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment hit Parliament. Having already hit Hollywood, the allegations soon came to Westminster. So the independent complaints and grievance procedure was established and voted on by this House in July 2018. It was a cross-party agreement, with many colleagues from across the House working hard together to achieve something that is different and ground-breaking.

Then of course we had the Cox report, which was specifically on the bullying of House staff by Members of Parliament. That reported in October 2018, after the independent complaints procedure had already been set up. Subsequent to that, we now have the inquiry by Gemma White, QC, into the bullying of MPs’ staff by MPs, and vice versa, which is due to report later this month. Finally, we have the inquiry by Naomi Ellenbogen, QC, into the bullying and harassment of peers’ staff by peers, and vice versa, which will report later this year. A number of complicated inquiries are going on, and I can well understand people saying: “It is all too complicated. I can’t get my way through it.” Nevertheless, it is all headed in the right direction; people are genuinely being given the opportunity to speak out and have their say, which is so vital.

The independent complaints procedure was set up following the July 2018 motion that was agreed by this House, and Alison Stanley, the independent reviewer of the complaints procedure, has just finished her review of the first six months of the independent complaints and grievance scheme. I wish to quote one statement in her report, as it gives us hope:

“both the Behaviour Code and the policies represent in some aspects leading edge practice, such as the unequivocal language used in the Behaviour Code. From my own experience of introducing change across diverse organisations, the fact that the Scheme has now been largely introduced across the Parliamentary Community is a positive sign of a change in the culture of the Parliamentary Community by some.”

That is on the good side, but of course there is another side. Throughout my time as Leader of the House, both officially, through the working group, and unofficially, as a private Member of Parliament, I have heard some truly terrible stories. These were stories of victims being quietly moved on, rather than the bully being challenged in any way; of young women and, in some cases, young men being taken advantage of, and off the estate; of complaints left entirely unaddressed by those who are supposed to be addressing them; and of mental health issues suffered by those who have been subjected to bullying, day in, day out, for long periods, by senior people who should be ashamed of themselves.

Alison Stanley’s report on the complaints procedure makes for difficult reading. The start of the culture change to embed the need to treat everyone with dignity and respect has been far too slow and it has not been well enough resourced. That is the conclusion of her report. She talks specifically about the speed of investigations being too slow, and speed is crucial both for the complainant and for the respondent. Where someone is accused of
something and they then have to wait for several months not knowing whether it is going to be taken up, it can, in some ways, be as difficult as the situation is for the complainant, who has plucked up the courage to come forward and just does not seem to be making any progress. Issues associated with confidentiality were raised. Unfortunately, as we live under the spotlight in this place, there are accusations made in the press which mean that people who want to come forward with a complaint do not really know whether their complaint would also then find its way into the press. That gives the complainants serious concern about being re-victimised. We have not yet managed to achieve enough confidence in that aspect.

We also face issues associated with the qualifications and processes for investigations—for example, on the understanding of the investigator as to whether the case deserves investigation or not. Alison Stanley makes some very strong recommendations on this, which will go a long way to also addressing concerns about historical allegations. As Leader of the House of Commons, I was concerned that when we look at day-to-day allegations of issues that are ongoing now we find that they are in some cases more easily understood than something that happened eight or 10 years ago, where most of those involved at the time might no longer be around. The complexity can be much greater, although not necessarily so. So the quality and experience of the investigators are vital.

Mrs Miller: It is incredibly useful for the House to have my right hon. Friend talk about her experience in this debate. She mentioned the assertion in the Stanley report that the roll-out of the grievance procedure had been under-resourced. With reference to what the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) said, it is difficult for us to know who is responsible for that, but we need to know, because we Members need to ensure that that changes in future.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. One thing that I found fascinating about the independent review was to see somebody with real experience, as Alison Stanley has, of implementing these kinds of change processes, because one could really see where the rubber hits the road. It is all very well all of us sitting and standing here making representations as to how we want change to happen, but it has to be workable on the ground. There have to be proper resources and service-level agreements, so that people turn investigations around fast enough for them to be meaningful. My right hon. Friend is exactly right that resourcing is absolutely key.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the right hon. Lady agree with another of Alison Stanley’s recommendations, which is about trying to ensure that there are no further cases of bullying and harassment? She recommends that all Members should go on the Valuing Everyone training, which I am pleased to say I went on yesterday and would thoroughly recommend to all Members.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I had the great pleasure of going, with my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), to one of the first prototypes of the Valuing Everyone training. I join him in thoroughly recommending that all colleagues undertake that training. It is quite insightful and extremely helpful.

Let me move on to address further points made in Alison Stanley’s report that should inform the roll-out of the responses to the Cox inquiry. Alison Stanley talks about independence. Quite often, people who want to come forward with a complaint will be concerned that they do not want it to be discussed with somebody whom they may then come across, whether in a corridor, a Select Committee or, indeed, the Terrace café. They do not want to feel that they are going to bump into the person, so the scheme’s true independence is vital, and Alison Stanley makes strong recommendations in that regard on which we should focus.

I wish to focus my remarks on the final point, which is about the ownership of the scheme. This goes right to the heart of what my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley said: who owns this scheme? We want to see things happen—we all say that it is not happening fast enough and ask why. The reality is that the recommendations in the Stanley report set out the problem rather than the solution. Using her best efforts, she has in effect sought to use current parliamentary processes to try to find a little scrap of accountability somewhere. I am afraid we are going to have to change that, so I shall focus on some specific recommendations.

First, the House of Commons Commission has struggled to tackle issues—not only this one, but others—at pace. The Commission should meet every week, not every month, and should have a much shorter, more focused agenda. The Clerk of the Commons and the director general should be voting members, not people who just sit there giving comments and are then overruled. They are clearly the two humans who are accountable for many issues, including the roll-out of this scheme and of changes to the culture, so it is right that they have a say on the House of Commons Commission.

The Commission’s meeting times should be fixed, and if the chair is unable to attend, as is often the case, an alternative—I suggest it should be one of the external commissioners—should step in and chair the meeting instead, rather than it being cancelled or delayed, as happens now and is often a problem for the other attendees. The minutes of House of Commons Commission meetings should be circulated promptly within a couple of days, in line with best practice in the business world, not with the agenda for the next meeting, as so often happens now.

On the point of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley, MPs should be elected on to the House of Commons Commission. Colleagues are saying, “I don’t know how the House of Commons Commission works. What does it do?” The reality is that if Members were elected to it, they would find out. In the House of Commons, we should be electing the members not only of the Commission, but of the Standards Committee. It should not be the case that somebody who might be dangerously independent is muzzled.

Chris Bryant: It is almost a shame to see the right hon. Lady on the Back Benches—no, it is a shame to see her on the Back Benches not least because she was taking this matter forward with such verve and energy and I applaud her for that. She knows that I completely
agree with all the recommendations that she has made thus far. We should be electing people on to the Commission, and the Commission should be meeting far more frequently so that it can transact more business more swiftly. Should we not also be electing all of the House Committees so that they can feed into the Commission more effectively?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman and I have had lots of conversations about this. We are in complete agreement, and I am quite sure that he and I would make a good fist of proposing a wholesale set of changes for the House of Commons Commission, including for the Finance and Administration Committees, but that is not the subject for today. None the less, what the whole issue of culture change in this place highlights is the need to change the way that we manage it, which is why I want to focus specifically on our recommendations for changes to the House Commission.

The final point on which I would like to focus is that, in dealing with culture change, we really have to do so in a bicameral way. I will not go through the sequence of events, but, essentially, we approved our report in July. The House of Lords approved theirs in November of that year. It was only in May of this year that they changed their standards Committee, so we are completely out of step. What they have agreed is not the same as what we have agreed, and this issue is absolutely integral to the point about sanctioning. I want to talk briefly about that before I draw to a close.

I am delighted to see that a number of members of the working group are here today and I thank them all again for what was such a fantastic cross-party collegiate piece of work. Let us be clear: this is not all about MPs. Members employ staff, the House employs staff and there are many, many contractors here. There are 15,000 people who work in the Palace of Westminster. Although this is not all about MPs, there are some really important considerations for them.

The working group wanted to ensure that a member of staff and/or an MP or a peer could be sanctioned even if they resign or, in the case of an MP, step down or lose their seat. This is very important. In all cases, the working group felt that records of bullying and harassing behaviour should be kept so that a member of staff or a Member of Parliament could be sanctioned should they ever return to either House. In this way, an MP who was given a peerage might be rejected outright potentially by the Lords standards Committee for their previous record in this House of bullying and harassment. A member of House or MPs’ staff, or, indeed, a contractor could be sanctioned by being ineligible for a security pass should they seek re-employment in either House. These are really important points. I do not want to labour this, but I really do think that this has to be bicameral. We cannot have this going down two separate tracks so that someone can step down as an MP, go and get their peerage and then sit pretty at that end—as long as they do not repeat their nasty behaviour, they can get away with it scot-free. That point is key.

I was delighted by recent visits that I received when I was Leader of the House from Canadian and Australian delegations and by my own trips to visit the Llywydd in Wales and the presiding officer in Scotland to talk about our complaints procedure in the UK Parliament. They are looking closely at what we are doing here. What I really hope and pray for is that this old and very much loved Parliament can demonstrate real change and can provide a genuine role model for other Parliaments right around the world. If we can achieve that and truly get to the point where we treat all who work and visit here with dignity and respect, we will have achieved a lasting legacy from this generation of UK parliamentarians.

Tom Brake: I will come to those recommendations, but if the purpose of what we are doing is to ensure that there are no future complaints about bullying and harassment, that course is part of the answer. Having attended the course yesterday, it is very clear that bullying and harassment is going on now, and that there are members of staff in particular who do not yet feel able to have that behaviour addressed and do not feel confident in speaking out openly. I would therefore suggest that the more Members who go on this course and the quicker that happens, the better.
I am very much in favour of naming and shaming the other 600 Members of Parliament—that is probably the number at this point in time—who have not been on it. I recommend that people attend that course because we are in a position of responsibility towards our staff. Therefore, if we have not been on the fire safety training course, we are not in a position to help them should an incident occur. But I need to focus, rightly, on the three critical points that came out of the Cox report.

The first recommendation is the termination of the Valuing Others and Respect policies. I hope that the right hon. Member for Basingstoke would agree that that has been acted on. The second recommendation is access to the independent complaints procedure for historical complaints. I agree that that has not progressed particularly quickly. However, the right hon. Lady may or may not be aware that the consultation on that closed on 14 June, and the Commission expects to consider its outcome on 24 June. We hope that the Leader of the House, who is very much new in his role but who I know will take these things very seriously, will ensure that any recommended proposal is brought before the House before the summer. I agree that it is not as quickly as we wanted—

**Mrs Miller rose—**

**Tom Brake:** And I am sure that is the point that the right hon. Lady is about to make.

**Mrs Miller:** I hope the House can forgive me for intervening again on the right hon. Gentleman, but he is actually the person who is most likely to be able to give us answers to questions because, unlike the Leader of the House, he is our representative on the Commission. The right hon. Gentleman talks about the importance of making progress on the second recommendation. May I gently remind him that not making progress is potentially unlawful? Surely the Commission does not need a consultation; it should simply be telling us what legal advice it has sought following the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s letter saying that it could be unlawful to block these non-recent cases. Might we actually be falling foul of our own law?

**Tom Brake:** I thank the right hon. Lady for that intervention. She will be aware that there has been legal advice of a different nature about what action we can take. However, I agree that we need to take action. I very much hope that the meeting on 24 June is the point at which a very clear way forward will be taken and that the House will then act on that before the summer recess. I do not want to get too political, but frankly we are not doing very much else in terms of the parliamentary timetable, so we have lots of opportunities to get the matter resolved, and I hope that we will do that before the summer recess.

The third point relates to an independent process for determining complaints of bullying, harassment or sexual harassment brought by House staff against Members of Parliament. I agree that we have not acted quickly enough. There were some quite engaged discussions, if not to say arguments, at the Commission about how to take it forward. I think that a satisfactory way forward has been determined: a staff team are going to look at it. We hope that we will be in a position to consider the output from that and choose a preferred option on which there will be a consultation in the autumn.

Again, I agree with the right hon. Lady that not enough action has been taken so far. However, there are things that are in train, including, as the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), mentioned, the Alison Stanley report that is flagging up actions that we should be taking. In terms of a timetable, I agree with the right hon. Member for Basingstoke that we need an action plan with precise dates on which the Commission can then be held to account on. The Commission is going to agree an action plan in response to the Alison Stanley report by 24 June. There are timescales available for some of the things that the right hon. Lady is worried about, and rightly so. Yes, the House has not moved as quickly as it should, but the Commission is taking action. It has agreed at least some timescales to which we are going to report.

A number of Members have rightly flagged up some concerns about the way that the Commission operates. We have heard that it is perhaps not as efficient, accountable, open or transparent as it should be, that it could come to conclusions more quickly, and so on. I have already mentioned to the Leader of the House the initiative suggested by the lay people, Jane McCall and Rima Makarem. When the previous Leader of the House was still in post, there was the idea that the Commission should collectively sit down and work out whether we are working as efficiently and effectively as we could be—how we could streamline the Commission’s processes and look again at the way it operates to ensure that it is meeting more frequently; that there is more clarity about the way that the decisions are taken; and that it becomes—much more businesslike in the way that it operates. That is certainly what I would like to see—

I am sure that the Leader of the House would want to support that initiative. I think there is a collective desire—

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride) indicated assent.**

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab) indicated assent.

**Tom Brake:** The shadow Leader of the House is nodding as well. I think there is a collective desire to ensure that we run the Commission more effectively than has perhaps been the case so far. I am sure that all the players on the Commission will want to support that initiative.

I agree that, as the right hon. Member for Basingstoke said, action has not been taken as swiftly as it should have been in relation to the Cox recommendations. However, there are some challenging deadlines, some of which I have mentioned, and they are on the record. We are meeting on 24 June, and there is an undertaking from the Commission to take decisions and agree action plans at that point. We are therefore very close to having to take some of these critical decisions. This is all on record and in *Hansard*, and many Members are here and have listened to this. I am sure that they will therefore want to know the outcome of the meeting on 24 June, and have assurances that the Commission will actually take the decisions that it has undertaken to take there in order to start to address the concerns that the right hon. Lady and, indeed, others here have about the lack of speed with which some of these decisions and actions are being taken.
Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Everyone is entitled to work free from harassment and abuse in an environment that promotes dignity and respect, yet sexual harassment and violence against women in politics is a long-standing phenomenon in the UK and in many other countries. I am proud to chair the all-party group on women in Parliament, the women’s caucus that works to encourage more women to come into political life and to support one another when they do. In the past couple of years, there have been a number of inquiries into the nature and extent of sexual harassment in Westminster, and the inquiry by Dame Laura Cox was pivotal in shining a light on the scale of sexual harassment, intimidation and bullying in Parliament.

The women’s caucus held a meeting in February with Dame Laura, and we were delighted that the then Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), was able to attend and reaffirm the commitment of the House to driving forward meaningful change in this area. We welcomed, and continue to welcome, the lead that the House has taken in ensuring ongoing reform and making Parliament a place where everyone is treated with dignity and respect. While the allegations of bullying and harassment in Parliament shocked all of us we were glad to see progress, with the new complaints and grievance policy now up and running. However, while there were welcome changes, such as the appointment of a new director of HR and a cultural transformation director, along with some interim changes on the Committee on Standards, Dame Laura conveyed to the group issues that have been raised with her by members of staff in both the Lords and the Commons about the implementation of her report. As chair of the all-party group, I would like to set out some of her concerns, bearing in mind that it is nine months since the publication of her report.

There were particular concerns about transparency and the rate of progress in implementing the recommendations. Dame Laura has received requests for amendments to the new independent complaints and grievance scheme to enable members of staff to bring complaints relating to historical allegations. Members of staff often find it difficult to make such complaints. There have also been suggestions to make sure that the processes for determining complaints brought by members of staff against MPs will be entirely independent and that MPs will play no part in those processes. I urge the new Leader of the House to look at those two specific suggestions and make sure that progress is made on those issues.

Dame Laura expressed concern about her recommendations becoming bogged down in process through, for example, the setting up of working groups and advisory panels. The feedback that she received from staff was that they were concerned about knowing who is responsible for what, and the dates by which actions should be taken. The problem of becoming bogged down in the process and detail, rather than seeing the big picture, was holding back progress.

We need better communication both to members of staff and to members of the public on the parliamentary website about what has been done and by whom. It was good that the House of Commons Commission published a statement on the way forward last week, but much more regular communication is needed for transparency. The biggest concern expressed to Dame Laura by staff was that some MPs and senior management—and, indeed, some very senior MPs—are prevaricating and delaying. It has even been suggested that that is with the aim of attempting to water down the recommendations. Delay can only exacerbate the lack of trust and confidence of members of staff that there will be fundamental change and that recommendations will be carried out. Any delays can only worsen the level of public confidence in the House’s ability to correct past errors and implement fundamental change. As I have said, these accusations were passed on to Dame Laura by members of staff.

We know from research by the Fawcett Society that the level of public concern about the nature and extent of allegations is very high, with 73% of both men and women believing that there needs to be change in how unwanted sexual harassment is dealt with in politics. If there are delays, they will only continue to undermine the legitimacy and authority of our own Parliament. There must be greater transparency and greater accountability. These recommendations are important, and progress needs to be seen.

I have a couple of other points to make. Having worked in politics for a decade both in Europe and then here, I see how it is very stressful. We in this place face very difficult decisions. We are living at a time of great change, with great challenges. We are living in the middle of an industrial revolution—the digital revolution—with huge demographic changes putting great pressure on our public services. We see the generational challenge of addressing climate change, which we must act on top of now, or the next generation will not have a planet as we know it for the future. On top of that, we in this place of course face the overlaying challenge of resolving Brexit.

It is therefore not surprising that politicians are under great stress and can be snappy. However, there is a difference between being stressed and snappy and continual harassment of staff, which is the allegation laid in front of us. There is work we could do to alleviate the level of stress in this place. I have talked about the lack of predictability of the parliamentary day, and other Parliaments have managed to find ways to resolve that, which does distress the working environment. I was very pleased to take part in the gender-sensitive Parliament audit last year, which made many recommendations about how to make this Parliament a more welcoming and sensitive place for Members, staff and those who work here, especially those with families or other caring responsibilities. I am very pleased to be on the Sub-Committee of the Women and Equalities Committee that is looking at implementing those recommendations.

I really feel strongly that I do not want to leave the impression that women are not wanted in this place. There are more women on these Benches in Parliament than ever before. Women make a huge difference in their constituencies, and they make a huge difference in Westminster. We need more of them here, and we must support them. In the news today has been the need to make sure we are supporting women, especially when they are expecting a baby or when they have a baby. No woman should have to choose between having a family and standing for political office, and I am very sorry to hear the concerns of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy).
However, I have been in touch today with a number of women MPs who have recently had a baby or are expecting a baby very soon, and some have commented on the great support they are being given by their colleagues, constituents and staff. Indeed, the Minister with responsibility for the constitution, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), who is currently on maternity leave, has commented that proxy voting is a good start. She has been in touch digitally today on these matters to remind us, at the same time as she is breastfeeding, that it is National Breastfeeding Week. We are introducing measures to make sure that our women and our men can have such flexibility. Again, I thank the former Leader of the House for her efforts in introducing proxy voting.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend is making a really important point. It is really important that the message that goes out from this place is that women should be MPs. Having children should not be an impediment to having a career in Parliament. My youngest was three when I joined—Madam Deputy Speaker, you have probably got a better story than that. Even back then, in 2005, it was very possible to do that. I would want to offer every support to any Member who felt that it was difficult.

Vicky Ford: I thank my right hon. Friend for that valuable point. I say again that there are more women in this place than ever before and they make a hugely valuable contribution. There are many women in this place who have just become mums or are soon to become mums—on that point, I note my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch), most fondly. We must make sure that mums and dads have the flexibility to take parental leave and to be supported during the time when they are expecting a baby. Every constituency in this country is different and every Member of Parliament represents their constituency in a different way. We need to make sure that each MP has the flexibility to make sure that their constituents continue to be represented when they are taking parental leave.

I want to make one final point about harassment. Harassment of politicians and our staff does not just happen in the physical world. It happens increasingly online, and there has been exponential growth in that online abuse. Action must be taken to stop the online harassment of women involved in politics—and it is women who are harassed more.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Lady is making a very important point about online harassment. Does she agree that dealing expeditiously with the report, being transparent about it and getting on with it would set an example that might help to break the logjam of inaction on online abuse elsewhere?

Vicky Ford: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We must move on with the Cox report. It must be implemented and there must be transparency. For the future, we must also deal with other areas where women, and men, are harassed, although it affects women particularly. There is a level of intimidation that is turning women off standing for public office, and that is therefore a direct attack on our democracy and on the democracy of the future. Britain needs to take a lead. The rest of the world is watching us. We must make sure that this Government do not allow this to continue into the next election.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), I would say that the hon. Lady is absolutely right. There are a small number of women here in Parliament who have become mothers while being Members of Parliament. Those of us who have done it know that it is a challenge, but it is far from impossible. It is very worthwhile, and it is really important that we encourage more of our sisters to follow this path, and that we do not let them be put off by anything.

4.33 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This place has a culture of “deference, subservience, acquiescence and silence, in which bullying, harassment and sexual harassment have been able to thrive and have long been tolerated and concealed.” Those were the words of Dame Laura Cox when her report was published in October 2018. Let us be honest with ourselves: if we received that report about any employer in our constituency, we would be on the phone to them straight away demanding action. That is why we have had so many Members making similar points today.

Such was the shocking extent of those revelations, just nine days later the House of Commons Commission agreed to implement the recommendations of the Cox report in full and without delay. There was agreement across the House that something should happen as soon as possible. House of Commons staff bravely came forward, shared their stories and gave evidence to Dame Laura. They felt that they had been listened to and that their efforts had not been in vain. There was a sense that we were beginning to see a real change in the culture of this place.

Like many Members, I am frustrated that, nearly a year since the House adopted the independent complaints and grievance scheme and nearly nine months since the House accepted Dame Laura’s three principal recommendations, we still have a long way to go. It should be to all our shame that we are not much, if any, further along than where we were seven or eight months ago. There is little or no evidence that the culture of acquiescence and silence is being actively challenged. The sense of urgency has, I feel, dissipated from this debate.

The House of Commons Commission is responsible for the implementation of Dame Laura’s recommendations, so it is right that the commission should answer to this House about the lack of progress, engagement and information to date. We are told that things are happening, but they are clearly not happening quickly enough. I wholeheartedly agree with the motion. The reputation of the House has been further damaged by the lack of progress made. I came to this place to fight for better working conditions for everyone in this country. That includes people who work in this place. It is only right that we get our own house in order.

We should be an exemplar of best practice. We should be the standard that others look up to and try to emulate. We are so far from that at present and I feel very frustrated about that on a personal level. More importantly, I am frustrated for all those who contributed in good faith to Dame Laura’s report, particularly those who have been the victims of bullying and harassment. They have shown such bravery in coming forward to take part in the inquiry, even under the condition of
anonymity, to record their experiences in the hope that by coming forward they would change things for the better. Men and women, former and current colleagues, have been let down again and again by this House, and we are still being let down now. People who have waited years are still waiting to see the changes we need to come forward.

Sometimes I think people do not appreciate just how debilitating, damaging and distressing it is to go into work every day not knowing what it is you are going to face. I was an employment lawyer before I came to this place, so I saw clients every day who faced intolerable workplaces, but at least there was a way forward. What my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) said earlier about the power imbalance is absolutely right. Every workplace has power imbalances, but the difference here is that our power is pretty much absolute. She is absolutely right that we need to give away some of that power to get a sense of fairness and balance in this process.

We were all clear when we met here in November that we needed to move forward quickly and that people had waited long enough. Swift action on the two outstanding principal recommendations—the historical cases and the independent process—is needed immediately. We all seem to agree that that is needed, so I have to ask: what is stopping that happening much sooner? I am aware that there has now been a consultation on historical allegations, which concluded last week. The proposals, which set out that non-recent cases will be treated in exactly the same way as the current independent procedure, with the same assessors, steps and decision-makers, will, I hope, ensure that whoever brings a complaint will have an equality of process moving forward. Given that what has been consulted on is exactly the same as the current procedure, I do not know why it took so long for the proposals to come forward. If we are to have the same system, we should have been implementing it a long time ago. It is only when the system is up and running for all complaints that trust will be restored.

I am also deeply concerned about the lack of progress towards meeting the priority of non-involvement of MPs in the independent complaints process. This was in response to the specific recommendation that the House considered the most effective way to ensure the process for determining complaints on bullying, harassment or sexual harassment brought by House staff against Members of Parliament would be an entirely independent process in which Members of Parliament play no part. That is pretty clear—we all know what it means. The Commission agreed last December that a small working group should be set up to examine and report on that recommendation, but seven months on and it was only last week that any progress was made. A staff team is to be set up that might report in the autumn—a year after the initial recommendations—and only then would the Commission consider its proposals. Goodness knows when it will come back to the House for us to vote on implementing any changes.

There are serious questions to be asked about what has been happening for the last seven months. How can staff have faith that further announcements will be forthcoming? It feels like someone is dragging their feet. We need to move this on much more quickly. How can we give the impression that this is a priority for people in this place? There is no legislation coming forward at the moment, and we know that the Government are in a holding pattern until they sort out the leadership. We could be using this time to implement these recommendations, to have a proper debate in here and to get them on the books sooner rather than later.

The culture identified in the Cox report as widespread, enduring and profound is still preventing progress. Many Members have rightly expressed concern about the delays, and we are told that there are working groups and so on. The Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), is right that the nub is the lack of clear accountability—it is not clear who is responsible for implementing the recommendations. Well, we are all responsible, and we all have to do a bit better. We need concrete action.

We have to get this right. Staff feel this is being kicked into the long grass. This does nothing to reassure them that the problems with the culture identified in the Cox report will be addressed. We are not asking for the earth; we are asking for something that is commonplace in every working environment up and down the country. In accepting Dame Laura’s report and agreeing to implement the recommendations in full, we have already agreed what needs to be done—the clue is in the title: it is an independent procedure. Why can we not get on and get that independent procedure in place? The failure to act swiftly only damages further the reputation of this place.

One way to instil confidence in this system is to make sure people know that what is happening is effective. I am not suggesting we name individuals who have had complaints lodged against them, but if we at least knew that those complaints had been upheld or dealt with and that offenders had been sanctioned, we would know that something was happening.

I want briefly to return to the issue of having a truly independent system of adjudication for complaints. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) mentioned this. All political parties should look at their own internal processes at the same time as this work is ongoing. If we ever finally have independent processes in this place, we could find ourselves with different processes being operated against Members for essentially the same types of complaint. As far as we know, the new independent procedure covers everyone working in both Houses, whether paid or not, and anyone with a parliamentary pass, and it covers bullying and harassment committed while on the parliamentary estate, in constituency offices or when carrying out parliamentary work.

The third of those is a bit vague. What covers parliamentary work? Someone wanting to bring a complaint of sexual harassment might have to go through an entirely different process depending on where the offence took place. Where does an act committed at a party conference come into it? Is that parliamentary duties? What if the victim is not a passholder but is harassed in a hotel room? What if the offense was committed in the course of parliamentary duties? Where do we draw the line? We want to avoid having different processes depending on where the offence takes place and who the victim is. We have an opportunity to get consistency across the board.
Sadly, there is ample evidence that political parties are prone to be tempted to make decisions about such complaints on a political basis, rather than on the basis of whether that behaviour needs to be dealt with. That has applied to all political parties for as long as politics has been in existence, but that does not make it right. If we do not get our own house in order and deal with bullying and harassment in our own parties, whoever has done it, we have no right to lecture other employers about how they treat their staff. That is why I believe that there needs to be a root-and-branch review of all political parties’ complaints processes and an acceptance that we need total transparency and total independence. If we carry on as we are, we shall run the risk that members of our parties will not be dealt with impartially when serious allegations are made—that they will not be dealt with as they would be dealt with here—or, at the very least, that there will be a perception that they are not being dealt with impartially. That could be as corrosive as not dealing with the allegations at all.

We have to think about the message that the low attendance in the Chamber is sending to staff. Where is this issue on our list of priorities? We should be fighting to ensure that everyone who works here, and everyone in every workplace in the country, is treated with dignity and respect, free from bullying and harassment. We need to accept that we have a long way to go, and that we really must find an answer and move this forward as soon as possible.

4.45 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), for not being able to be present at the start of her speech. I was able to catch up with her remarks, and I think that she spoke on behalf of all of us in the House.

I thank Dame Laura Cox for leading an extremely important inquiry, and for producing such a comprehensive report containing such sensible and achievable recommendations. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), the former Leader of the House, for her work in beginning to implement those recommendations. She was clearly right when she highlighted the need for a significant culture change in this place. I also pay tribute to her for her acknowledgement that it will not happen overnight, but it needs to happen, and to happen without delay. The time that has already passed has been too long for those who work in this building, who work with us and who support us, but who may be subject to behaviour that would be clearly unacceptable not only in this Parliament, but in any other workplace.

Bullying is vile and horrid. Unfortunately, it appears to be becoming more and more of an issue—a visible issue—in wider society. Across society, there seems to be, in many cases, not only a breakdown in what might previously have been thought of as common courtesies but a breakdown in basic decency. It is a question of fundamental values: how we should treat each other, and what is the correct way in which to work with not just those to whom we are close, but those with whom we have professional contact.

As Members of Parliament, we clearly have a particular role in setting an example of—I was going to say “good behaviour”, but behaviour that is acceptable. We should not be expecting thanks or congratulations merely for not doing things that would be rightly condemned if they were done by anyone in any role in almost any business, any school, or any workplace in any other organisation anywhere in our country.

When we talk about bullying in the context of schoolchildren, we refer to the devastating effect that it has on their mental health and development, but bullying is an issue that affects people at all stages of life, regardless of their backgrounds, and it is increasingly affecting people’s mental health. Technology and social media seem to be increasing the prevalence of bullying, but it is even more noticeable that the reach of that bullying and abuse continues to expand so that, in many instances, victims cannot feel safe, whether in the workplace or at home. If a person cannot feel safe from being abused by someone who—as other Members have said—has an improper power advantage and is abusing that imbalance in the relationship, how can that person be happy and continue to function on not only a professional level but a personal level? So, yes, we in this place must be setting an example to people in the wider country, not showing people how to be bullying and undermine others.

As has been said, politics is a very peculiar environment. It clearly attracts people with high passions and people who feel very strongly about their beliefs. It arouses those passions. People get hot under the collar. It makes people’s blood boil. People rarely end up agreeing with each other. But high passions and strongly held views cannot be an excuse for unacceptable bullying and abusive behaviour. It is not acceptable for my children at home and it is not acceptable for those of us who claim to represent our constituents here in the mother of all Parliaments.

If we are to resolve the issue of bullying and harassment in Parliament, the recommendations in Dame Laura’s report must be embraced. The report needs to be implemented wholeheartedly and we must enact a seismic shift in culture. We must develop that culture of respect that we speak of for our society. We must embody a culture of respect in Parliament because everybody who works in Parliament—whether Members of Parliament, staff, Officers of the House, contractors, journalists or anyone else who has reason to work in this place—has a right to be able to go about that work and their lives without fear of abuse or risk of bullying and harassment.

In many ways, we see a parallel now with the stories around the expenses scandal a decade ago, very different though those issues are. Both cases threaten to completely undermine what remaining respect and confidence people have in our democratic structures, institutions and political system. In both cases, it is simply unacceptable to try to appeal to some peculiar culture in Parliament, saying “People outside just don’t understand what it’s like. It’s always been that way.” Whether or not it has always been that way, if it should not be that way, we have to make sure it is not that way, and that means we need to take action now and to make sure that processes are in place so that the victims or potential victims of this behaviour can be protected and those who are guilty of this unacceptable behaviour can be held to account.

As with the expenses scandal, it is clearly inappropriate for Members of Parliament to think that they can mark their own homework. That is why the independent nature of this body is so important. That is such an
important recommendation from Dame Laura, so I hope that the Commission will ensure it is implemented swiftly.

This has been a painful and unpleasant experience for Parliament as an institution, but it has been a far more painful and unpleasant experience for those who have been the victims of bullying and harassment here, and whether that is from other MPs or from staff should not matter; they should have that level of protection. And it has been painful, unpleasant and unacceptable regardless of whether it happened before or after this new code of conduct came into place. That is why it is essential that the issues of historical abuse and bullying are properly addressed. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) talked about retrospective regulation, and we must be wary of the risk of retrospective regulation and rules coming in that hold people to a standard they could not reasonably have expected to be held to, but this is not the situation on the whole: most of these cases do not involve some obscure administrative or procedural requirement that we are expecting people to sign up to that we would not have expected them to meet a decade ago. In almost all cases, this is about basic standards of decency, where, regardless of whether the code of conduct was in force at the time, it is perfectly reasonable to expect Members to have abided by those standards. Those who did not should expect to answer for that, and whether what happened was 18 months ago, three years ago or longer, those who have been the victims of abuse, where the evidence is there to support those allegations, should have the right to have their claims heard and, where appropriate, there may be arguments for redress.

We really need these recommendations, including for an independent body and for an effective system to handle historical cases, to be implemented without further unnecessary delay. I know that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House feels strongly about these issues, as his predecessor did. We all call on the House of Commons Commission to do everything possible to make sure that the changes are introduced, implemented and enforced, so that we can all come behind the report and the recommendations made by Dame Laura, endorsed by the House and so badly needed by so many people who work for us in the Houses of Parliament.

4.56 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood), and I apologise for missing the opening speech, as I was attending a polling station at that time.

Like many in the Chamber, I very much welcome the good work undertaken by Dame Laura Cox and the former Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonsire (Andrea Leadsom). She was emphatic in her support for Dame Laura’s report and eager to see its recommendations implemented. I am sure that her successor is equally keen. While a fundamental change in policy will always require time and patience, I feel very strongly that we must prioritise its implementation, as has been said so often this afternoon. I believe that that is essential if we are to regain the trust of the House staff and, equally importantly, the wider public. Indeed, I am convinced that it is also key to regaining public trust more generally in politics and politicians.

The implementation delays are unacceptable. As Members, I am sure that we all agree that the staff of this House do an absolutely remarkable job for all of us, often under intense pressure. Much of what goes on in this place involves some level of stress or pressure—not least time pressure—which is on the shoulders of parliamentarians or House staff. Often, it is indeed a shared pressure. We are all fallible as human beings, but what we must avoid, and what Dame Laura sought to highlight in her report, is the almost casual manner in which this wicked sort of bullying, harassment and behaviour seemed to have become endemic in this place. I imagine that this was sadly supported by a blind-eye policy adopted by those around them. Stress and pressure are no excuse for an underlying culture of bullying and harassment. As Members, we must remember that the tentacles of bullying and harassment go beyond the workplace to the domestic environment, social lives and general wellbeing of the individuals who are subject to bullying and harassment. We must never, ever condone any such activity.

It is clear that there was little confidence in the erstwhile Valuing Others policy, introduced as far back as 2007, or the Respect policy of 2011, however well intended they were. In fact, it is frankly astonishing that there was no formal avenue for dealing with complaints before these policies came into effect, or indeed, that even after their introduction, it seemed that the somewhat old-fashioned and antiquated “quiet word” in one’s ear here or there was sufficient. That is not acceptable any more. We can hardly be surprised, therefore, that there was little confidence in the policies or their implementation. However, by swift action we must be satisfied that the implementation of the Cox recommendations. There are indeed only three: there is not a raft of important recommendations to implement. The introduction of the independent complaints and grievance scheme marks a positive first step, but we must not lose our momentum. We must overcome the inertia that we have experienced to date.

Earlier this month, the House of Commons Commission confirmed that agreement had been reached on the implementation of the Cox recommendations. I am, however, concerned about the treatment of historical cases before June 2017. I see no acceptable justification or reason as to why it is impossible to assess historical incidents with similar accuracy as recent cases, and I hope that that decision will be reconsidered or revisited.

Bullying and harassment have no place in the House of Commons or, indeed, in any area of public life whatsoever. It is abundantly clear that we have failed the staff in the past, and we must not fail them in the future. However, the solution lies not just in the implementation of the Cox recommendations but more fundamentally in the behaviour of ourselves as parliamentarians. In closing, I suggest that we as parliamentarians we would do well to listen to the wise words of Robert Burns, who wrote as follows:

“O wad some Power the giftie gie us, to see oursels as ither see us!”

5.1 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): It is a rare pleasure to follow immediately after my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant),
especially when he quotes Burns so beautifully. I, too, must apologise to the House and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) for missing any part of the debate that has been so impassioned and that I fully appreciated. That could have profound consequences for the health of our democracy.

I would also like to repeat the sentiments of many who have spoken today by offering my gratitude to Dame Laura Cox for her tireless work in putting together this report. Her dedication to making this House a better, safer and more respectful place for everyone who works here has been indispensable, and I am glad that she will continue to be consulted by the staff team that will lead on producing options for implementing the recommendations in her report. In addition, I would like to congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke and the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), as we are getting used to having to call the former Leader of the House. She—for pretty much the same reason, I am afraid—but had I waited until after this time, I might have missed the ballot, so I hope that the House will forgive me.

I am glad that Members on both sides of the House share an aspiration to make things better, but we must do so as quickly as we can, and in a manner that is thorough and robust and that properly safeguards staff on the parliamentary estate for years to come. I therefore welcome the progress that has been made so far on implementing the Cox report’s recommendations, including the abandonment of the Valuing Others and Respect policies. I am disappointed that more progress has not yet been made on the other recommendations—on historical or non-recent allegations, in particular—but it is my hope that those recommendations will be implemented in a rigorous manner in the very near future.

It is vital that we act on the recommendations because I firmly believe that Parliament must be accessible. Between the cases of bullying and harassment on the parliamentary estate and the ongoing proliferation of online abuse, such as the kind described by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), towards not just MPs, but people who have the temerity to appear online in support of their MP or other MPs and all those who work in wider politics, I fear that more and more people may come to the conclusion that politics, whether that means holding office or working on the estate or in a constituency office, may not be for them. That could have profound consequences for the health of our democracy.

We must therefore continue to work together, quickly and thoroughly, to make Parliament and politics truly accessible again, and that includes delivering on the recommendations of the Cox report. It is clear from this debate that there is genuine commitment from all sides to achieve that, but it is vital that we put today’s words into renewed action tomorrow and every day until we have achieved the objective of making these Houses of Parliament a safer and more respectful place for everyone who works here.

5.5 pm

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) on securing this important debate. I also thank other parliamentary colleagues for contributing to what has been an excellent debate that has given us the opportunity to kick around some issues that now go back almost two years.

The major theme is that there seems to be some slowness in execution or a paucity of action around some of the conclusions and recommendations of Dame Laura Cox’s report. I do not take great exception to that, because the report was produced in October and its conclusions were accepted in a debate in November, and it is now only June of the following year, which is not particularly unusual. I am pretty used to the glacial pace that this House operates under and to the speed at which things get done, so I do not find it at all unreasonable that we have waited some seven or eight months to get to this stage.

I want to go through conclusions one by one to see what progress we have made. As everybody has said, Dame Laura made only the three recommendations. I think we have established that the first has been dealt with, which was to abandon the Valuing Others and Respect policies. The second recommendation was, of course, that the independent complaints and grievance scheme should be amended to ensure that historical cases can be heard, and we have heard a few contributions, most notably from the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), who represents the House of Commons Commission, that progress is being made on that.

I declare an interest in that I have been involved in the ICGS since its inception, and I have just recently been appointed to the House of Commons Commission—an august body on which I look forward to serving. The members of the ICGS group take things seriously when we are presented with them, and it was important that the second recommendation was considered with full intent, which is what we have done. I have seen the shadow Leader of the House shaking her head about all that, and we had a series of meetings just to see how to respond. We said that we would move forward, so we had a consultation, and we are trying to ensure that we move forward and that the recommendations on that specific point are accepted by the House.

The matter will be debated further at a forthcoming meeting of the House of Commons Commission, which will be my first, and I hope that there will be progress. I therefore do not see any big issues with the second recommendation, but if I am missing something, I am
more than happy for the right hon. Member for Basingstoke to intervene and tell me where the drawbacks are and where something is being lost.

The third recommendation is that the process for determining complaints should be independent and free from any involvement from Members of Parliament and, again, I have seen progress there. There is a complicated issue relating to how we deal with historical cases, and there were delicate negotiations with the Committee on Standards as to how things would be progressed. I am disappointed that the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who chairs the Committee, is not here, because I am pretty certain that she would reiterate that it is important to get things right when making really important decisions about how we operate. I know that there were real issues with how to do that, and that legality and other things had to be considered. I think we are making steady progress, and there is a view that independence will be created—no one in this House would deny that.

I see progress in all these things. It might not be fast enough for the right hon. Member for Basingstoke and other Members, but I am ticking all these recommendations. I am ticking the top recommendation, with two thirds of a tick for the other ones. I understand there is a real desire to get things going, but we are not doing all that bad.

Mrs Miller: Would the hon. Gentleman be satisfied if employers in his constituency reacted so glacially, to use his term, to important recommendations about the safety of his constituents? I am not sure he would. I also think he needs to reflect on whether the two-thirds ticks he is giving those two elements actually make any difference to staff in this place. It might make a difference to him and to members of the Commission but, if we were to ask staff, they will not have noticed a blind bit of difference.

Pete Wishart: The right hon. Lady makes an important point, but what is more important to me when it comes to these things is that they are done right for the constituents I represent, for the staff I employ in this House and for my obligations and responsibilities as a Member of Parliament.

It is important that we get this right, which is why some of the conversations and negotiations that are required have to be played out so we get to the right solution, and I believe we are getting there. We owe it to the House to get to the right place. We have to make progress, and we have to deal with this.

I remember when all this started. There was a huge flurry of activity, with party leaders getting together under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister. There was an urgency about it. Something had to be done.

The energy seems to have been sucked out of that initiative, and I do not know why. The Chamber is a bit busier now but, at its busiest, I counted only 15 Members here to discuss these important issues. At one point during the debate we were down to seven Back-Bench colleagues listening to these important proceedings.

I suggest that somehow we are not getting the message out to other colleagues, and I am grateful to everyone who has been here. The contributions have been sincere and heartfelt, but we are not exciting the House with these proposals. We have to do more to ensure that Members are engaged with this process, because it is about us. It is about our behaviour and how we respond to staff and to the parliamentary community.

Tom Brake: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that perhaps one way of getting the attention of Members would be to act on my earlier suggestion—in fact, it was recommended by Alison Stanley—that all Members should be required to do the Valuing Everyone programme? That would draw people’s attention to it.

Pete Wishart: I will address Alison Stanley’s recommendations, which are important. The six-month review of the ICGS is important, and we are all grateful for her contribution and the sterling leadership that she offered. Again, I see the shadow Leader of the House nodding her head in agreement, because Alison Stanley demonstrated real leadership on these issues.

One of Alison Stanley’s main recommendations, and one of the things that was changed in the scheme—this is why these things are so important to get right—is that the training will now be compulsory for all Members. In the early stages of the working group’s report, it was suggested that the training would be voluntary. We tried to do as much as possible to encourage Members to undertake the training, but now it is to be mandatory. I know the right hon. Gentleman did the training yesterday, because he did it with two of my staff. I brought them all the way down from Perth to ensure they would be among the first to be properly trained in the scheme.

My staff’s recollection of the event is that he was an assiduous and energetic collaborator in the exercise, on which I congratulate him.

Along with the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House, I was supposed to be the first to undertake the training, but I had responsibilities elsewhere. I say today—I will be held to account for this—that I will undergo the training at the earliest opportunity. Every Member should ensure they do the training, because it is important. We have 15,000 people working on this estate. We have huge obligations and responsibilities to ensure that everybody who enters it, be they those who work here or visitors, is treated with respect and dignity. Regardless of everything else that happens in this place, the one thing we can all agree and unite on is that there should be zero tolerance of any inappropriate behaviour by anybody who works on this estate, be they people who work for Members of Parliament or others working in any capacity across this House.

I served on the ICGS group, and I join in the tributes to the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom)—I always find it curious when “south” and “north” are in the same constituency name, but I think I said that about right. She, too, was really dedicated to this and provided inspired leadership for the report. Her determination and sheer willingness to get this through ensured that we got to this stage. If anything is going to be her legacy, it will be the fact that we have been able to progress to this stage on the ICGS.

We have just had Alison Stanley’s six-month review, and I have already said how highly I regard her and the work she has done. All of us on the ICGS group are eternally grateful for all that. She made important recommendations, and it was right that the ICGS was...
reviewed at six months. There is another commitment, as you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, to have it reviewed again in 18 months. I will say again today that I am happy to continue to serve. I will just talk about my association with the work that has been done so far, but I look forward to serving that committee and coming back in a year’s time just to see where we are on it.

The most important recommendation was the one mentioned by the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, which was that training will be mandatory. We had a look at some of the processes that have been set up, for example the independent helpline. There is a general conclusion that it is working satisfactorily. The number of people who have sought help and advice via the independent line is really encouraging; so many people have now seen this as a feature they can go to in order to secure the assistance that they feel they require, so we know that it is working. All the way through the ICGS process, we have looked at things to do with confidentiality, with the involvement of Members of Parliament—the so-called “marking your own homework”—and with ensuring that we make progress on historical cases. We have had countless debates and arguments about all these features. We have got to a place where we are reasonably okay.

On the historical cases, I believe we are getting there. I think we are going in the right direction. We were probably shaken a little by legal advice we got about how a new scheme would be applied to people who had not signed up to it. We all questioned the quality of that legal advice and opinion—initially we had advice we were prepared to accept, which said that it could not be. Dame Laura Cox could not care less about that, and, as a former High Court judge, she is probably right; opinions probably do not come greater when it comes to this thing. She said that she was having nothing to do with that and historical cases would have to be looked at. That was a clear recommendation to the independent ICGS group to look at this and incorporate it. As I have said, there is a real and absolute commitment to do that.

I will not go through the progress on the other issues which Dame Laura makes recommendations, because, as I have said, I think we are getting there, although I know we might not be doing so with the speed that some in this House would like or to their satisfaction. I think we will get there, and I believe that within a short period we will get to the point where we will have implemented all the recommendations made by Dame Laura.

There is one feature I do not think we have made enough progress on, and I continually come back to this. I am referring to the culture of this place and how this House operates, how it appears, how it feels and what it expresses about dynamic power relationships and arrangements. We have to do more work on this. Banning alcohol in the Members’ Tea Room and in the cafeteria was to be it—that is utterly ridiculous. We are talking about one small bottle or glassful of wine, but a ban was seen as attacking the culture in this place. I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, but it is almost laughable that that was the only positive and concrete proposal that was implemented. That is just nonsense.

We have to look more at how this place does things and we have a blueprint for that in Sarah Childs’ guide, “The Good Parliament”. If Members have not read it, I ask them to please have a look at it, because it suggests a number of things we could do, even down to how we light the place and how we arrange and put together meeting spaces. This place practically oozes patriarchy out of its statues, paintings and walls. The new types of arrangements that we need to put in place to become the modern Parliament that we need to be are almost impossible to design because of the way we arrange this place and the way the House is structured.

I have suggested a number of proposals. The way we address each other in this place is ridiculous. I cannot call people by their first name. In how many other places in the world can people not do that? I was born with a name and I am quite happy for people to use it. I have to wear a tie in this place and be dressed in a suit like this. The Speaker of the House is responsible for dressing me. The last person to have been responsible for dressing me to go out was my mum, yet we allow the Speaker to define a dress code for male Members of Parliament. It is utterly ridiculous. I know that the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington would tell me to dispense with the tie, because he is an example of doing that, but how long did that change take? We have all these weird things and gentlemen of this House are expected to dress in a particular way that serves no purpose whatsoever, other than to try to suggest a sort of authority.

**Tom Brake:** The hon. Gentleman has just noticed that the tie was perhaps not a good example to go for, but I encourage him and his colleagues, who have been assiduous in pushing the idea that the new temporary Chamber that is to be established in Richmond House should be used to test some of the different arrangements in this Chamber that he and I would like to see.

**Pete Wishart:** The tie example was a bad one, even though that change took a long time, as I said. The right hon. Gentleman is a proud exponent of the non-tie arrangements and decorum of this place. I do support the idea that there are things we could do. If we are to move out of this place, why are we moving to a temporary place that does exactly the same things and looks, feels and appears to be the same place? Why not try to do something different? I know the right hon. Gentleman has been paying attention to my clear and detailed agenda to replace the current Speaker. The proposals I have put forward include things such as electronic voting. Let us try to bring this place into the 21st century—

**Tom Brake:** And they are related to the Cox recommendations.

**Pete Wishart:** As the right hon. Gentleman says from a sedentary position, my proposals relate to the Cox recommendations. Can we please do more to look at how we do business in the House, how this place feels and how it looks to people who come into the House? For goodness’ sake, we still have a place down the corridor called the Lords. The forelock tugging and cap doffing goes on, and there are still people called Lords and Ladies. What does that say to the people who come to this place from throughout the country? That somehow these are our betters—these are people who are titled, and they run the country.

**Mrs Miller:** Earlier in his remarks, the hon. Gentleman alluded to the fact that he is a member of the House of Commons Commission. It will be noticeable to people listening to the debate that the two individuals who are
members of the Commission are far more positive about the progress that has been made on Cox than the rest of us are. Will the hon. Gentleman remind me and other Members who put him in his position on the House of Commons Commission? It would be helpful for the House to be aware of that.

Pete Wishart: Ah, that is a very good point, and I will answer it fully and comprehensively. I do not know who said it, but of course people should be elected to the House of Commons Commission, and that is what we should do for everybody in the management of the House.

I would go further than that, because a key feature of the ICGS was the fact that staff members and trade union representatives were involved—representatives of the general staff of the House—and they did two important things. First, they gave a voice to the members of staff who work in all parts of the House. They made probably the most useful and positive contributions throughout that whole experience. Secondly, they had a restraining effect on the Members of Parliament who served on the group. We were somehow better behaved because members of staff were part of the group, and it did not feel like a bunch of MPs getting together and shouting at each other in the most appalling and useless way.

I make this appeal: as well as reforming the Commission to include elections for Members of Parliament, we should also have staff members on it. The Commission is responsible for the management of the House, and therefore it should include people from the whole House community. As I look around the House, I do not see a great deal of agreement on that point, but I hope that Members of Parliament might actually give the idea some thought. Let us run the House in a way that represents the people who work in this place. I think that is a reasonable suggestion.

We will have a debate about the future of the Commission, and I look forward to being part of it. I say to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke that, unfortunately, I cannot be held responsible for any earlier decisions—I have not been to a meeting yet. I am looking forward to going to my first one on 24 June. She is looking at me as if I were responsible for some of the decisions that have been made, but I cannot claim that responsibility yet. If she wants to come back in a few months’ time, she can blame me for all the terrible things that are going on in the Commission if we have not managed to get some of the reforms through.

I am all for reforming the House of Commons Commission. It would be good to have a positive debate about the type of management structure that we want in this House. Perhaps it would be an idea to include the Backbench Business Committee in this, as it seems to be getting all the business just now. The hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) might as well be the Leader of the House rather than the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), given that he practically determines and dictates everything that is going on, including this debate. Perhaps it would be useful to encourage him to hold a debate on the House of Commons Commission. We would be able to hear the range of opinions about how we can make this House a more effective, democratic and useful type of organisation. One thing that we have to conclude is that this organisation has issues and difficulties. Is the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire the man to fix them? Probably not. We need everybody in the House to be involved and engaged in that debate, and I hope that we have it.

Finally, there is the ownership issue. This is a very important issue, and it might get to the heart of some of the frustrations and difficulties that Members have expressed throughout the course of this debate. It is about who owns what when it comes to the plethora of initiatives—I say plethora because, in my view, we have too many things going on. I have been a member of the ICGS group, so I am familiar with that work and I know what we are doing in that regard. I also have a good sense about the direction that we should take and the type of service that we should deliver. Obviously I know Dame Laura’s report, because I have read it and attended these debates on it, but then there is also Gemma White’s review. Another review is also going on in the House of Lords. We have four initiatives, which seem to be happening simultaneously with different terms of reference. Although most of them seem to be working quite collegially with each other, we are creating confusion and difficulties. We need to look at how we can bring these initiatives together under one work stream, which will make it sensible not just for Members of Parliament but for people across the House.

If there is something that we can take away from today, it is how we can start to combine these initiatives. Then we must decide who owns this. It looks as though it will be the Commission—I accept my responsibilities and obligations when it comes to that—but perhaps the Commission is not the best place to look at the ownership of all this. This is just a thought—it is not a thought-out suggestion or proposal—but perhaps we should be looking at some sort of Select Committee, some sort of new elected authority, that would have ownership over these initiatives and be charged by the House to look specifically at these issues. I think this is important enough for us to do that. I know that the right hon. Member for Basingstoke chairs the Women and Equalities Committee, but perhaps we need something beyond that, which could possibly include our friends from that high and mighty place to which we always have to pay due deference—that is if they deem to be part of something with us humble directly elected Members. I put that forward as a suggestion. I will think more about it and see whether I can come back with a firmed-up proposal.

I say to colleagues throughout the House that they should not despair. We have come a long way. We need to do more to reactivate interest from colleagues across the House, and the mandatory training will help to do that once people are asked to do something that is perhaps part of a more general package. Steady progress is being made. I do not share the great sense of disappointment that the right hon. Lady and others have expressed about whether we are getting there, because I am confident that we are.

It has been an absolute pleasure, privilege and humbling experience to have been involved in the conversations and debates on this issue. [Interruption.] I see that the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) has returned to the Chamber; I did pay tribute to her for her leadership in all this. I think we all bear the scars of the past year and a half when it comes to these matters, but it has been an excellent experience
to work with others across the House, including the shadow Leader of the House. We are getting there. I would appeal for just a little bit more patience, because the most important thing is that we get it right.

Valerie Vaz: I was just coming to who appoints us to the Commission, so maybe I can answer my hon. Friend’s question. As a member of the shadow Cabinet, I am appointed by the Leader of the Opposition; the Leader of the House is in the Cabinet, so he is appointed by the Prime Minister. We serve on the Commission because the Commission is responsible for the House staff, and this is related to the business of the House.

I think that the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington was appointed before I was. It was appropriate to have him as the voice of the Commission because he is not a Member of a main party. Obviously, there is a staff to support him and, no, he is not paid. I hope that clarifies the situation. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley has a lot of power, as she is a deputy editor of The House magazine. I do not know whether or not she was elected to her post. Anyway, I look forward to being in the magazine because I have not been in it for a while.

Tom Brake: To complete the clarification of my role, there have in the past been requests to hold an election among the Liberal Democrats for this post. When a party has a relatively small number of MPs, the competition for the posts that are available is not usually very extensive, and therefore the probability of an election is quite restricted. If two Liberal Democrats had wanted to perform this role, there could have been an election that Members of the House could take part in, but there was no competition.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Also on the Commission are the Chairs of the Finance Committee and the Administration Committee, plus two non-execs.

The Commission appointed Dame Laura Cox to do the report as a result of the “Newsnight” allegations. Because it was very clear that the Commission did not want to be involved as elected members—as you will recall, Madam Deputy Speaker—we tasked the non-execs, Dame Janet Gaymer and Jane McCall, to draw up the terms of reference for the report and to find someone of the stature of Dame Laura Cox who was producing it. It was a completely independent process both in terms of the report and picking the person—it was not interfered with at all by the Commission.

Dame Laura Cox published her report on 15 October. She made three fundamental recommendations that we on the Commission felt merited urgent consideration. We did that at our 24 October meeting and issued a statement on the same day agreeing to all the recommendations. Dame Laura Cox chose not to come to the Commission—not to answer questions, because we did not want that, but just to say what she wanted to say. She said that she had written her report and that was the end of it. I was therefore pleased when the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) said that when Dame Laura came to her APPG, she was able to talk about details of the report. The Commission confirmed that it was then up to the House to take forward these recommendations, to which we were all fully committed. Part of our statement said that we would expect to see them progress as quickly as possible.

The Clerk of the House then worked with members of staff to ensure that the recommendations were put in place. Dame Laura did not say in her report how she
wanted the various strands set up—that had to be done from scratch. It was down to the Clerk and the staff he worked with to work on how the three recommendations would be implemented. The House of Commons debated the report in the Chamber on 5 November and agreed to the Committee on Standards report, “Implications of the Dame Laura Cox report for the House’s standards system: Initial proposals”, on 7 January 2019.

We all take this seriously and we all take responsibility for it. Every Commission meeting—the minutes are available on the parliamentary intranet—has been dominated by the deliberations that we have had on this. We appreciate that these are complex matters. Progress has at times been slower than we would wish, but I consider that we are now making good progress. It could be faster, and we will monitor that.

The first recommendation was that the valuing others policy and the revised respect policy should both be abandoned as soon as possible. That decision was taken immediately and they were suspended immediately.

The second recommendation was that the new independent complaints and grievance scheme be amended to ensure that House employees with complaints involving non-recent allegations can access the new scheme. That is because the Commission had made the clear recommendation that, for simplicity and consistency, recent and non-recent cases should have exactly the same process. I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley made that point. We were advised by Speaker’s Counsel, the Commissioner for Standards and the trade union side. The public consultation closed last Friday. The responses will be reviewed, and there is an excellent prospect that this will be in place very soon. Dame Laura Cox said that she wished that we had waited until the publication of her report before the ICGS was in place because she had some recommendations to make about that. She felt that it was important that everything should be taken together.

The third recommendation was that steps should be taken, in consultation with the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and others, to consider the most effective way to ensure that the process for determining complaints of bullying, harassment or sexual harassment brought by House staff against Members of Parliament will be an entirely independent process in which Members of Parliament play no part.

In paragraph 379 of Dame Laura’s report, she said that there was a “general reluctance of Members to judge the misconduct of other Members, or even to assist in the investigations”.

The Commission considered how to take that forward, and the previous Clerk, David Natzler, came up with a form of consultation that included Members. Her Majesty’s Opposition agreed which of our Members would serve on that group. A general agreement was required among all parties through the usual channels that the people on that group should, as we say in equity, have clean hands—they should have no involvement whatsoever with the Commissioner for Standards or the Committee on Standards or any other involvement; that was the sticking point.

As a result, on 10 June, the new Clerk announced that a staff team would be created to take the lead on producing options on implementation. That team will include people with procedural and legal knowledge, as well as expertise on the operation of the ICGS. I, too, want to pay tribute to the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who will know that all the groups in which we were involved had a wider spread, as alluded to by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). The trade unions, the Members and Peers Staff Association, and lay members all made an important contribution. Different voices were heard. It was hard work, but it was good that we could produce a report that we all agreed and signed up to.

The group that will take forward the third recommendation will talk to the union side, lay members of the Committee on Standards, party whips, Dame Laura Cox and the Chairs of the Select Committees on Standards and on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs, as well as the Chairs of the Women and Equalities, Liaison and Procedure Committees. There will be a wide view, and a wide consultation. I know Members feel that the Commission or individuals have to drive things forward, but it is important to consult staff, Members and anyone who wants to make a contribution, so we should widen it out and hear those voices. Consultations do not take place quickly. People have to be given time to be consulted, but there is a way to push things forward.

The options will be presented to the Commission, then a consultation will be opened. The House authorities were quick to appoint Julie Harding, who took up her post as Independent Director for Cultural Transformation on 18 February 2019, and has been appointed for a one-year fixed term. Her new role was established to set a transformation strategy for change. She has met many of us. I do not know whether she has met the Women and Equalities Committee, but it would be worth her while doing so, as well as meeting other Committees.

Steps have been taken to change the culture. The House Service launched a new diversity and inclusion strategy on 26 March 2019. Responding to the recommendations of the Cox report is a key element of that strategy. As the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire said, over 1,000 staff from the House of Commons and the Parliamentary Digital Service have attended or booked to attend the valuing everyone training, including 49% of managers. The aim is that all staff and Members should complete the training by June 2020. Thirty-three Members, and 147 of their staff have attended or booked to attend the training sessions. I agree with the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington that the training should be compulsory. As a lawyer, I had to undertake continuous professional development. The Bar Council did it as well, so I would see venerable, elderly QC’s attending those training sessions. When I first became a councillor in Ealing in 1986, we had to undertake equalities training. Whenever I conducted an interview as a member of the civil service, I went through training, so it is really important that training is compulsory.

Sarah Davies, our new Clerk Assistant, is also now Managing Director of the Chamber and Committees Team. It has adopted standards of service for all Select Committees, ensuring that all Select Committee members know what they can and cannot expect from staff. A staff member now sits on the Strategic Estates Team board, ensuring that staff issues are heard at the highest level. The Commons Executive Board—the board just
below the Commission that manages the House—has undertaken a 360 degree feedback exercise and coaching from Julie Harding on behaviour as part of its broader commitment to cultural change.

The ICGS is supported by two helplines—the independent bullying and harassment helpline and the Independent Sexual Misconduct Advisory Service—and all their details are published on Parliament’s website. The most recent figures show that, between 1 January and 31 March, there were 293 calls and 10 investigations were launched. I suppose it would be a tribute to our success if behaviours change and there are fewer and fewer investigations, and we hope that will happen with changes in all behaviours.

As has been reported, Alison Stanley was absolutely remarkable in the way she conducted her six-month review, which was very important for us to have. That review was put in place, and there is also an 18-month review of the processes. We need to have these reviews because we must constantly monitor and improve our processes. The Commons Executive Board and the Commission will consider the review.

Dame Laura highlighted the gendered and racist dimension to bullying and harassment. Paragraph 123 states:

“Some areas of the House were described as having a particularly bad reputation for sexist or racist attitudes”. Of the 200 people who came forward to give information to the inquiry, the majority—nearly 70%—were women. We know there will be other reports that will steer future decisions and change. We are awaiting the report from Gemma White QC, who I am sure will make further recommendations, and it is right that the House has time to debate them.

I have only two minor asks of the new Leader of the House, who I know has a very big in-tray. May we have a debate on the forthcoming report and Alison Stanley’s recent six-month review before the House rises? During the debate on the Cox report on 5 November, I asked the then Leader of the House what discussion she had had with Government “to ensure the allocation of proper resources and extra staff to make this work”. [Official Report, 5 November 2018; Vol. 648, c. 1287.]

Will the Leader of the House say whether further resources will be available for the further recommendations of the Cox report and the other important reports?

Every time we talk about delay, we must remember that, down below, staff have been working incredibly hard. In the last eight months, they have made some major moves forward, and we should always remember that. I know that when we first set up the review of the ICGS, staff were actually doing other jobs as well as doing the job of ensuring that we came to our proper conclusions. I particularly want to thank everybody who has worked on producing those reports and those—whether House staff or in the special unit—who are continuing to do that work. I also thank Dame Laura Cox for her report, and Alison Stanley.

Everyone who works here, in whatever capacity, knows that they play a vital role in ensuring that our Parliament and our democracy thrive. It is essential that everyone who works in a modern Parliament knows the boundaries of acceptable behaviour in a safe and secure workplace. Her Majesty’s Opposition’s position is very clear: we will work with the Leader of the House and the House of Commons Commissions to push forward all the key recommendations in full.

5.49 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): I congratulate those who brought forward this afternoon’s debate, most particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller)—I thank her for sitting down with me, prior to this debate, to talk through some of her thoughts on the very important issues that she has presented this afternoon—and of course the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). I thank all the speakers who have contributed in such detail and such thoughtful ways on an issue that I know is of great importance to everybody right across the House.

We are privileged to work and legislate in the cradle of our great country’s democracy. As a legislature, we expect the very highest standards among all organisations in our lands—among all businesses, public organisations and so on. So if there is any one place where we should set the standard, it is here, and that standard should be a culture of respect and dignity.

At a time when the country is so divided and there is so much anger—we have heard from one or two contributors this afternoon about what is going on online—it is doubly important that we set the bar as high as we can, particularly when it comes to our own. All those who work in the Palace of Westminster, whether they report to line managers as part of the House staff or report to Members of Parliament, and all those who are visitors to this place, should experience the very best when it comes to a culture of dignity and respect.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I have a very small request. I was in the Scottish Parliament the other week. In the toilets, they have posters that give contact details to report behaviour if someone feels that they have not been treated with dignity and respect. Could something like that happen in this building, and could it happen quickly?

Mel Stride: I will certainly take that specific point away, although I know that the behaviour code has been distributed widely across the estate. I will take the representation seriously and will come back to the hon. Lady on that specific point.

I pay tribute, as many have, to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who has been right at the heart of much of the progress that has been made. There has been a debate this afternoon about whether that progress has been too fast or too slow, but progress has been made. It is fair to say that, wherever we are today—satisfactory or otherwise—if it were not for her we would be a long way behind where we are.

In a sense, that is not surprising. As many Members have pointed out, we all operate in a historic, rather stratified environment, steeped in traditions, which tend to change extremely slowly. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley referred to us being the masters of other people’s destiny and she makes an important point. She speaks an important truth. There are inevitably power dynamics in a place such as this.
There are many different strands of employment. There is the employee who works within the House administration, and there may be various sub-divisions within that, and there are those who work for Members of Parliament. There is also the fact that this is a very public place and that those who come forward and make complaints about how they are treated may expect that that will end up in the press and might identify them publicly. Those are additional stresses and complications with which this place has to grapple.

In that context, while we have not moved fast enough and I accept that, we should not overlook the progress that we have made. We have a code for ourselves and for the other place. We have a process that affords anonymity to those who need to come forward, with sometimes extremely serious concerns, and that has also been rolled out not just across this place but across the other place. That has been achieved through cross-party, cross-House work. I thank my opposite number, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), for coming to see me and sharing with me a lot of her valid and important recommendations. We must not forget the importance of those recommendations. We must not forget the recommendations for how it can operate differently?

What today’s debate shows is that we still need to do more. That is what the Cox report tells us. Of course, it is not just Cox. Understandably, Members have strayed beyond the terms of the debate this afternoon. My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) talked particularly about online abuse. As Leader of the House, I feel particularly strongly about that. I raised it in my opening remarks in my first outing at business questions, and it is an area that I intend to lean in on quite hard. Of course this is an element that affects women in particular, sometimes in the most wicked and appalling way, but actually it affects all of us, too. As a father, I can tell Members that to have one of your children come home in floods of tears because they have been told things in the playground about you that may be entirely false, makes one, whether you are a man or a woman, feel pretty miserable. So I take that extremely seriously and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for choosing to raise it.

I pay tribute to Dame Laura Cox for a very thorough and detailed report, which came up with some very important recommendations. We must not forget the background to the report, which came about when my predecessor pushed for an inquiry around the allegations in March 2018 of extensive bullying and harassment in this place. We must not lose sight of where we have come from. There are some very, very serious allegations that relate to Parliament, both this House and the other place.

I want to touch on the issue of where responsibility lies for how we move forward. The question posed by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire was: who owns the scheme? That is a good way of phrasing this particular conundrum. There is the sense that there is something we are trying to grasp here, but we are not quite sure who owns it or where the responsibility lies. Clearly, the House of Commons Commission is responsible for House administration and, in a sense, is therefore responsible for the Cox recommendations, but ultimately it is for us—not on a party basis, but as individuals Members—to push matters forward. Neither I as the Leader of the House nor my the shadow Leader of the House speaks directly for the Commission. That is why I was so pleased that the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) was able to join us today as the official spokesperson for the House of Commons Commission.

To get to the heart of the accountability issue, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke termed it an accountability deficit. She in particular and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire raised the issue of the Commission and directly the way in which it works; whether it is representative enough; whether it should have members who are elected; whether it is transparent enough; whether, when the chair is not able to attend the meeting, the meeting should be postponed or chaired by somebody else; whether the minutes should be circulated more quickly; and whether there is an overall sense that the Commission is sufficiently functional for the challenges it faces. In that context, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke called for a series of motions on the Floor of the House on the delivery of Cox to address issues around the Commission, including the role of the Speaker in the Commission. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) suggested that it might be replaced by a Select Committee and run on those lines.

My message this afternoon is that I do not think anything should be off the table. I am not saying that we should necessarily jump instantly to conclusions and start to shake everything up, but we should be prepared to look at everything carefully and in the round. I say that as someone, like the hon. Gentleman, who has not yet attended a Commission meeting. I look forward to attending my first meeting on Monday 24 June. It may be that I go there and find that it is incredibly functional, very well run, very transparent and that nothing needs to change at all. I have an entire open mind on the direction we should go in, but debate must be facilitated on exactly these matters.

Tom Brake: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that I raised an idea put forward by the lay people on the Commission that we should as a Commission go away—I dare not call it an away-day because of the connotations of everyone wearing a patterned jumper for that purpose. Would he support that sort of set-up, where we go away, look at how the Commission is operating now, and come up with some suggestions and recommendations for how it can operate differently?

Mel Stride: I would certainly be prepared to consider that, but let me consult and discuss it with others. In answering that intervention, may I also thank the right hon. Gentleman for spending time with me in my early days as the Leader of the House and for sharing that thought, among others, with me on that occasion?

I will turn now to the three main recommendations of Cox. The first, as we have heard, was to terminate the Valuing Others and Respect policies, and that was, as many have pointed out, done relatively swiftly. It is fair to say, however, that of the three challenges set by Cox, that was by far the easiest. It is much easier to abolish a policy than to bring something in from scratch. None the less, it should be recognised that that has been done.

The second recommendation was about ensuring that historical complaints could access the scheme. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke raised the
issue of the Equality and Human Rights Commission and her view that the current scheme is discriminating against older employees. She also raised the view that the House may in that sense be in breach of the public sector equality duty under section 149 of the Equality Act. That, plus the legal advice that had to be taken when considering what should replace it and ensuring that the new scheme would itself not be open to legal challenge for being unfair and unreasonable, in contradiction of other statute, is one reason these things sometimes take a bit of time, to echo perhaps the sentiments of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire.

That is not to say that, because something is complicated and takes a bit of time, it should drag on forever—that is certainly not the case—but, in pressing for things to move forward quickly, it is still important to get things right in terms of our approach. We now have a new proposal that was agreed by the Commission in February. It has been consulted on—the consultation finished on the 14th of this month—and it will be on the agenda, I believe, for the meeting on 24 June. I for one look forward to working with others, including the shadow Leader of the House, to push that to its conclusion as quickly as possible.

The third recommendation of the Cox report recognised the importance of limiting Member involvement at the point that any cases reach the Standards Committee. That is an important point because throughout the rest of the ICGS system this particular matter does not come into play. There will have been important decisions or considerations about the fact that we are elected representatives, and constitutional issues will also have had to be taken into account. I am pleased that, in the past week or so, agreement has been reached to move forward with a taskforce that will, as the hon. Member for Walsall South eloquently set out, liaise with the Chairs of the various Committees she listed, and which I will not relist, to ensure we move that on with a view to reporting as soon as possible—certainly, I would hope, no later than the autumn.

This has been a crucial debate. Right at the start of the Cox report, there is a quote from a member of staff who in essence says that this is an institution worth things into the long grass because it is convenient for contradiction of other statute, is one reason these things sometimes take a bit of time, to echo perhaps the sentiments of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire.

That is not to say that, because something is complicated and takes a bit of time, it should drag on forever—that is certainly not the case—but, in pressing for things to move forward quickly, it is still important to get things right in terms of our approach. We now have a new proposal that was agreed by the Commission in February. It has been consulted on—the consultation finished on the 14th of this month—and it will be on the agenda, I believe, for the meeting on 24 June. I for one look forward to working with others, including the shadow Leader of the House, to push that to its conclusion as quickly as possible.

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This has been a crucial debate. Right at the start of the Cox report, there is a quote from a member of staff who in essence says that this is an institution worth fighting for, but that a seismic shift is needed. That encapsulates everything in a nutshell. We have made progress to date, but this is a beginning, not an end. There is a journey to be continued. The House has my progress to date, but this is a beginning, not an end. There is a journey to be continued. The House has my support, and that independent processes, as described by Cox, are put in place. I have recommended that there should be motions on the Order Paper to ensure that progress is made. If others do not table them, I will seek support from the Backbench Business Committee to do so, because this is important. We cannot continually push things into the long grass because it is convenient for others to do so. We have to act.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House welcomes the publication of, and recommendations in, the Dame Laura Cox report on bullying and harassment in Parliament; welcomes the implementation of the recommendation to abandon the Valuing Others and Respect policies; expresses concern about damage caused to the reputation and standing of this House by the lack of progress made on other recommendations on historical allegations and the non-involvement of MPs in Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme cases; and calls on the Leader of the House and the House of Commons Commission to push forward the implementation of all three key recommendations in full without delay.

Business without Debate

PETITIONS

Climate Change

6.5 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): The House has declared a climate emergency, and we all recognise the necessity for swift and effective action. During my four years in the House, I have been a consistent advocate of Britain’s global leadership in tackling climate change. That is why the petitioners of Eddisbury request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the United Kingdom hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

I am also presenting petitions in the same terms from the Newbury and Truro and Falmouth constituencies.

Following is the full text of the petition:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Eddisbury, Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002468]

6.6 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I, too, wish to acknowledge the climate emergency declared by the House. I also wish to convey the sentiments shared by the good people of East Worthing and Shoreham, 123 of whom have presented this petition. It declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world. It further declares that the UK has a leading role to play in tackling climate change in the future.
[Tim Loughton]

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

I think that some good news may be heading their way very shortly.

Following is the full text of the petition:

The petition of Residents of the constituency of East Worthing and Shoreham,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Following is the full text of the petition:

The petition of Residents of the constituency of East Worthing and Shoreham,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

6.7 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of 624 constituents, hundreds of whom are from two secondary schools, Priory School in Lewes and Seaford Head School.

The petition of Residents of the constituency of Lewes,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

6.8 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The residents of Mid Worcestershire also declare that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention. I therefore present this petition from constituents young and old.

Following is the full text of the petition:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Mid Worcestershire,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

6.9 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On behalf of the residents of Chelmsford, who also care passionately about the planet, I would like to present a petition in the same terms. The petition has 228 signatures, 203 from the Chelmsford constituency and 25 from the wider Essex area, and I particularly thank the staff, parents and pupils of Our Lady Immaculate primary school in Chelmsford, who gathered an impressive 122 signatures.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Chelmsford,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world; further that the UK has a leading role to play on tackling climate change in the future.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure the UK hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

6.10 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I too rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Witney and West Oxfordshire. There are 1,469 signatures, and I particularly want to thank the parents and pupils of the following schools: Ducklington Primary, Enstone Primary, Marlborough School, Kingham Hill School, Wood Green School, North Leigh Primary School, Copethorpe School, Great Rollright Primary School and Bampton Primary School.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Witney and West Oxfordshire,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world; further that the UK has a leading role to play on tackling climate change in the future.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure the UK hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
Bank Holidays in 2020

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

6.11 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to bring this important issue before the House; it concerns many of my constituents and many other people around the country. Since being elected in 2015 I have secured a number of debates in Parliament, all triggered by someone from west Cornwall and Scilly raising an issue with me that deserves proper scrutiny and representation. The issue of the early May bank holiday next year is no exception.

I am here to add my full support to the decision to make the 75th anniversary of VE Day on 8 May 2020 a bank holiday and a national day of celebration and commemoration. Victory in Europe Day, generally known as VE Day, is a day celebrating the formal acceptance by the allies of world war two of Nazi Germany’s unconditional surrender of its armed forces on 8 May 1945.

It is worth remembering how we celebrated that momentous event all those years ago. At 11 am on 8 May church bells rang out across the nation signifying the end of the most destructive war Europe had ever seen. More than 1 million people took to the streets of London to celebrate. Crowds filled Trafalgar Square and up the Mall to Buckingham Palace, where King George, Queen Elizabeth and Winston Churchill stood on the palace balcony, waving and cheering the crowds on. Around the country, millions gathered in villages, towns and cities, marking the end of war in Europe with street parties, dances and parades. Social norms were abandoned as strangers hugged and danced with one another, and bonfires were lit in the street—I cannot imagine what local councillors would do about that these days. Despite rationing and years of economic strife, communities came together to cook sweet treats for children and shared meals with what food they had, and pub licensing hours were extended. Buildings and streets in major cities were illuminated for the first time since the start of the war, after years of blockouts to prevent German bombings.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and add my support to the bank holiday idea. I recently read through the biography I wrote of my grandfather, who was a 17-year-old paratrooper—they used to lie about their age—in northern France and Germany in 1945; it addressed that time and when he came home. Does my hon. Friend agree, however, that it is difficult for businesses and even community groups to accept this roll-out of a new bank holiday date? I support the principle of what he is saying, but the proposal is not even for a year’s roll-in. Does he share my dismay at the news of calendar makers losing hundreds of thousands of pounds due to the short roll-in? Does he share my concern at the environmental aspects of the wastage of perfectly good material because the Government, in this case, did not pre-empt the change in the same way as was done with the last change to a bank holiday, which was announced in 1993 for a roll-out in 1995?

Derek Thomas: I welcome that intervention, and I would be happy to apply for a Westminster Hall debate with the hon. Gentleman if he chose to speak on that further.

I want to make the point that I am not a fan of the way in which the Government have come to this decision, but it is really important for me, knowing what a great thing it is to remember the sacrifice made by the millions of men, their families and all the people involved in working and fighting for peace in Europe, that we spend a little bit of time remembering the great event that took place when that finally came to an end. For me, seeing the footage of crowds in the streets celebrating this momentous occasion—for them, a bittersweet moment after years of hardship, loss and fear—it is right that we should put aside all else and commemorate and celebrate that day on 8 May next year. I hope that we will be able to re-enact many, if not all, of the activities in our towns and villages. I would not need to go far, as I have a couple of sons in my own home who would be quite happy to tell me how to light fires, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned.

As I have said, I have no problem with the decision to move the bank holiday to 8 May. My problem is the cack-handed way in which the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy went about reaching this decision. I would be interested to hear from the Minister what impact assessment the Department did on the lateness of making such a substantive change to the bank holidays in 2020 before announcing this decision. What was the Department thinking when it decided to give just 11 months’ notice of the cancellation of the early May bank holiday?
we not just have an extra day?

Their plans are now in tatters. We cannot just let people down in this way. It is not fair. People plan these things in advance, based on the dates they know. Why do we not just have an extra day?

**Derek Thomas:** I am glad that I have support from around the House, because Adjournment debates are often poorly attended. I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I completely agree with him. The Secretary of State announced the change to the early May bank holiday, and it was an enormous decision for large numbers of small businesses, for the tourism industry—which I particularly want to focus on—for the people who have already, for good reasons, booked their holidays next May, and for the people who have decided to use that weekend because they would be able to take their children away without interfering with their schooling.

I am disappointed that the Secretary of State himself is not here to respond to the debate, because the late notice of the announcement demonstrates a tin ear towards the tourism industry. For those in any doubt about the meaning of the expression “tin ear” and its use in relation to the Department’s attitude towards small businesses and many other people, it is defined as “a deafened or insensitive ear”. However, I want to make it clear that I do not include the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), who has been asked to respond to this debate, in that definition, because he has had nothing to do with it.

I received a letter from a businessman on the Isles of Scilly a day after the announcement, and he put his concern across much more diplomatically, saying:

“I have to say whichever government department decided at this late stage, 11 months before, to change the dates really does need to wake up to the reality of the holiday market. This change has the potential to create many upset guests unable to change their booked dates.”

I know that I am not alone in receiving correspondence and representations from constituents and businesses, and I have selected a few extracts that help to express the various implications of the decision being so late. One constituent asked the following question of the Secretary of State in an email to me:

“Have schools been considered in this late announcement about the changes to the May bank holiday? This will cause problems especially as holiday dates are already issued, residential and school trips will have been planned, and this is the Friday before the important Y6 SAT tests”.

Another wrote:

“Hello Mr Thomas,

I have also been affected by the change of the bank holiday. I have booked my Hen Do”—

we have already had a reference to weddings—

“for the bank holiday weekend, paying more to go on these dates so that more people could make it as they wouldn’t have to take the day off work. As the date has now changed, people are not able to make my Hen Do, and I am forced to pay to cancel the holiday booked for us all losing over £1000."

I hope you can help in this issue by asking the government to not take away our original bank holiday date.

Another constituent wrote to me to say:

“Dear Sir,

I am extremely pleased that VE day is to be celebrated as a priority in 2020.

However, I do not believe that the decision yesterday to change the date to 8th May 2020 provides a suitable length of time for the country to adapt.

My family are now left with the option of losing financially to cancel our annual May Day Bank Holiday as our children will be required to attend school.

The tourism industry is just one example where 11 months’ notice is not suitable.

I would expect that more foresight would have been given to this scenario.”

Someone who is not a constituent—I will leave the House to work out where they are from—wrote:

“Dear Mr Thomas

I understand you are bringing up the cancellation of the May day holiday in Parliament.”

A small group of us, they continue, organises “the annual bikers’ event and May day Morris dancing in Hastings. It is by far and above the biggest weekend in the annual calendar. Not only will it affect our events badly, it will also be a massive blow to local tourist businesses who rely on that weekend after a hard winter and tell me it’s their biggest earner of the year...Currently, Morris dancers and bikers from across the country”—this is something that we can all look forward to—

“are planning a protest at Parliament on July 23rd. This is something we would rather not have to do”—although I think we would welcome it.

“We fully support a commemoration of VE Day, but we do not support having our events that have already been booked and paid for, plus all those who have already booked hotels, disrupted with so little notice.”

Returning to my constituency, many will know that the world gig rowing championships take place on the Isles of Scilly on the early May bank holiday every year. It is a momentous event in my constituency’s calendar, and it takes a considerable amount of time to get all the gigs over to Scilly. However, it is currently unclear what changes will need to be made if the Government stick to their decision. Moving on to other disruption that I am aware of, we have all seen the story in the national press about the small business that is set to lose £200,000 having just printed next year’s calendars.

I am sure the Government do not need me to say how disruptive this decision is given how late in the day the announcement was made. The only possible, practical and pragmatic response is for the Government to keep the bank holiday to commemorate VE-day and to reinstate the early spring bank holiday on Monday 4 May. I make it clear to the Minister, to the House and to business that I have no appetite to create extra cost and disruption for small businesses, and I have never previously supported the idea of extra bank holidays. However, the fact remains that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has left the decision far too late and has caused far too much disruption and potential expense for far too many people. The appropriate response must be for the Department to reinstate quickly the bank holiday on 4 May.

There is support for that proposal, which may not surprise the House. The British Beer & Pub Association sent me a letter:
“For clarity the BBPA does support the extra bank holiday that Mr Thomas is proposing. Based on the four-day bank holiday weekend for the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee in 2012, we predict that the extra bank holiday would provide a boost to Britain’s pubs and brewers, with an estimated 10 million extra pints sold. This would also support the taxman and the economy—the taxman would receive £4.5m in extra duty revenue and VAT and it would provide a £30m boost to the economy.”

All of us, particularly those of us with rural constituencies, know the importance of small rural village pubs and how such opportunities really help them to continue their business of providing a community hub and keeping an eye on those who are otherwise often left at home on their own.

**Hugh Gaffney:** The hon. Gentleman mentioned earlier that people book holidays for that weekend, and sometimes it is the only time that families get together because they have to work through the school holidays to keep a roof above their head. The UK has the fewest bank holidays in the G20. Does he agree with Labour, which wants to increase the number of bank holidays? Let us start next year with VE Day and then look at each country’s patron saint’s day.

**Derek Thomas:** The hon. Gentleman will realise that I do not fully support everything he has just said, but I support what he says about next year. That is the whole point of this debate.

We have left it too late. There is no question but that we need 8 May, but we should reinstate and keep the 4 May bank holiday, because that is what people have planned for, expect and, in many cases, have paid for. Tourism is a significant part of my constituency’s economy, and people have booked in advance because there has been real growth in staycations. People are staying in the UK for holidays, and Cornwall is obviously their No. 1 choice, particularly west Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

I have always maintained that I represent the most beautiful, precious and wonderful part of the country. If people have any concerns about their wellbeing, they should come down for a well-deserved rest and therapy. I hope I have been able to get that across in this short commercial break.

I agree about the extra bank holiday for next year, but I do not have it within me, as a former businessman, to impose further bank holidays, particularly on small businesses, unless there is a good reason to do so and the Department handles it much better than it has on this occasion.

The British Beer & Pub Association’s letter continues: “Furthermore, the BBPA have already called on the Government to grant extended hours to pubs, so pubs can make the most of the celebratory weekend.” That is what happened 75 years ago, and I hope the Government follow suit.

In summary—I am reluctant to keep people away from any activity they might want to pursue in the beer industry later this evening—I have no appetite to create further cost and disruption for small business. That is clear, and I spend my time trying to do what I can to support small businesses. In fact, I have spent a lot of time over the past four years arguing that the Government should improve the lot of small business by simplifying the tax system—scrapping business rates, for example—creating training opportunities and ensuring that businesses have affordable access to credit.

I have a record of wanting to support and promote small business, and I am not one to disrupt it any further, but I believe we should give the extra bank holiday on this occasion. The Business Secretary has given too little notice of the changes to the early May bank holiday. The Government should reinstate the bank holiday on 4 May and keep the planned bank holiday for 8 May that was recently announced to celebrate the 75th anniversary of victory in Europe.

I completely support the proposed bank holiday. The challenge for businesses, particularly in tourism, is that the Government have given just 11 months’ notice of this change, as if the 75th anniversary has come as some sort of surprise. I sincerely apologise to business, which can ill afford another bank holiday, but it is too late to scrap the 4 May bank holiday. The Government should reinstate it, and reinstate it quickly—hopefully in the next 15 minutes.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** Before I call the Minister, I welcome the Assistant Sergeant at Arms, Nick Munting, to his position.

6.29 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson):** May I echo your comments about the new Assistant Sergeant at Arms, Mr Deputy Speaker? I wish to start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this important debate and on his interesting and informative speech, which covered everything from morris dancers to bikers. I also thank other Members for their interventions, particularly the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who never misses an Adjournment debate. I would be delighted to hear more about his expertise at bonfires.

I share the views expressed in the House that VE Day is an important opportunity to reflect on the sacrifices of a generation. The Government believe it is important to commemorate the sacrifices made by our servicemen and women in the second world war on the 75th anniversary of VE Day, as we did for the 50th anniversary in 1995, when there were celebrations and street parties across the UK. My hon. Friend talked so eloquently about that.

Moving next year’s early May bank holiday to VE Day itself has been seen to be a right and fitting tribute to our heroes of the second world war. The sentiment of celebrating on VE Day itself cannot be monetised for the veterans who served in the war. The Government gratefully acknowledge the responsibilities that our country’s armed forces assume on behalf of the UK Government and our people.

**Hugh Gaffney:** While we respect the men who fought for us and gave us our freedom today, we must also remember that there is a traditional May Day. So this is not about moving it; it is about keeping both of them. Workers have a traditional May Day holiday, celebrated every year, in the exact same way as the men who went to war.

**Andrew Stephenson:** If the hon. Gentleman bears with me, I will come to address that point.

The sentiment of celebrating VE Day is something that everyone in this House would agree with. As well as marking the allies’ great victory in 1945, the bank
holiday on Friday 8 May is an opportunity to pay tribute to members of the UK armed forces who have served and continue to serve our country to this day. On this historic occasion, the Government want to ensure as many people as possible have the valuable opportunity to pay a fitting tribute. This is part of a wider package of celebrations the Government have supported, including the commemorations to mark the 75th anniversary of D Day, which recently took place across the UK. The 75th anniversary of VE Day is also a significant commemoration in its own right and will be marked appropriately.

My hon. Friend has been a consistent champion of the tourism sector, which thrives in his constituency, drawing from his own experience of running a small business. Since his election to this House, he has prioritised supporting small business owners. Having served as a district and parish councillor, he has shown a deep commitment to his local community through his work at Westminster. I recognise that the Government’s decision to move the bank holiday from Monday 4 May to Friday 8 May next year will have an impact on the impressive May Day festival in his constituency, which I believe dates back to 1573.

Tourism has driven development in my hon. Friend’s constituency over the past 150 years and is an essential part of the area’s day-to-day life, impacting significantly on the economic activity of the local community. An estimated 2,850 jobs in St Ives are supported by visitor-related spending and 42% of jobs directly depend on tourism, so I understand the importance of this sector to his local area. These celebrations will have others like them across the country, and reorganising them will be a real challenge. I hope that plans can be adapted during the next 11 months to ensure minimal disruption. I also hope that other events planned may benefit from the change; I particularly hope that the St Ives literary festival, which begins only a day after the VE Day bank holiday next year, will attract even more tourists, due to the long weekend.

As we have heard, there are additional impacts on other specific sectors and planned events throughout the country. As we are moving the bank holiday rather than creating an additional one, we anticipate that the overall cost to business will be relatively low, but I genuinely recognise that the benefits and costs will vary from area to area and from sector to sector.

Jim Shannon: In my intervention on the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), I referred to the massive £200,000 cost to a calendar business. Does the Minister have an idea of how we can help to compensate that business in some way for its massive loss? That small business cannot absorb that cost.

Andrew Stephenson: I think I have read about that example in the newspapers. It is obviously a significant blow to that business and something that I feel is regrettable. I wish the decision could have been made in a more timely fashion and do genuinely appreciate the concerns expressed by firms throughout the country. As I shall say later in my speech, the impact on different sectors of the creation of an additional bank holiday of which there would be even shorter notice, could have an even bigger impact on our economy and on some businesses. I appreciate some of the concerns expressed about this decision, but we need to strike a balance in our approach to the creation of additional bank holidays.

Let me reflect on some more of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives made about the importance of small business. First and foremost, we need to ensure that the decisions the Government take reflect the needs of small businesses, because small businesses are the backbone of our economy. In 2018, small and medium-sized enterprises accounted for 60% of UK private sector employment and had a combined annual turnover of £2 trillion. We try to support small businesses through my Department’s industrial strategy, and on an almost weekly basis I meet the Federation of Small Businesses and the British Chambers of Commerce to hear about their concerns and how we can best support them.

In May, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), who is responsible for small business, held the first ever small and microbusiness engagement call, to allow the Government to engage with hard-to-reach businesses. The next call will be on Monday, alongside the regularly scheduled SME advisory board meeting.

I appreciate what my hon. Friend said about the Department having a tin ear on this issue, but I reassure him that we regularly engage with businesses small, medium and large throughout the country. I have been in post for only two months, but in the past month I visited 22 businesses throughout the UK, from Kent to Derby and up to Burnley—I had to do some visits in Lancashire, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The Government are proceeding rapidly with discussions with the industry to deliver a tourism sector deal. Ten sector deals are currently part of our industrial strategy, and I very much hope that the 11th will be a tourism sector deal, which we hope to launch in the coming weeks. The deal will look to harness the opportunities that the UK has to offer and further boost our tourism sector.

My hon. Friend asked about parents having booked holidays on the date of the original bank holiday, which will now fall as a school term day. As I understand it, it is within the gift of headteachers to grant permission for children to be absent during term time, under exceptional circumstances. Given the rationale behind the moving of the bank holiday, a compelling argument could be made that the circumstances are indeed exceptional.

I accept that the decision will have a negative impact on some people, but moving the bank holiday remains a right and fitting tribute to mark such a watershed moment in our nation’s history.

Hugh Gaffney: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Stephenson: Let me continue a little.

As my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives acknowledged, we all know the history: in Cornwall, 4,786 casualties were identified as the result of world war two, including the deaths of 54 sets of brothers and nine sets of fathers who served in the war, as my hon. Friend rightly said, and pay tribute to the brave people of Cornwall who served or laid down their lives in conflict.
In the light of the lateness of the decision, my hon. Friend asked the Government to create an extra bank holiday to avoid disruption. The Government regularly receive requests for additional bank and public holidays to commemorate a variety of occasions, such as cultural history and military and religious events. My ministerial colleague, the Minister for Small Business, took a House of Commons petitions debate introduced by the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) relating to holding public holidays on religious occasions last year, in which the merit of bank holidays for important religious occasions, such as Eid and Diwali, was debated.

It is the duty of any responsible Government, however, to judge impacts on the overall economy and the economic impacts on all sectors. Although an additional bank holiday may benefit some people and some sectors—my hon. Friend made a good point about the benefit it certainly has for our pub sector—the cost to the economy of an additional bank holiday is considerable. The impact on the economy of the one-off bank holiday for the Queen’s diamond jubilee in 2012 was estimated at £1.2 billion. The cost falls heaviest on the manufacturing sector, with the burden being twice as big as that on the service sector. We need to take into account not just the fact that there are different impacts on different sectors—some gaining and others not—but the size of those impacts. The Government considered these issues carefully and it was judged that moving the bank holiday, rather than creating an additional one, is the most appropriate way on this occasion following the precedent set by the 50th anniversary.

Friday 8 May next year will be a valuable opportunity for people across the UK to take time to commemorate the historic occasion of victory in Europe and pay tribute to those who sacrificed their lives in the second world war on behalf of us all. I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me the opportunity to discuss the Government’s position on the significance of bank holidays in 2020.

Question put and agreed to.

6.41 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 19 June 2019

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mrs Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU

1. Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Prime Minister on the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

   [911386]

11. Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Prime Minister on the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

   [911397]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I should like to begin by wishing Shelley Kerr and the Scotland team all the best in tonight’s women’s World cup match against Argentina. Although results have not necessarily gone the team’s way to date, they have been a credit to Scotland and have transformed people’s views on women’s football.

   I have had regular discussions with the Prime Minister on a range of matters relating to EU exit. It is the Government’s position that leaving the EU with a deal is in the best interests of Scotland and the UK.

Joanna Cherry: One thing that the Secretary of State for Scotland and I can agree on is wishing our colleagues well in the football, and, of course, things always go very well for the Scots where Argentina and football are concerned.

David Mundell: It seems clear that the Conservative party is on the verge of electing a new leader and Prime Minister whose primary purpose will be to deliver a no-deal Brexit. Is the Secretary of State prepared to be part of a no-deal Cabinet that will shrink our economy by up to 7% and put 100,000 people in Scotland out of a job?

David Mundell: Obviously, I am answering questions on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government and not on behalf of the leadership candidates, but I am clear that those aspiring to the leadership of the Conservative party want to leave with a deal. Throughout this process, I have voted on every occasion to leave the EU with a deal. The hon. and learned Lady has never done so.

Drew Hendry: According to every piece of the Secretary of State’s own Government’s analysis, there is no version of Brexit that fails to harm Scotland. New YouGov polling shows that Tory members would prefer Scotland to be an independent country, rather than stopping Brexit. Which choice should the Scottish Secretary make: a devastating no-deal Brexit Britain, or giving the people of Scotland the choice to be an independent European nation?

David Mundell: Mr Speaker, it will not surprise you to hear me say that Scotland has already made its choice on whether to be independent or part of the United Kingdom. The poll to which the hon. Gentleman referred was based on a false premise. This Government are about delivering Brexit and keeping Scotland at the heart of the United Kingdom.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Will the Secretary of State tell us how much money the Scottish Government have given to local authorities in Scotland to prepare for our exit from the European Union?

David Mundell: As far as I understand it, the UK Government have made more than £100 million available to the Scottish Government to help to prepare for Brexit—and, indeed, a no-deal Brexit—but precisely none of that money has been allocated directly to local authorities or to Police Scotland.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Further to the reply that the Secretary of State gave a few moments ago, does he agree that the majority of Scots voted in the 2017 general election for parties that were committed to delivering the 2016 referendum, and that it would be a dereliction of our democratic duty not to do so?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That is why this Government are committed to respecting the outcome of both the referendums that have taken place in Scotland: the 2014 independence referendum, in which people voted to remain in the United Kingdom; and the 2016 EU referendum, in which people across the UK voted to leave the EU.

9. Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Given that the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly have both said that the economies of Scotland and Wales would fall by between 7% and 8% on no deal, what has the Secretary of State said to the five leadership candidates about the impact of no deal and why they should avoid it?

David Mundell: This is not just about the five leadership candidates. Both in this House and elsewhere, I have been clear that a no-deal Brexit would be bad for Scotland, and we want to avoid that. We want to leave with a deal and, as I understand it, the leadership candidates are all setting out how we could leave with a deal.

10. David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State tell us how much of the £100 million made available to the Scottish Government has been allocated directly to local authorities in Scotland to help prepare for Brexit—and, indeed, a no-deal Brexit—but precisely none of that money has been allocated directly to local authorities or to Police Scotland.
on Scotland, how can the Secretary of State possibly countenance the no-deal or hard Brexit being offered by his colleagues in his party’s leadership election?

David Mundell: I thought for one moment that the hon. Lady was going to refer to her own leadership campaign, and if I did not think it would stymie her chances I would wish her well. She knows that the current uncertainty is the more serious problem for businesses in Scotland and elsewhere, but we could have ended that uncertainty much earlier by voting for a deal.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): My right hon. Friend spoke about the £100 million being given to the Scottish Government to tackle Brexit. Will he confirm that Scottish nationalists have chosen to spend £10 million of it on plugging holes in their own budget?

David Mundell: I fear that there are so many holes in the Scottish Government’s budget that a mere £10 million will not fill many of them.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I join the Secretary of State in congratulating and sending our best wishes to Scotland’s women’s team, particularly to Leanne Crichton. She is from Dennistoun in my constituency, and it was a pleasure to meet her just a couple of weeks ago.

Speaking of team players, the Secretary of State has refused to rule out working with the calamitous former Foreign Secretary, who is prepared to see the United Kingdom leave the EU on disastrous no-deal terms. A majority of Conservative party members would rather see the economy crash, the United Kingdom fragment, and their own party destroyed to secure Brexit. The party is now better described as the “English nationalist party” rather than a party that wishes to preserve the unity of the British people. Has it now dawned on the Secretary of State that he may not have left the Conservative party, but the Conservative party has certainly left him?

David Mundell: I am sure that that read better as a press release. This Government’s position is quite clear: we are about honouring both the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and the 2016 EU referendum. I will take no lessons from the hon. Gentleman on party affairs when his colleague Neil Findlay used his resignation letter to describe the Scottish Labour Party as having a “toxic culture” and “eternal” infighting.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The Secretary of State has been consistent, if nothing else, in denying the Scottish Parliament’s aspirations to offer the people of Scotland a choice between remaining in a Brexit Britain or taking control of their own affairs. Indeed, he made it a central plank of his party’s election campaign last month. In that election, the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party received 11.6% of the votes. Given that only one in nine people support his proposals, is it not time to demonstrate some grace and humility and stop behaving like a colonial overlord?

David Mundell: If anyone requires grace and humility, it is the SNP, which still fails to recognise that in the 2017 general election, in which Brexit was a key issue, its vote fell by more than 500,000 and it lost 21 seats.

Tommy Sheppard: Many of us appreciate that this may well be the Secretary of State’s last outing in this Chamber in his current role, so his mind may be somewhat distracted, but he must surely recognise that the circumstances have now changed. His party is about to elect a leader and force upon us a Prime Minister hellbent on a no-deal Brexit. If that happens, will he continue to refuse the right of the Scottish Parliament to consult Scotland’s people on their own future?

David Mundell: I understand that the Scottish Parliament will consult via a people’s assembly process, although I do not agree with it. When we have a Scottish Parliament and 129 elected representatives, I feel that is the forum in which these matters should be discussed.

The hon. Gentleman is wrong in how he characterises the Conservative leadership candidates, who have made it clear that their preference is to leave the EU with a deal.

Household Incomes

2. Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): What assessment has made of the effect of recent changes in the personal allowance on levels of household income in Scotland.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): We are helping families to keep more of what they earn by raising the personal allowance, which has gone up to £12,500. As a result, 2.4 million Scottish taxpayers received a cut in their tax in 2019-20 compared with 2015-16.

Paul Masterton: As well as letting hard-working families keep more money in their pockets—in stark contrast to the Scottish Government, who are taxing 22,000 of my constituents more than they would be taxed if they lived in England—raising the personal allowance also takes some of the lowest paid out of tax altogether. Will my right hon. Friend confirm how many people in Scotland have been taken out of paying income tax by the Conservative Government?

David Mundell: Thanks to this Government’s increases in the personal allowance, 135,000 Scots no longer have to pay any income tax at all. That is the record of this Conservative Government: cutting tax, as opposed to the SNP Scottish Government who are making Scotland the highest taxed part of the UK.

14. Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State realise that people on universal credit automatically lose 63% of those tax benefits? That is contributing to the fact that more than 34,000 tenants on universal credit in Scotland now owe over £21 million in rent arrears, an average of £644. Will he look at the impact of universal credit on Scottish people, and particularly those in low-income households?

David Mundell: I am always willing to look at specifics. Of course, we are working with the Scottish Government to bring forward the variations in universal credit that they are seeking, and one of those variations relates to the payment of rent. Another point I have made many times at this Dispatch Box is that the Scottish Government also have wide-ranging powers to make additional payments to people in Scotland, if they choose.
Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Our armed forces serve the whole United Kingdom, and, as an English MP, I am proud that our United Kingdom Government are supporting our armed forces personnel stationed in Scotland to the tune of £4 million. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is only the UK Government who can stand up for our armed forces personnel?

David Mundell: The Ministry of Defence again made a very positive announcement this year confirming extra payments to servicemen and women who have been sent to Scotland for operational requirements to ensure that they are not penalised for serving in Scotland by the SNP’s high-tax policies.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I note what the Secretary of State says about taxation. However, people living in remote parts of the UK, such as my constituency, are paying crippling delivery charges for goods. Would we not help the income of those families by tackling this serious problem?

David Mundell: I recognise this issue and, obviously, it has been raised many times in this Chamber by my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross). The Government are seized of this issue and are looking to try to resolve this inequity whereby people living in remote and rural areas are asked to pay disproportionate delivery charges.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Although the lowest-paid members of the armed forces in Scotland pay less tax than their counterparts in England, can the Secretary of State confirm that the mitigation payments made by the United Kingdom Government to the highest earners in Scotland are subject to tax?

David Mundell: Every payment made is subject to the tax system, as is self-evident, but what these payments do is mitigate the reduced payments that our armed forces personnel are receiving due to the SNP’s high-tax policies.

Intergovernmental Relations

3. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What progress the Government have made on their review of intergovernmental relations. [911389]

6. Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): What progress the Government have made on their review of intergovernmental relations. [911392]

7. Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): What progress the Government have made on their review of intergovernmental relations. [911391]

12. Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What progress the Government have made on their review of intergovernmental relations. [911398]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): This is a joint review between the UK Government and the devolved Administrations, and it is incumbent on all Administrations to make progress. There are ongoing discussions across the review’s work streams, which will be discussed at the next meeting of Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations), which is next week.

Alan Brown: The frontrunner to become the next Prime Minister has published an anti-Scottish poem. I believe that a pound spent in Croydon is of more value than a pound spent in Strathclyde, and that a Scottish MP should never be Prime Minister. Does the Secretary of State agree that if the former Foreign Secretary became Prime Minister, it would be a disaster for intergovernmental relations and a boost for Scottish independence?

David Mundell: At every Scottish Question Time we hear the assertion that this or that will be a boost for Scottish independence—it has got to the stage where if the chicken crosses the road, it will be a boost for Scottish independence. It is for individual candidates in the Conservative leadership elections to answer questions about their own position and background.

Ronnie Cowan: During an open session of the Political and Constitutional Affairs Committee on Monday 20 May, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster was asked whether he could give an update on the progress of the review of intergovernmental relations. He replied:

“I cannot put a firm timescale on this. Perhaps, if we were looking towards the end of this year.”

Given the time that has elapsed, and the uncertain political times we are living through, is that good enough for Scotland?

David Mundell: I believe that progress is being made, and I am hopeful that next week’s meeting of the JMC(EN) will provide an opportunity to discuss the principles that would underpin the new IGR agreement. That was discussed with Welsh Government Ministers and Mr Mike Russell at the last meeting of the JMC(EN).

Mhairi Black: The current frontrunner to become Prime Minister has previously written that “government by a Scot is just not conceivable in the current constitutional context.”

Does the Secretary of State agree? Does he believe that such an opinion is helpful to intergovernmental relations?

David Mundell: I do not agree, and I am sure that the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), should she lead her party, will aspire to the office of Prime Minister. No, I do not agree with that analysis.

Deidre Brock: The Scottish Affairs Committee should be holding the Secretary of State to account, but he keeps refusing our invitations. As this is his last Question Time before leaving office in the great Tory purge to come, does he agree that the Scotland Office is no longer fit for purpose, that its function as a propaganda unit is unbecoming of a Government Department, and that it needs serious reform and overhauling—or quite simply to be abolished? What is the point of the Scotland Office?

David Mundell: The very simple answer is no.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Like me, the Secretary of State has served as a councillor, an MSP and an MP; so does he agree that we can have political differences within and between the various levels of government, but that that should not be misconstrued as a breakdown in intergovernmental relations?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Many of the disagreements between the Scottish and UK Governments are over political differences, rooted
in the fact that this Government want to respect the outcome of the 2014 independence referendum and the SNP Scottish Government want to have another referendum. They are political disagreements.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that £1.3 billion has been allocated to Scotland through the city and growth deals? Lessons learned through the city and growth programmes are being played into the Union strategy and intergovernmental relations, so we take the positives out of the incredible investment that is coming to Scotland through the UK Government.

David Mundell: I have always believed that the city and growth deals are a clear example of the fact that the two Governments can work together constructively for the benefit of the people of Scotland. That is what people in Scotland want to see.

Mr Speaker: In congratulating the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire on a particularly splendid tie, I call Mr Pete Wishart.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The Scottish Affairs Committee has just released our report on intergovernmental relations. It is an evidenced-based, wide-ranging report on a number of important issues. This cross-party report states that the Scotland Office has failed to keep pace with devolution and that most direct intergovernmental relations are conducted outwith the Secretary of State’s Department. I have noticed in some of the press comments that he is not taking this at all seriously, so will he now agree to a proper review of his Department?

David Mundell: I do not know to which press comments the hon. Gentleman refers, because although we have our political differences, I respect the work of his Committee and have been clear that I welcome the opportunity for a review of the Scotland Office. I am confident that such a review would result in an enhanced Scotland Office, not the loss of it.

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): First, I associate myself with colleagues’ remarks and wish the Scotland team all the very best in their final match tonight.

Two parliamentary Select Committees have now recommended that the Secretary of State’s role should be abolished. The Secretary of State ignored Labour’s warning about the democratic deficit of the Joint Ministerial Committee, he botched the devolution element of the Brexit Bill and he has failed to secure funding for Scotland as part of the stronger towns fund. Does he accept any responsibility whatsoever for presiding over the mess that has led to the unprecedented step of two parliamentary Committees calling for his head?

David Mundell: I do not know whether the hon. Lady has read the Scottish Affairs Committee report; it might have been helpful, because it does not call for the abolition of the Scotland Office. The SNP obviously wants to see the Scotland Office abolished—the SNP wants to see the UK Government abolished. The report calls for a review, and after 20 years of devolution a review is a perfectly appropriate step to take.

Lesley Laird: The issue is how we got to this point. The right hon. Gentleman’s handling of all the issues I have outlined confirms why we are in this mess. Given that he is unhappy in his work, his threats to resign may well be fulfilled by the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) in a short period.

Both the Secretary of State and Ruth Davidson have flip-flopped on whether they would work with the former Foreign Secretary if he became Prime Minister. Does the Secretary of State think that if the former Foreign Secretary is elected as Prime Minister, his diplomatic skills will come to the fore and he will improve relations between the Scottish and the UK Government, or would it be another Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe moment?

David Mundell: I am very clear: I respect democracy and will respect the result of the Conservative leadership election. All five of the candidates who are still in the race are clear that they are Unionists, which is what makes them different from the Leader of the Opposition. They will not be cosying up to the SNP to have a second independence referendum.

The Union

4. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to strengthen the Union.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Strengthening and sustaining the Union is a key priority for the UK Government. The Government deliver for the people of Scotland day in, day out, whether through creating jobs, opportunities and long-term growth, or keeping our citizens safe.

Sir Henry Bellingham: One obvious way further to strengthen the Union is for key Government Departments, such as the Ministry of Defence and the Department for Work and Pensions, to move more jobs and activities to Scotland. What is the Secretary of State doing to pursue that agenda?

David Mundell: My Cabinet colleagues are present, and I am keen to ensure that as many UK Government jobs as possible are in Scotland. Last week, I was delighted to launch the new UK Government hub in Edinburgh, which will house 3,000 UK civil servants.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): The Scottish Government have launched an independent review of the joint campus of Buchanan and St Ambrose High Schools in my constituency, after health and safety concerns were raised by parents, pupils and staff. Does the Secretary of State agree, like me, with the concerned parents, pupils and staff, who think that an independent review must properly assess the water quality and the site of both schools, including for air and soil contamination—for the past, present and future of these children?

David Mundell: Obviously, that matter is ultimately for the Scottish Government, but I know that the hon. Gentleman is a real champion for the parents and pupils at those schools, and I will do everything to assist him in taking forward their concerns.
Fisheries Bill

5. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the Fisheries Bill.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I continue to work closely with colleagues on the Fisheries Bill, which will allow us to manage our fisheries sustainably and deliver on our promise to take back control of our waters. It will allow us to decide who may fish in our waters and on what terms as we become an independent coastal state.

Mr Carmichael: The last time that I asked the Secretary of State about the Fisheries Bill, he deflected the question by saying that

"we will see what happens when the Bill returns on Report."—[Official Report, 16 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 1152.]

That was five months ago, and we have still not had the Fisheries Bill on Report. When are we going to get it?

David Mundell: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to hear me say that it will be in due course.

Oil and Gas Industry

8. Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the Government’s role in supporting the oil and gas industry.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I have regular meetings with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on a range of issues relevant to Scotland. That has included discussions about the support that this Government have provided to the oil and gas sector. The UK Government are committed to ensuring that this key industry has a long future.

Colin Clark: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. May I congratulate him and the Scotland Office on supporting Scottish industry, when the SNP Scottish Government do not? It is due to his hard work that transferable tax history was delivered to the oil and gas industry. Does he agree that Opposition suggestions that we should divest ourselves of the oil and gas industry would threaten 120,000 highly paid Scottish jobs?

Mr Speaker: That goes into the matter of Opposition policy. That would be impure, and I am sure the Secretary of State would never knowingly be impure.

David Mundell: Since joining this Parliament, my hon. Friend has become a real champion of the industry, and it disappoints me to hear Opposition Members describing oil and gas as a dirty technology with no long-term future. We can be clear that this party and this Government will always stand up for Scotland’s oil.

Drug Consumption Room: Glasgow

13. Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on the potential merits of establishing a medically supervised drug consumption room in Glasgow.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): There is currently no legal framework for the provision of drug consumption rooms in the UK. The Scottish Affairs Committee is undertaking an inquiry into drug use in Scotland. As with other inquiries, the Government will consider the Committee’s report.

Alison Thewliss: I am sorry, but that is just not good enough. People in my constituency are dying for want of a safe consumption room. Will he come to meet people in Glasgow to see why such rooms are very much needed to reduce harm and to save lives?

David Mundell: I hear what the hon. Lady says, but I do not think that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) would accept that we would not want to take seriously his Committee’s serious inquiry—the Committee is visiting many overseas examples. We want to look at its report, and that is what we will do.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [911436] Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 19 June.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Today marks two years since the terror attack on the Finsbury Park mosque. It was a truly cowardly and depraved attack that was intended to divide us. Instead, London remains united, and it is London’s diverse communities that make London the world’s greatest capital city.

In recent days and weeks we have seen flooding across the country, which has been particularly severe in Lincolnshire. I know that the whole House will want to join me in paying tribute to the work of the emergency services, our military, the Environment Agency and all those who have been working on the ground to support the communities affected. The Government stand ready to respond and offer all assistance where required.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mr Jones: I associate myself and the whole House with the comments that the Prime Minister has made about the Finsbury Park mosque attack and the flooding in Lincolnshire.

If our town centres are to survive and thrive, we need more people living in them, more people working in them and more people spending their leisure time in them. I welcome the future high streets fund and commend to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister the important
bid that has been made by Nuneaton. Will she speak to her Ministers and ask them to look on that bid very favourably?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to say that high streets are changing, and we are committed to helping communities to adapt. He set out some of the things he wants to see if those high streets are to continue to thrive. As he said, we have provided £675 million through the future high streets fund. I am pleased to hear about the Transforming Nuneaton programme, which I understand aims to increase footfall and drive economic growth. Nuneaton’s bid for the future high streets fund is currently under consideration, and we hope to announce the bids that have been successful in going forward to the business case development phase in the summer.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Today does mark two years since the terrorist attack on Muslim people in Finsbury Park outside the mosque, and the murder of my constituent Makram Ali. With the far right on the rise both in our country and across the world, we can all send a message to all those who seek to sow hatred and division in our society that we will not be divided. Our diversity is our strength, and I believe it always will be.

I concur with the Prime Minister about the need to support people who have suffered as a result of the floods over the weekend, and about the work of the emergency services in helping them.

On Friday, I was honoured to join Grenfell residents and survivors to mark the two-year anniversary of that terrible tragedy. With great dignity, they are campaigning for justice and change. Across this House, we have a duty to ensure that such fires can never happen again. That is why I have signed up—I hope the Prime Minister will do so as well—to the “Never Again” campaign, which is run by the Fire Brigades Union with the support of the Daily Mirror. Three days after the Grenfell fire, the Prime Minister said:

“My Government will do whatever it takes to help those affected, get justice and keep our people safe.”

So two years on, why do 328 high-rise buildings—homes to thousands of people from Newham to Newcastle—still have the same Grenfell-style cladding?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman that we will never be divided and that our diversity is indeed our strength; we should all celebrate that diversity.

The right hon. Gentleman refers to last Friday being two years on from the terrible tragedy of the Grenfell fire. I was very pleased yesterday to welcome, as part of Grenfell United and others—to No. 10 Downing Street. I was particularly pleased to meet young people, hear their questions and talk to them about their concerns for the future. [Interruption.] I am pleased to see the shadow Foreign Secretary back from her re-education camp of a few weeks ago. She says, “What did you say?” I am about to tell her and the rest of the House what I said—just a little patience.

The issue of justice was indeed raised by one of the young people, which is exactly why I set up the public inquiry within days after the fire. That inquiry has two phases. It will soon be entering its second phase, and we have appointed panel members to sit alongside the judge in that phase. The aim is to find out exactly what went wrong, who was responsible and who was accountable, and to enable that justice for the people of Grenfell.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned cladding. We asked building owners in the private sector to take the action that we believed necessary, but they have not been acting quickly enough. That is why we will fully fund the replacement of cladding on high-rise residential buildings, and interim measures are in place where necessary on all 163 high-rise private residential buildings with unsafe aluminium composite material cladding.

Jeremy Corbyn: Obviously, the inquiry must go on and we await its response to what actually happened at Grenfell, but the answer that the Prime Minister gave is of no comfort to the 60,000 people living in high-rise tower blocks across the country. They are worried—their communities are worried.

Although Government funding is, of course, necessary and welcome, but not yet available, more than 70 block owners still have no plan in place to get the work done. Will the Prime Minister set a deadline of the end of this year for all dangerous cladding to be removed and replaced? Will she toughen up the powers for councils to levy big fines and, where necessary, to confiscate blocks to get this vital safety work done if the block owners simply fail to do it?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, all affected buildings identified in the social sector have been visited by the fire and rescue services, which have carried out checks and made sure that interim safety measures are in place. Remediation work has started or finished on over three quarters of those buildings. We are fully funding the removal and replacement of unsafe ACM cladding systems on high-rise social housing.

The right hon. Gentleman refers to housing in the private sector. We asked building owners to take the action necessary, and we expected building owners to take the action necessary. They have not done enough; they have not acted quickly enough. That is why the Government have stepped in and said that we will fully fund the replacement of cladding on high-rise residential buildings. As I said, interim measures are in place until that work is done.

Jeremy Corbyn: The question was: will the Prime Minister ensure that this is done by the end of this year? At the current rate of progress, it will take three years for even the social housing blocks to be done.

But the issue goes wider: 1,700 other buildings, including hospitals, care homes, schools and hotels, are clad in other potentially combustible materials. If landlords will not act, will the Government step in and act on those buildings as well? The 2013 coroner’s report on the deadly Lakanal House fire recommended that sprinklers should be retrofitted to all social housing. Currently, only 32 of 837 council tower blocks of above 30 metres have sprinklers. Two years after Grenfell and six years after that coroner’s report, will the Prime Minister now accept that recommendation and set a deadline for all high-rise blocks to have sprinklers retrofitted?
The Prime Minister: First of all, the right hon. Gentleman raises the issue of other cladding. The work is indeed being done to investigate the safety of other cladding. He then talks about the coroner’s report and recommendation in 2013. I think he has inadvertently said something that does not quite reflect what the coroner’s report said. It said that landlords should consider retrofitting sprinklers; it did not say that every building should be retrofitted with sprinklers. As he will know, there are many landlords up and down the country, including Labour councils, that have chosen not to fit sprinklers.

Jeremy Corbyn: The coroner’s report made it very clear that she thought that sprinklers would make blocks safer; I do not think we should be playing around with semantics—we should be making sure that all the blocks are safe across the whole country. Only 105 of the 673 new-build schools have sprinklers. Labour would make sure that all new schools had sprinklers fitted.

Grenfell survivors say, “We were victims before the fire.” Radical change is needed in our system of social housing. Tenants raised concerns about safety; they were ignored. Two years on from Grenfell, when will we see Government legislation to strengthen tenants’ rights and apply the Freedom of Information Act to all housing associations as well as local authorities?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right that one of the truly shocking aspects of what happened at Grenfell Tower is that, before the fire happened and over a significant period of time, residents of the tower were raising concerns with the tenant management organisation and the council, and their voice was not heard. That is why one of the other things that I did after the Grenfell Tower fire was to initiate work looking at social housing.

The then Housing Minister—and this has been taken on by subsequent Housing Ministers—went around the country meeting people in social housing to see whether that had happened simply at Grenfell or was happening across the country, and to see how we could strengthen the voice of people living in social housing. I believe that should be done, and it is the work that we have been putting in place. It is absolutely right that the voices of those people should have been heard and acted on. We want to ensure in future that social housing tenants’ voices will be heard.

Jeremy Corbyn: That is all well and good, but just how long does it take to amend the Freedom of Information Act to make sure it applies to social housing run by housing associations as well as local authorities?

The Government spent £1.013 million on fire services in 2016-17. This year, the figure is £858 million—£155 million cut from fire services. Every fire authority across the country, from the 11% cut in Greater Manchester to the 42% cut in Warwickshire, is going through the same experience. We cannot put a price on people’s lives. We cannot keep people safe on the cheap. The Prime Minister told the country at the Conservative party conference last autumn that austerity is over. Will she now pledge that her Government will increase fire service funding and firefighter numbers next year?

The Prime Minister: Indeed, we are able to end austerity, and we are able to put more money into public services. We are able to do that because a Conservative Government take a balanced approach to the economy. We have been putting right the wrongs of a Labour Government who left us with the largest deficit in our peacetime history. That is the legacy of Labour. We saw fewer people in work and less money to spend on public services, and we will not let it happen again.

Jeremy Corbyn: The legacy of this Tory Government is 10,000 firefighter jobs cut since 2010 and 40 fire stations closed, including 10 in London under the previous Mayor.

The Prime Minister claimed that action on Grenfell would be part of her legacy, but in two long years, too little has changed. She has met the Grenfell survivors, as have I. Their pain is real and palpable, and it continues. A big test for the next Prime Minister will be to make good the failings of this Government over the past two years—a failure to rehouse all the survivors, a failure to give justice to the Grenfell community, a failure to make safe other dangerous high-rise blocks, a failure to retrofit sprinklers and a failure to end austerity in the fire service. Does the Prime Minister believe that by the third anniversary next year, the Government will be able to honestly say with conviction to the country and to the Grenfell survivors, “Never again”?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman refers to the rehousing of the Grenfell survivors. All 201 households have been offered temporary or permanent accommodation—[Interruption.] I think that 194 of those households have accepted that, and 184 have been able to move into their accommodation.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about what the Government have been doing in response to the Grenfell Tower fire. We set up immediately a public inquiry. We set up immediately the Dame Judith Hackitt review, which looked at the issues around building regulations and fire safety. The Government are acting on the results of that, and I expect a future Government to act on the results of the public inquiry.

I have met on a number of occasions, including yesterday, people who survived the Grenfell Tower fire—people who lost their homes, people who lost members of their family and young people who lost their best friends. Their pain is indeed great; it will never go away. It is important for us to ensure that we provide support for those survivors into the future. It is not just about buildings and cladding; it is about support for the local community; and it is about mental health services and support for those who have been affected.

This Government are committed to ensuring that we provide that support and that we do everything we can to make sure that a tragedy like Grenfell Tower can never happen again.

Q5. [911440] Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Today is Thank a Teacher Day, and I am sure the whole House would want to express its gratitude to our hard-working, dedicated teachers.

Earlier this week, a report from the Department for Education showed that children in coastal areas achieve lower grades than elsewhere, which means that children in constituencies such as mine have a double whammy, because West Sussex has historically been one of the worst-funded areas as well. Given that the PM recognises that fair funding for schools needs to be a priority in the forthcoming comprehensive spending review, will she...
support setting up a coastal schools challenge fund to replicate the success of the London schools challenge fund, which achieved significant improvements in outcomes from 2003 in London?

The Prime Minister: First, I think we should all recognise Thank a Teacher Day. I am sure everybody across this House remembers a particular teacher who had an impact on them, and indeed helped them to do what was necessary to become a Member of Parliament and to represent a local community in this House.

My hon. Friend makes a point about coastal communities. He will know that school funding is at a record level, and our reforms have been improving education standards. I want to ensure that schools have the resources they need and that reform continues to improve those standards; that we are able to give schools the budgets on a timetable to work for them; and—he mentioned the issue of fairer funding—that we continue to make progress on the fairer national funding formula. I think what my hon. Friend has done in referencing a coastal schools fund is actually a bid into the spending review that will be coming later in the year.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister’s remarks on the atrocity at the Finsbury Park mosque?

This is also World Refugee Week, and I want to commend my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), who brought forward a family reunion Bill some time ago. Will the Prime Minister, in the time that she has got left, please make sure that this comes forward to Committee?

Does the Prime Minister agree with the front runner set to succeed her that the Scottish people are a “verminous” race that should be placed in ghettos and exterminated?

The Prime Minister: The Conservative and Unionist party not only takes the people of every part of this United Kingdom seriously, but we welcome the contribution from people of every part of this United Kingdom, because that is what makes the United Kingdom the great country it is—and long may Scotland remain part of it.

Ian Blackford: Well, of course, words matter and actions matter. The Prime Minister thought that the man who published those words in his magazine was fit for the office of Prime Minister—and he should have notified the Member in advance, but I would urge him to weigh his words. [HON. MEMBERS: “Withdraw!”] Indeed, I think it would be much better if, for now, he would withdraw any allegation of racism against any particular Member. I do not think that this is the forum, and I do not think it is the right way to behave.

Ian Blackford: Mr Speaker, I have informed the Member. He has called Muslim women “letter boxes”, described African people as having “watermelon smiles” and another disgusting slur that I would never dignify by repeating. If that is not racist, I do not know what is. Does the Prime Minister honestly believe that this man is fit for the office of Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has been leader of the SNP in this Chamber and has asked Prime Minister’s questions for some time, so he might understand that the purpose is to ask the Prime Minister about the actions of the Government. That is what he should be asking us about. I believe that any future Conservative Prime Minister will be better for Scotland than the Scottish nationalist party.

Q7. [911442] Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree with me about the importance of tackling corruption and tax evasion around the world and about the key role that knowing who really owns companies plays in that? Does she therefore welcome the announcement today by Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man that they will open their registers in a couple of years’ time, and will she urge our remaining overseas territories to make progress in doing the same?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue. I am very pleased to see the announcement today by Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man. We continue to work with overseas territories to ensure that they follow those standards and open their books so that people can see who actually owns companies.

Q2. [911437] Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Following my visit to the Netherlands two weeks ago with Emma Appleby, I have witnessed at first hand the incompetence of the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care in delivering medical cannabis with THC, not just CBD, for children with severe epilepsy. History was made exactly one year ago today when Alfie Dingley received the licence for his medication and the Prime Minister looked Hannah Deacon, Alfie’s mum, in the eye and promised to right this wrong. Today, will the Prime Minister commit to making it part of her legacy to deliver on her promise not just to Alfie, but to the many other children who are still suffering?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we looked at the whole issue of medical cannabis. That is why we changed the approach that was taken. Obviously, individual cases are desperately difficult, and I think that everybody across the House feels with the families and friends of those who are affected. We have ensured that the law has changed and that specialist doctors can prescribe cannabis-based products for medicinal use, where there is clinical evidence of benefit. I think that was the right thing to do. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and...
Social Care has heard the testimony of families about the barriers they appear to have faced and has asked NHS England to undertake a rapid re-evaluation and to address any system barriers to clinically approving the prescribing.

Q14. [911450] Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Last year, an Ofsted report revealed severe shortcomings in the London Borough of Sutton's special educational needs department. I have since met many parents, such as Hayley Harding, who have had to resort to tribunals to get an appropriate education, health and care plan for their children. A leaked internal report showed that money is categorically not the issue, as Sutton has the highest per head spend on SEND in the UK. However, it also has one of the highest levels of refusals for EHCP assessments. Will the Prime Minister assure me that Sutton Council will receive all possible assistance from the Government to resolve its lack of leadership and its mismanagement, which were identified in its own report, so that we do not let families down?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. It is vital that all children with special educational needs receive the support they need. I have been assured that the council will receive the right support. The Department for Education and NHS England have been working closely with the local authority to ensure that the necessary changes take place, and they will continue to do so. My hon. Friend talks about funding. This year, Sutton's high needs funding allocation has been increased. I understand that Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission will revisit Sutton to ensure that the council is improving its support for children with special educational needs, so that those children can fulfil their potential.

Q3. [911438] Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Last month, the Prime Minister wrote to the seven Westminster political leaders and said that the victims of the contaminated blood scandal would have to wait years, until the end of the inquiry, for compensation to be paid. That is a political decision. Every 96 hours, a victim dies. While I accept that the Prime Minister made the right choice in setting up the inquiry, would not a real legacy be to pay compensation now, as happened in the Republic of Ireland in the 1990s, for those who have suffered so much for so long at the hands of the state?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has campaigned long and hard on this issue and championed the needs of all those who were affected. The victims and families have suffered so much, and it is obviously important that they get the answers and the justice that they deserve. They have been waiting decades for that. In April, as she will know, the Department of Health and Social Care announced a major uplift in the financial support available to beneficiaries of the infected blood support scheme in England. Discussions are now under way between officials in the UK, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Administrations to look, as a matter of urgency, at how we can provide greater parity of support across the UK.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): The Conservative party has frequently won the trust of the public over recent generations because of its reputation for economic competence and responsibility. Those qualities have helped to contribute to the Prime Minister's legacy. She will leave behind a recovery from economic crisis to full employment and economic growth. Does she therefore agree that in the present uncertainty surrounding Brexit and the change of government, it would be extremely unwise for candidates in the leadership election, or the outgoing Government, to start making reckless commitments on tax cuts and promises on spending, which should properly be addressed responsibly in a spending round once those uncertainties are behind us?

The Prime Minister: First, I commend my right hon. and learned Friend for the work he did in a previous Conservative Administration as Chancellor of the Exchequer. He left a golden economic legacy, which was then completely squandered by 13 years of a Labour Government, and as he says, Conservatives have had to turn that around. I am pleased that we see employment at record levels; I am pleased that we see the deficit down; and I am pleased that we see debt falling. We are able to ensure that we can put more money into public services. We have already committed the biggest ever cash boost for the national health service in its history. I can assure him that in my time as Prime Minister we will not make any reckless commitments, but we do want to ensure that we see our public services supported, as they should be, to provide the services we believe the people of this country deserve.

Q4. [911439] Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Over the past nine years, the Prime Minister has had authority over immigration, first as Home Secretary and now as Prime Minister. By her own metric, she has failed to reduce immigration, and her unjust, discriminatory and racist policies have caused thousands of people to be treated inhumanely. In Refugee Week, the last week of her term in office, can she call her record on immigration anything other than a failure?

The Prime Minister: Immigration has been good for this country, but people want to know that the Government can make decisions about who should come to the country, that there is control over the number of people coming to the country, and that the Government take action against those who are here illegally. That has been the purpose of the policy pursued since 2010, giving people confidence in our immigration system so we can ensure that people continue to welcome immigrants, who make such an important contribution to our life, into this country.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): As we build the homes we need across the country, it is essential that we equip young people with the correct practical skills to drive forward our economy. The 45th WorldSkills competition takes place in Russia in August. My constituent, 21-year-old Lewis Greenwood, will be representing the UK in the bricklaying competition. Will the Prime Minister wish Lewis and the rest of Team UK the best of British in the skills olympics?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to reference the fact that we need those skills for our economy and our society in the future. I am very happy to congratulate Lewis on being the UK representative for bricklaying in the WorldSkills competition in Russia.
I wish him all the very best and I am sure the whole House will wish him all the very best as he carries the UK standard with him.

Mr Speaker: It is always said that Winston Churchill was a 60-bricks-an-hour man—a very good bricklayer himself, I must advise the House.

The Prime Minister: First, we mark Windrush Day on 22 June; that day has been set up to recognise the contribution that the Windrush generation made to our life, our society and our economy here in the UK. What lay behind the issue in relation to the problems that people in the Windrush generation faced was the fact that when they came into the UK, they were not given documentary evidence of their status, and, as their countries gained independence, was the fact that when they came into the UK, they lay behind the issue in relation to the problems that some members of the Windrush generation have faced. That is what lay behind it, and there were cases of people in the Windrush generation.

Mr Speaker: Order. This is very unseemly behaviour. Members are entitled to ask orderly questions, but having asked the questions, they should then have the courtesy to listen to the Prime Minister’s answer.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

That is what lay at the heart of the issue in relation to the Windrush generation. It is the case that people in the Windrush generation faced these difficulties as a result of not having that documentary evidence both under Labour Governments in the past and, more recently, under this Government. The Home Office is working to put that right. People who are concerned about this should contact the Home Office taskforce and they will get the help and support that they need.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): Last week, we learned that a 13-year-old boy who brought his rapist to court received £20 in compensation. A 13-year-old girl and a 15-year-old girl received £50 for being abused as children. Does the Prime Minister agree that this is a terrible way to treat the victims of child sexual abuse, that they deserve to be treated fairly and compassionately, and that it sends out all the wrong signals to anybody who is thinking of bringing their perpetrator to justice? Does she agree that it takes huge courage to bring a case such as that, and will she urgently look at a review of criminal compensation orders, so that victims of child sexual abuse get the justice that they deserve?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that it takes huge courage to come forward to talk about incidents of child sexual abuse—and not just to talk about that, but to be able to go through that such that the perpetrator of that abuse can be brought to justice. I commend those he has spoken about specifically and all those who come forward to do that. I hope that from the action that this Government have taken, through setting up the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, we make it very clear that we want these wrongs to be righted. We want people to be able to feel that they can find justice. The memory will never go. The memory will live with them, but we can at least give them justice and I urge everybody to come forward, if they have been subject to child sexual abuse, such that justice can be brought.

Q8. [911443] Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I am dealing with the most traumatic of constituency cases, affecting a vulnerable young woman refugee now at risk of prostitution and trafficking here in the UK. She faces being thrown out on the streets by this Government, who have refused her the support that she desperately needs, even though she has a further challenge submitted to the asylum support tribunal. Will the Prime Minister please show her some compassion?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very specific case. Obviously I have not seen the details of that case, but I will ensure that the Home Secretary looks at the details of it.

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): Police officers and firefighters are able to retire at 60, but prison officers cannot retire until they are 66 and they are facing the prospect of having to retire at 68. Does my right hon. Friend believe that that is fair?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue. Obviously, this has been looked at and considered in the past, but I will make sure that the Ministry of Justice is aware of his concerns.

Q9. [911444] Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): My community does not feel safe. Crime rates in Stockton South have almost doubled in the last eight years, while Cleveland police have lost 500 officers. Now the Prime Minister’s Home Secretary is admitting that we do not have nearly enough police to be able to keep people safe. Does she now think that she might have been wrong to make such deep cuts in policing, and will she consider, as her final act as Prime Minister, giving Cleveland police our 500 bobbies back?

The Prime Minister: We have made about £1 billion extra available to police forces this year, and that includes an increase in funding for Cleveland police. How the money is spent is a matter for the police and crime commissioners and the chief constable. We have made funds available, and we have ensured that we are giving the police the powers that they need. Sadly, the Labour party in opposition voted against that extra funding for the police.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Losing a child is every parent’s worst nightmare, but every day parents up and down the country are caring for children with life-limiting illnesses. For those families the children’s hospice and palliative care services are a necessary lifeline, but some of our hospice services are struggling for cash, and Acorns, our largest service, has had to announce the closure of one of its hospices.
Prime Minister, you came to power saying that you would help people who were just about managing, but many of those families are barely existing at all. Please, as your legacy, will you give the £40 million that is needed to provide really good palliative care for all the children in the country who need it?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the important role played by hospices generally, but by children’s hospices in particular. I have been pleased to be involved in the establishment of the Alexander Devine hospice in my constituency, which was set up after a family tragically lost their son Alexander.

It is important for us to ensure that people have the support that they need as they see a child approaching the end of their life. We have made children’s palliative and end-of-life care a priority in the NHS long-term plan, and over the next five years the NHS will be match funding clinical commissioning groups that commit themselves to increasing investment in local children’s palliative and end-of-life care services by up to £7 million.

That will increase the support to a total of £25 million a year by 2023-24. Those children and their families deserve the very best care, and I commend all who are working in the hospice movement, because they provide wonderful end-of-life care for children and adults.

Q10. [911445] Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Hartlepool is a trial area for universal credit, and we now have seven food banks. Is that a legacy the Prime Minister can be proud of?

The Prime Minister: No one wants to see someone feeling the need to go to a food bank, but what universal credit does is ensure that people are helped into work, and that work pays. As they earn more, they are able to keep more of those earnings. Work is the best route out of poverty, and universal credit is working to ensure that people get into work and can provide for themselves and their families.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I know that the whole House will join the Prime Minister in thanking the emergency services and the armed services when they step up to the mark at times of national or local emergency such as the mosque outrage or the Novichok incident in Salisbury, near my constituency, but will she also do what she has done throughout her time as Prime Minister and pay tribute to a vast army of other people—the volunteers in our society who do so much for us? I am thinking particularly of the Royal British Legion, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the Red Cross, and, especially on this important day in its life, the Order of St John and St John Ambulance. Those are truly the big society.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. So much of what happens in our country—so much that is good in our country—does indeed depend on volunteers up and down the country, including those in the organisations that my hon. Friend has mentioned, and those in other community groups and charities too. We should celebrate the work that volunteers do, we should commend them for their work, and, above all, we should say a wholehearted thank you.

Q11. [911446] Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): A high score of adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, increases an individual’s chances of having physical health issues or poor mental health, or being involved in violence. Today the WAVE Trust will launch a survey to collate, anonymously, MPs’ ACEs score. This is the first time that that has ever been attempted by any national Parliament. Will the Prime Minister, like me, respond to the survey and encourage other colleagues to do the same?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises an important point about the impact adverse childhood experiences can have on people in later life. It is one of the reasons why we are putting so much support and emphasis on the mental health of young people to help them as they go through their life. I was not aware of this survey; I am happy to look at it, and I am sure all Members of the House will look at it and recognise the importance of this information that increases the knowledge of such adverse childhood experiences and helps to deal with these issues.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that there are already almost 400,000 people employed in the low carbon sector and its supply chains across the country, but can she assure me that more jobs will be created in this industry through our modern industrial strategy, including through the utilisation of carbon capture and storage, which will be critical to our meeting our net zero targets?

The Prime Minister: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend the assurance that as we look to meet our climate change target we will indeed see more jobs being created in this sector, and I was very pleased when I made the announcement about the net zero emissions target to visit Imperial College here in London, which is doing important research and training work on CCS that will be of benefit across this country and the world.

Q12. [911447] Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The Prime Minister is a dedicated follower of fashion, so can she explain why yesterday her Government rejected a penny on every garment sold in this country, which would have created green jobs, a ban on the 300,000 tonnes of textiles that go to landfill or incineration, and the 16 other recommendations made by my Committee when she wants to get to a net zero carbon economy by 2050?

The Prime Minister: I am aware of the report from the Environmental Audit Committee on this issue. Much of what the Committee wants to achieve is actually already covered by Government policy, and there are a number of areas I could mention—for example, making producers responsible for the full cost of managing and disposing of their products when they are no longer useful, and last week the Government opened a multi-million pound grant scheme to help boost the recycling of textiles and plastic packaging. We have already responded to many of the issues raised by that report.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Unlike local councils, NHS bodies are not legally required to balance their budget on an annual basis. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough sustainability and transformation partnership is facing
a deficit of £192 million and other STPs could be raided to bail it out. What would my right hon. Friend say to my constituents—including those in places like Jaywick, an area of deprivation that has extensive health inequalities—when they ask why their services should suffer to meet the deficits of others?

The Prime Minister: Of course we want to ensure that all health trusts and health services are operating properly within their budgets and are able to balance their books. What I would say to my hon. Friend’s constituents is that I am pleased that this Government have been able to increase the funding available to the national health service, and that will go towards increasing and improving the services his constituents are able to receive.

Q13. [911449] Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister is a busy woman, so she might not have seen the latest report from Inside Housing, which has revealed that three successive Ministers were written to a total of 21 times over four years by the all-party group on fire safety and rescue urging them to act to make sure we avoided another fire following the Lakanal House fire. The last of those 21 letters was written a month before the Grenfell Tower fire; no action was taken. What does the Prime Minister believe those Ministers should have done when they received that expert advice?

The Prime Minister: Ministers obviously always look very carefully at the expert advice they receive, but the whole question of what has happened and the advice that was available will be looked at in the second phase of the public inquiry.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Later today in Westminster Hall Members will have an opportunity to debate the independent review of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. Thanks to the leadership of my right hon. Friend this landmark legislation has empowered both victims and the police to seek justice, with 239 suspects charged and 185 people convicted of modern slavery offences in 2017-18. What further measures does my right hon. Friend believe will help to strengthen this Act?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased that my hon. Friend has raised this issue, because it remains an important topic. We have seen not only the first convictions under the Act but thousands of businesses publishing transparency statements and senior business leaders being much more engaged on the issue than ever before. She asks what more we will be doing. We will shortly be publishing a consultation to look at ways to strengthen transparency in the supply chains, and we are expanding transparency laws to cover the public sector and its purchasing power. This is important as the public sector has huge purchasing power, and this could be used to good cause to ensure that we are ending modern slavery.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): The Prime Minister is keen to secure a legacy of acting in the country’s very best interests, so will she commit to introducing legislation that will guarantee that this House sits in September and October so that, in the event of a no-deal Brexit, all options are available to this Parliament, including revoking article 50?

The Prime Minister: The dates for recess and the times of the sittings of this House will be published to the House in due course.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): The national funding formula for schools is great for underfunded constituencies such as mine, where funding is going up twice as fast as the national average, but village schools and other small schools are still under financial pressure and their numbers have declined over recent decades. Will my right hon. Friend encourage the Department for Education to look again at how we can make the national funding formula do more to help village schools, which are so important to our rural life?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely accept and recognise the important role that village schools play in our rural life. A lot of work went into the national funding formula, and it is right that we are introducing this fairer means of funding. We have yet to reach the end point of the national funding formula, but I want to see us progressing and ensuring that we are putting that national funding formula in place. I am sure that the Secretary of State for Education will have heard the request that my hon. Friend has made.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I am heartbroken, and Tooting is heartbroken. On Friday night, the streets claimed another victim. Cheyvn Evans might be just another awkward statistic to this Government, but to us he was a son, a brother and a friend taken too soon. This senseless violence could have been avoided with adequate policing and good youth provision to give our young people a sense of hope. My question to the Prime Minister is simple. Will she use her remaining days in office to leave a legacy that will change the paths for those young people, or can we expect yet more of the same?

The Prime Minister: None of us ever wants to see a life, particularly a young life, taken before its time by violent crime. These are not difficult statistics; they are people who had a future ahead of them and who have sadly died as a result of the violence of criminal perpetrators. We have introduced our serious violence strategy, and we are working with the police and other organisations to ensure that young people are turned away from the use of violence and the use of knives. The hon. Lady says that this is a question of funding and police numbers, but actually it is a much wider issue—[Interruption.] Anybody who denies that this is a wider issue for our society is simply failing to understand the issue that we have to address, and if she wants to talk to somebody about the police on the streets of London, I suggest she talks to the Mayor of London.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Bearing the sub judice rule firmly in mind, what does the Prime Minister think of the principle of bringing a dying, decorated former soldier before the courts of Northern Ireland on charges based on no new evidence that are unlikely ever to lead to a conviction?

The Prime Minister: I know this is an issue that my right hon. Friend and a number of other right hon. and hon. Friends have raised in terms of individual cases and the general principle. None of us wants to see elderly veterans being brought before the courts in the way that he has described, but we need to ensure that we have processes and systems in Northern Ireland that
ensure that proper investigation is taking place. I understand that my colleagues feel that the state has let down people like the veteran that he cited, but the fact is that previous investigations have not been found to be lawful. That is why we are having to look at the process of investigation. I have said many times standing at this Dispatch Box that I want to ensure that we see the terrorists who cause the vast majority of deaths in Northern Ireland being properly brought to justice. That is what we are working on, and we will continue to work on a system that is fair.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): When the Prime Minister took office, she suggested that her mission would be to tackle “burning injustices”, yet this morning a report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that, under the Cabinets in which she has served over the past nine years, in-work poverty has risen dramatically. Will that not be the legacy of her premiership?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises the IFS report, but in fact that report shows that people are better off when they move into work. It shows that under this Government, more people are in work than ever before, that material deprivation rates have fallen by a fifth since 2010, and that the reason for the relative poverty figures is that pensioners are better off. He might think that cutting pensioners’ incomes is the answer, but actually I do not.
**Point of Order**

12.56 pm

**Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con):** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Since you took the Chair, you have been a stalwart defender of Back Benchers. You have also stood up to bad parliamentary behaviour like the use of the word “racism”. I am deeply upset that your chairmanship has been undermined dramatically because of the very calm and polite advice you gave to hon. Members—leaders of political parties—that was ignored. Please will you do all you can to ensure that words such as “racist” are not common parlance in this House?

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I am always appreciative of kind words and, in so far as he is proffering sympathy for me and expressing concern about my reputation, I am deeply obliged to him, but I am not a delicate flower and I do not feel any concern on that front. I am simply trying to do the right thing by the House. There was originally, as colleagues of long service will know, a list of unparliamentary words, but that list was discontinued, not least on account of its potentially infinite scope. It was therefore discontinued. The word in question is not of itself unparliamentary. The issue is to judge context and to make an assessment of what is seemly in the Chamber, and I made my own assessment and advised the House and the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) accordingly. It was only when I heard the full flow of the words that I was able to make an assessment, and I think it would be wise for colleagues to bear in mind the general principle that one does not impute dishonour to another Member. That is the first point.

The second point is that I know that there is a degree of latitude in respect of questions to the Prime Minister, but I think it would be appropriate, in the remaining weeks before the summer recess and before a new leader of the governing party takes office, to have some regard to that for which the Prime Minister is responsible. She is responsible for her own policies and for the conduct of her Government and their administration of their affairs, and it is important that questions should be put with that overarching consideration and ambit of responsibility in mind. However, I have said what I have said, and the hon. Gentleman has made his point in his question. I have no wish to prolong the argument, and knowing what a naturally good-natured fellow he is, I feel sure that he has no such ambition either. We will leave it there for now.

**Breathing Space Scheme**

1 pm

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):** With permission, I will make a statement on supporting people in problem debt. This is an issue close to my heart. As a former member of the all-party parliamentary group on hunger and food poverty, I have seen at first hand the hardship that problem debt can cause. Now that I am in a position to bring about change, I am focused on improving the lives of the most disadvantaged.

Problem debt places a heavy burden on households and can lead to family breakdown, stress and mental health issues. The Government have taken steps to prevent problem debt from occurring and to support those who have fallen into it. We have reformed the regulation of consumer credit and widened access to professional debt advice, and we are helping to build individual financial capability. Today, I can update the House on the Government’s plans to go further, with the introduction of a breathing space scheme and a statutory debt repayment plan. I am grateful for the support of the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), whose private Member’s Bill and ongoing work have made a key contribution to the scheme becoming Government policy.

For people who are just getting by, even a small income shock can provoke a cycle of debt dependence that can be difficult to escape. If then faced with invasive debt enforcement, it is no wonder that many people in problem debt simply disengage. The first step to countering problem debt is to ensure that consumer credit firms are properly regulated, because loans should not be made to people who cannot afford to repay them. The Government have empowered the Financial Conduct Authority to ensure that firms lend responsibly, protecting consumers from over-borrowing. At Budget 2018, we announced new measures to increase access to affordable credit by helping foster a larger, more vibrant social lending sector.

In parallel, we have put in place support to help people make good financial decisions. The new Money and Pensions Service brings together three existing publicly funded money and pensions guidance services into one new organisation, providing free support and guidance on all aspects of people’s financial lives. Importantly, it also has a statutory duty to develop and co-ordinate a national strategy to improve people’s financial capability. Despite those preventive measures, I recognise that many people still fall into problem debt. For such people, further support is required.

Seeking professional advice is a vital step in moving towards a sustainable debt solution. That is why we have increased public funding for free professional debt advice to almost £56 million this year, delivering 560,000 sessions in England, but more needs to be done. The Money and Pensions Service estimates there are up to 9 million over-indebted people in the UK, but only a fraction of them access free debt advice each year. That is why I can announce today that, following consultation, the Government will deliver on their manifesto commitment to introduce a breathing space scheme for people in problem debt.
The scheme has two parts which, together, will protect debtors from creditor action, help them get professional advice on their debt problems, and help them pay off their debts in a sustainable way. Breathing space will provide debtors with a 60-day period in which interest and charges on their debts are frozen and enforcement action from creditors is paused. Creditors must not start new court action, communications with debtors relating to enforcement of their debt must stop, and benefit reductions to reclaim debt will pause. During the time, debtors will have to seek professional debt advice to find a sustainable solution to their debt problem. These protections will encourage people in problem debt to seek advice earlier and give them the headspace to identify the right debt solution for them.

The statutory debt repayment plan is a new debt solution that will extend the breathing space protections to debtors who commit to fully repaying their debts in a manageable timeline. Importantly, the payment plans will be flexible to changes in debtors’ life circumstances to remain sustainable over the long term. If someone’s disposable income decreases, their payments will go down, and vice versa.

The breathing space scheme will make a real difference to the most vulnerable families across the country, and I recognise the sense of urgency across the House to deliver this policy quickly. I am committed to delivering the scheme swiftly, working closely with key stakeholders to make sure that it works in practice. The Government will lay regulations on the breathing space element of the policy before the end of the year, and we intend to implement it in early 2021. We will continue to develop the statutory debt repayment plan to a longer timetable.

In addition, I am pleased to announce that the Government will go beyond their manifesto commitment to the most vulnerable families across the country, and I commend this statement to the House. 1.8 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I begin by thanking the Minister for his courtesy in giving me advance notice of this statement, which we broadly welcome. There has been a growing consensus for some time about the need for something less dramatic than formal insolvency proceedings which offers hope to people with problem debts that there can be a way out. That is what the breathing space scheme should be—a space to let people get back on their feet, perhaps overcoming a health issue, a period of unemployment or something else that has adversely affected their lives.

There will always be disagreement between the Opposition and the Government on the necessity of the austerity policies that have blighted the country since 2010, but no one can deny that household debt in the UK is large, growing, and problematic for many people. The big change that I have seen in my constituency is that people are using credit not just to buy a car, a new sofa or a washing machine, but to pay their living costs at the end of the month—for food, dinner money, and children’s clothes. The worst is when people, unable to take control of their own affairs, go from one short-term credit product to another, compounding the costs and liabilities they are incurring and sometimes ending up in hock to illegal moneylenders as the only option they have left. One of my constituents in such circumstances ended up suicidal.

We want this policy to work, and my questions for the Minister are in that spirit. First, can he say why a 60-day period has been chosen as optimal? Going back to the need to let people overcome whatever problems they face, I have always felt that the period may need to be longer.

Secondly, will the Minister confirm my understanding that all debts will be covered, including public sector debts like council tax arrears and benefit overpayments? I very much recognise the obliteration of local government finances over the past nine years and, alongside colleagues, I presented a petition to Downing Street this morning on how bad it has been for councils like mine in Tameside. Council tax arrears are one of the biggest causes of the bailiffs being called, and we need such arrears to be included, too.

In addition, will the Minister look specifically at the issue of guarantor loans? Under such loans another person, typically a family member, accepts joint liability for the debt. I had another case of this type from a constituent in Stalybridge just this week. If the breathing
space period does not apply to these loans, the burden will simply pass and offer no relief, which would be counterproductive.

Ultimately, this policy will work only if there are sufficient sources of advice and support for people to access during the breathing space period. It is a reality that such services—advice bureaux, local authority and housing association advice centres, and so on—have been put under massive strain over the past few years. So what strategy do the Government have to significantly improve the capacity in this area? Whatever initiatives have been pursued to date, and whatever merit they have, there is no doubt that we need to go further.

Finally, in the famous words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

“There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.”

As well as a change of economic policy, we believe it is time to regulate further the interest that can be charged on overdrafts and credit cards, to look at the marketing of credit to vulnerable people, and to ensure there is real and effective financial education in schools.

There is a lot to do. This statement is a move in the right direction, but let us make sure we keep going in that direction.

**John Glen:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his typically positive and constructive remarks, and I will try to address the five key points he raises.

First, the 60-day time period is longer than our manifesto commitment of six weeks and is the product of listening to the consultation responses and to the experience of the mechanism in Scotland. Overall, it is seen as the right solution.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman asked which debts are included. I tried to set out in my statement that the scheme is extremely broad, covering public sector debts and arrears. He asked about bailiffs and their role. Of course, the Ministry of Justice completed a consultation exercise in February and will respond in due course. There is also Cabinet Office guidance on the fairness of debt collection. He makes a reasonable point.

Thirdly, the hon. Gentleman asked about guarantor loans, which are an emerging new category of high-cost credit. Such matters are regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority, and I had a conversation just this morning with its chairman. I spoke to Andrew Bailey, its chief executive, earlier this week on the need to be vigilant across all emerging forms of high-cost credit, which is under ongoing review.

Fourthly, the hon. Gentleman asked about capacity and capability in the area of debt advice. I envisage that the creation of the Money and Pensions Service as a new single entity will bring much better co-ordination of the available advice. As I mentioned, the Government spent £56 million last year, and 85,000 more people were seen than in the previous year. We are looking at how that advice can become consistently of a higher standard.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about the long-term causes and the regulation and marketing of high-cost credit products. Following the recent issues at London Capital & Finance, I directed the FCA to examine what happened, and I have asked my officials in the Treasury to conduct a separate review of how regulation works. We have to continue being vigilant on this evolving space, and the increased digitalisation of the availability of high-cost credit means that the regulation and oversight needs to keep pace.

I hope that answers the hon. Gentleman’s questions.

**Dame Caroline Spelman** (Meriden) (Con): I welcome this statement and the Government going beyond their original manifesto commitment. It gives me a chance to thank my citizens advice bureau, which has done fantastic work on debt rescheduling during my 22 years as an MP.

Does the Minister welcome the Church of England’s initiative to teach financial literacy in its primary schools, and would he encourage rolling out such an approach to prevention more widely?

**John Glen:** I welcome my right hon. Friend’s observations on the Church of England’s interventions on financial literacy. The ongoing challenge is to develop national consistency in the delivery of financial education and advice. A number of initiatives are under way, one of which is trying to get financial services providers, particularly the banks, to work in a more co-ordinated way. I am happy to endorse the work of the Church of England, which has been a significant partner in improving financial literacy across the country.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am pleased that the UK Government have decided to put this in place and have set out the mechanism for doing so. In Scotland we have the debt arrangement scheme, which was launched in 2004 and significantly reformed in 2011, and a breathing space is built into that scheme.

Over £200 million of debt has been repaid since the reforms in Scotland, and 6,000 people completed a direct payment plan between 2011 and 2018, so I am pleased to see in the consultation responses published today that the Government have looked at how the system works in Scotland and have learned lessons. It is clear that, where the Scottish system has the powers to do so, we have the ability to trailblaze and lead the way.

In 2016, because of the debt arrangement scheme in Scotland, we had the lowest proportion of over-indebted people of any part of the UK. As austerity continues, we continue to see increases in the number of people suffering under the burden of debt. In 2017 there were 2.4 million children living in families with problem debt in England and Wales. StepChange, the debt charity, has said that 60% of those in problem debt fell into it because of an unexpected life event, and not because of poor money management—something external happened that changed their life, meaning they could no longer manage their debt.

I am concerned about why it will take the Government so long to implement the changes. Surely, as they already deal with a similar system in Scotland, most creditors should be able to take on the changes fairly quickly and roll them out over a wider group of people. Could this be done any quicker than 2021, which is the date I have seen in the papers?
**John Glen**: I thank the hon. Lady for her observations, and she is right that the Government have carefully listened to and observed the experience in Scotland. She asks about the timeline, and I have done everything I can to move this forward as quickly as possible. The challenge is to bring the sector along at the same pace and to ensure that we have complete commitment and sign-up to the process so that it will be a success. I am pleased that the chief executive officer of StepChange has said that he is particularly pleased to see the Government’s confirmation that debts owed to the Government will be included in the scheme. We are working very carefully, and this is the timeline to which we have to work.

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): I thank the Minister for the proposals, which will help some of the most vulnerable and their families and, I believe, save lives. Will he clarify which stakeholders he will engage with to ensure effective implementation, and will they include debt advice charities such as Christians Against Poverty, which does such excellent work in this field?

**John Glen**: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the excellent work of Christians Against Poverty, which is indeed a key stakeholder. We engage widely with the sector, including the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, StepChange, the Money Advice Trust and the charity National Debtline—it really is a collaborative effort—and I am pleased with their response to where we have got to.

**Jack Dromey** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Debt ruins lives. Debt harms health. Debt damages relationships. Debt holds back children. In extreme circumstances, debt kills. When the Financial Guidance and Claims Act 2018—it established the Money and Pensions Service—was being taken through the House, the Government made a commitment to move on a breathing space scheme. Today’s announcement is therefore welcome, particularly the action being taken to defend the interests of those suffering mental ill health. In welcoming today’s announcement, I urge the Government to ensure that the new arrangements are properly resourced and that there is a sense of urgency in their implementation, because the sooner they are put in place, relieving that terrible burden that afflicts so many people in our country, the better.

**John Glen**: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He played a significant role in the passage of the legislation that led to today’s announcement. He urges me once again on the timeframe, and I can assure him that my Treasury officials are working as rapidly as possible, but we must also ensure that it actually works. One of the questions he asked me previously, about what is included in the scheme and the range of public sector debts, has been a significant driver in those conversations. I acknowledge and take on board his comments.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Absolutely welcome the breathing space scheme, which will help people facing debts that they cannot repay. I join other Members in thanking citizens advice bureaux and organisations such as the Trussell Trust that help to signpost people to better debt advice. It has told me that young people, in particular, can get enormously concerned about their mobile phones being cut off, because if they lose their phones they lose their communications and any hope of finding work, for example. Will the Minister confirm that this will cover a wide range of debts and mean that people need not worry about losing their homes or their communications while their debts are sorted out?

**John Glen**: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for those observations and for mentioning the Trussell Trust, which is headquartered in my constituency and has done a lot of work in this area. The principles underpinning the scheme are based on the Insolvency Service’s system and include all debts covered by the system. There are a small number of exceptions—for example, deductions for child maintenance payments—but we have designed this so that it is meaningful. It is not about a holiday from ongoing payments; it is about dealing with arrears and debt. The expectation is that when people join the scheme they will continue to pay for everyday expenses as they occur.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Is the Minister aware of Debt Hacker, a free online tool that I launched here in the House of Commons? It is run by activists and uses FCA rules that are poorly understood by the general public to help consumers to get back their £50—or however much it is—from companies that use extortion to get money out of others. Is he also aware, given his broader role in the Treasury, of the fact that it is mainly NHS and public sector workers who are in this debt trap, because wages have not kept up with housing, energy and other costs?

**John Glen**: The hon. Lady raises two points. I was not familiar with the Debt Hacker app, but I will seek it out because it sounds like a very worthwhile initiative. I respectfully say to her that in the fourth quarter of 2018 debt as a percentage of household income was 139%, whereas 10 years previously it was 160%. I recognise that households are experiencing strain, but it is not quite as dire as she makes out.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Loan sharks are the unacceptable face of capitalism, but this is a complex area and the Government should proceed with caution. Confidence in the market, and in capitalism more generally, depends crucially on the payment of debt. I very much hope that the Government will consult widely with the industry, particularly with credit card companies, and consider piloting, because there are unintended consequences of Governments, in their dying days, trying to virtue-signal and regulate more but actually doing more damage than good. Therefore, please may we have piloting and widespread consultation?

**John Glen**: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his observations. This is not virtue-signalling; it is delivering on a manifesto commitment with the sectors involved, carefully and methodically. We rightly have a robust regulator with powers to deal with exploitative credit providers. As I indicated earlier, we are not complacent. I observe his concerns about ensuring that we implement this appropriately and with the wide assent of the industry.
Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I welcome the breathing space scheme, which will certainly be helpful in Blaenau Gwent, because we discovered that Wonga lent £1 million a year to our borough’s residents. I suspect that a 60-day period will not be enough. The fact is that although citizens advice bureaux are great, we have insufficient guidance and support in our borough. I think that 90 days might be necessary, or perhaps even more, so I ask the Minister to think carefully about that possibility.

John Glen: We certainly keep all matters under review, but the 60-day period has not come from nowhere; it has come from deep engagement with the sector. As Joanna Elson, the chief executive of the Money Advice Trust, has said, “this new scheme could well be a game-changer in our efforts to tackle problem debt as a society.”

I recognise that there are a range of views, but we have looked at what is out there and considered the Scottish experience, and we believe that this is the right policy response.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Unless I am much mistaken, the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) is in danger of being rather a naughty man. I am advised that he beetled into the Chamber halfway through the response from the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman—

[ Interruption. ] I was advised that he came through the double doors. I do not know whether he toddled out for some reason and then came back. If he is telling me —

[ Interruption. ] The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) is chuntering from a sedentary position, and gesticulating as well, and in a manner not altogether helpful at this juncture to the Chair. If the hon. Member for Harborough says to me explicitly that he was here at the very start of the statement, I am happy to indulge him. Otherwise, I would say that he should count his lucky stars, because after all he did get in at Prime Minister’s questions, so he has had a jolly good day.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): I take your advice, Mr Speaker. You think I was not here at the very start, and you are surely correct, so I will sit down.

Mr Speaker: Well, it is merely a question of remaining seated. After that Socratic dialogue, we will leave it for now. The hon. Gentleman can bank his PMQ. Very well done.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Financial difficulties are considered an adverse childhood experience. Facing problem debt in the family as a child can perpetuate cycles of poor mental health, low achievement, poor employment opportunities, prison, drug addiction and so on. I am very pleased that the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) earlier drew attention to ACEs. Will the Minister assure me that the breathing space scheme will include advisers being trained in adverse childhood experiences and trauma, so that the problems of financial hardships are not perpetuated into the next generation?

John Glen: The hon. Lady makes a very reasonable point about the nature of the training for debt advisers. I cannot give her a specific commitment on that, because there are so many partners involved, but I will look into it and see what can be done to advance that very reasonable observation about the quality of advice given.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I welcome the proposals, although it has taken us since 2017 to get to this point and it is going to take another two years to get the first part operational. I am glad the Minister is moving swiftly and not dragging his feet.

Two problems for people who get into debt, particularly over tax credits or benefit clawback, are the interest charges that are applied as they try to repay and the management fees charged on top by debt-recovery agencies, which mean that the debt increasingly expands. The Minister could have a direct input on both those things; why does he not put a ceiling on those charges, rather than simply using a freeze?

John Glen: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point, but that is not an area for which I have direct responsibility. Reclaimed overpayments—for example, from universal credit—will be included in the scheme. I cannot comment on things that are outside my control, but I hear his point about doing this as quickly as possible.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Ind): The announcement of the scheme is brilliant news and I welcome the statement enormously, and particularly the parts on the inclusion of Government debt in the scheme. I also welcome the fact that the Government have recognised the effect that debt has on people’s lives and their ability to get out of debt. However, I urge the Minister to look into the Government’s own policies—I suspect he knows what I am coming to. The five-week universal credit wait is a big issue. Advance payments are not the solution because they themselves are a debt and are putting vulnerable people further into debt. As I have said many times, the advance payment for the most vulnerable should be a grant, not a loan. As it is, we are handing out advance payments to around 60% of claimants. We are handing out the money anyway, so it is not going to cost us anything. It is just a cash-flow situation.

The Work and Pensions Committee has recently heard moving and horrendous testimonies from women who have been forced into sex work because they cannot make ends meet. We heard stories of women going into a brothel for around three days, working 20 hours out of 24 and coming out with £150 of earnings, and that gives them a roof over their heads as well. As our Prime Minister leaves office, I cannot believe that is the legacy she wants to leave behind. Please will the Minister look into this issue? It is also a Government debt.

John Glen: I acknowledge the hon. Lady’s deep interest in and work on this topic over several years. She has raised points to which it is difficult for me to respond because they are out with my responsibilities. As she will know, in the Budget we announced a £1 billion package of additional financial support for universal credit. I acknowledge that the hon. Lady disagrees with one element, but that additional support did involve the
reduction of the maximum deduction from the standard allowance, from 40% to 30%. I cannot speak for a policy area for which I do not have responsibility. I am delivering a breathing space scheme that covers a wide range of debts and reaches deep into public sector debts, which I was keen for it to do from the outset.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): As I set out in a recent Westminster Hall debate, the amounts being deducted from universal credit are a significant part of the reasons people fall into problem debt. I agree that a lot of that is down to Department for Work and Pensions policy, but I have seen many examples of people whose tax credit overpayments are being deducted from their universal credit, and of people being told that they have overpayments dating from 2006 or 2011, when they were supposed to have been written off. The average of £1,200 being deducted from people's universal credit is contributing to their not having enough to get by or to pay their bills. Will the Minister and the Treasury please look into this issue as a matter of urgency and allow people to appeal against such deductions?

John Glen: The hon. Lady will know that, as I said in response to the previous question, that is an issue of the administration of benefits and is the responsibility of the DWP. I will certainly make her observations clear to my colleagues in Government. Universal credit overpayments will be included from day one. I will make sure that I fully address the hon. Lady’s points and write to her on the detail.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I very much welcome the statement and the action that will be taken from today, because research shows that each year more than 100,000 people who are in debt attempt suicide. The scheme has to be helpful in giving them the support they need and improving mental health. One suicide crisis period, particularly for young men, is early adulthood; will the Minister liaise with colleagues to ensure that financial education and support is available not only in schools but in colleges and universities?

John Glen: The hon. Lady makes a sensible point about the need for appropriate financial education at all levels. It needs to start early and endure through adolescence and into early adulthood. Several initiatives are under way to try to improve the quality of financial advice. The setting up of the Money and Pensions Service and its broader remit in this area is one part of that, but there are other partners, including our banks, through UK Finance, which is keen to do more. I very much take on board the hon. Lady’s observations.

Businesses: Late Payments

1.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): With permission, I wish to make a statement about the Government response to the “Creating a responsible payment culture” call for evidence, which I have published today.

The Government are committed to supporting small and medium-sized enterprises to start well and grow, including through a network of 38 growth hubs throughout England that provide advice, guidance and support. As part of our industrial strategy, we have an action plan to unlock more than £20 billion of investment in innovative and high-potential businesses. Where we see practices that unfairly constrain SMEs’ finance choices, we are prepared to act. For example, we recently removed a barrier that was preventing some SMEs from using invoice finance because of prohibitive contract terms imposed by their customers. The new measure is expected to provide a long-term boost to the UK economy worth almost £1 billion.

Last year, we launched a call for evidence asking for views on how to create a responsible payment culture for small business. Although a number of measures are already in place to tackle late payment—from the prompt payment code to the ability to charge interest on late payments and the increased transparency through the payment practices reporting duty—the call for evidence told us that there is more to do to improve the payment landscape. That is why I am announcing today that I will now take further and firmer action to tackle the scourge of late payments while maintaining a holistic approach to cultural change by using all the avenues available to us in this space.

I will shortly launch a consultation to seek views on strengthening the small business commissioner’s ability to assist and advocate for small business in the area of late payments through the provision of powers to compel the disclosure of information. I will also seek views on the merit of the commissioner’s potentially being able to issue penalties for poor payment practices. In respect of large businesses that have poor or unfair payment practices, we want to seek views on whether the commissioner should be able to apply sanctions, such as binding payment plans or financial penalties.

I am also announcing today that responsibility for the voluntary prompt payment code is to move to the small business commissioner and be reformed. This will unify prompt payment measures with the commissioner’s other responsibilities and address weaknesses in the operation of the current code. We have seen the impact of the strengthening of the code since our announcement in October: earlier in the year, we saw the removal from the code of five businesses and the suspension of 12 others. The next compliance round is currently under way.

I will take a tough compliance approach to large companies that do not comply with the payment practices reporting duty. The legislation allows for the prosecution of those who do not comply. I will use this enforcement power against those who do not comply, where necessary. We are already writing to the businesses that we have assessed as being within scope to remind them of their duty.
The Government will launch a business basics fund competition, with funding of up to £1 million, which will encourage small and medium-sized enterprises to utilise payment technology. We have recognised that tech adoption has had a positive impact on the productivity of small businesses. This competition is coupled with the small business commissioner’s strategy to deliver advice, signpost and provide a clear pathway for small businesses when they feel that they need support.

I also intend to establish a ministerial-led group to bring together key Government Departments to act on improving prompt payment across both the public and private sectors. We are working with UK Financial Investments and the financial sector to review the role that supply chain finance plays in fair and prompt payments, including the potential for an industry-led standard for good practice in supply chain finance. This review will report back to the Business Secretary by the end of the year.

We also want to bring greater transparency to how supply chain finance is reported in company accounts and assessed in audits. Working with the Financial Reporting Council, we want to develop guidance and build that into its sampling of companies’ accounts. Supply chain finance can provide an affordable finance option for SMEs, but they need to be assured that the terms are fair.

Our modern industrial strategy aims to make Britain the best place in which to start and grow a business, and removing barriers to growth is key to that aim. The response to the call for evidence and the package of measures that I am announcing today will ensure that we will continue to tackle the issue of late payments. I offer great thanks to the Federation of Small Businesses and its Fair Pay campaign, which has campaigned so hard for movement from the Government. I also thank the hundreds of businesses that have taken part and engaged comprehensively with the Department in assessing the call for evidence.

Finally, I thank the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee for its significant work on this issue and the work that it will continue to do. I am sure that it will hold us to account on the improvements that we are announcing today. I will place a copy of the Government’s response in the Libraries of both Houses today. I commend the statement to this House.

1.42 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Unfortunately, I have only just received a copy of the Minister’s statement. I do not know why there was a delay, but it was not particularly helpful in preparing my response. [Interruption.] The Minister has just graciously apologised.

Late payment is believed to be the cause of 50,000 business failures each year, at a cost to the economy of £2.5 billion, along with thousands of jobs. Those are figures from the Federation of Small Businesses. The Minister is right to pay tribute to that organisation for the brilliant work that it does in advocating for small businesses on this issue and on so many others.

In her press statement, the Minister reported a fall in the scale of the problems facing small businesses, but let me caution her on that. She cited the excellent work of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, but it has suggested that it has evidence that payment terms are growing longer to mask some of these problems. Perhaps she can address that through some of the proposals that she has outlined.

We welcome the steps announced today as an important start in tackling the scourge of late payment. I tabled amendments to the Enterprise Bill that would have given the small business commissioner powers to insist on binding arbitration and fines for persistent late payment. The Government rejected those amendments, so we put the proposals in our 2017 manifesto, along with requirements for anyone bidding for a Government contract to pay their suppliers within 30 days. It is good to see the Government catching up with us today in their proposals.

The small business commissioner does great work with the £1.35 million in his revenue budget and, as I understand it, 12 members of staff at his disposal, but there are limits to what he can do. Although the £3.8 million recovered by the commissioner is important to the businesses affected, it is a fraction of the money withheld by late payers, which is in the tens of billions of pounds on any of the estimates available to us. What extra budget will the commissioner be given to discharge the additional responsibilities that the Minister is proposing, and what is the timescale for the consultation?

Accountability of company boards is a step in the right direction, but it will be important to compare the experience of the supplier with the reported practice in company accounts. How will the Minister ensure that what is reported is the time from the date of supply of goods and services rather than the date of recording the invoice, which any accountant knows can be significantly different and is often subject to delay when invoices are mysteriously lost or queried by accounts departments?

How will this add to the existing duty to report? When will the consultation on giving the powers on the duty to report to the small business commissioner take place?

As the Minister told us, a number of companies that are members of the prompt payment code have been found not to comply with the code. The scandal of Carillion is an example of abuse of that code; we saw payment times of 120 to 180 days becoming the norm. Giving the policing of that code to the small business commissioner is a sensible idea, so will the Minister say what additional resources for these powers will be given to him?

The use of project bank accounts would have prevented the £2 billion loss to 38,000 suppliers in the Carillion fiasco. What consideration are the Government giving to extending the use of project bank accounts? I also note that the Government are pledging from 1 September to force bidders for Government contracts of more than £5 million to pay 95% of their invoices within 60 days. That is in line with the prompt payment code, but only with the lower end of its requirements. Why not make it a 30-day requirement?

One complaint of businesses is that the public sector is the source of some of the worst practice. The Minister mentioned the public sector in her statement. Another complaint is that smaller firms are often at fault in delaying payments. When does she expect action to be taken on public sector and other small business delays?

The problems of late payment need significant changes in practice. Today’s statement announces a series of measures which, if properly resourced, could make a
significant difference. Businesses deserve a change of culture. The economy and the country need a change in practice. In broadly welcoming these measures, I hope that the Government’s delivery matches the rhetoric.

Kelly Tolhurst: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for the fact that he did not receive a copy of my statement in sufficient time. That was not my intention at all. I hope that he will understand, following the many debates that he and I have had in the House, that that is not how I tend to work with him. I thank him for recognising that this statement should have an impact on the late-payment problems of many small businesses. One thing that has been made absolutely clear to me since I became a Minister—and actually prior to being elected, when I was a small business owner myself—is that late payment is always raised by companies that deal with large organisations. I am very pleased to be able to move forward on this matter.

The amount of money owed in late payments has halved. I wish to recognise the work that has been done by the small business commissioner since he took up his role one and a half years ago. He has collected more than £3.5 million in late payments. The hon. Gentleman is right to question his role and when the consultation will take place. We want that consultation to happen quite quickly. One of the key things that came out of the call for evidence was that people wanted more powers to be given to the small business commissioner. They saw his role as, in effect, an umbrella role encompassing a number of enforcement abilities for him to act on behalf of small businesses.

The consultation will happen soon, and I would like it to take place with speed. I reiterate that, as we seek views on whether we should allow the small business commissioner to apply sanctions such as binding payment plans and financial penalties, that would be a massive step change and step forward. The small business commissioner has been very vocal in requesting more powers to enable him to represent and help the small businesses that come to him.

We will also be seeking views on whether the small business Minister should have the ability to refer topics to the small business commissioner for investigation. The small business commissioner will currently investigate only once a complaint has come from a small business, so we are looking at other ways in which investigations could be carried out. Obviously, I am giving hon. Members just a sample of what will be included in the consultation.

The hon. Gentleman is quite right on the matter of boards. On the back of the Chancellor’s announcements in the spring, we are pleased to give audit committees the power to review payment practices and for that to be included in the annual report. We are working with the Financial Reporting Council and the frameworks department at BEIS to work out the best way for that to happen. The new strategic reporting requirement was introduced in January. We are asking the FRC how the payment reporting duty is covered by that new duty, if at all. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will legislate to make that happen if necessary.

The Chartered Institute of Credit Management has worked hard on this issue over recent months, especially on the strengthening of the voluntary prompt payment code in October. We are pleased that cross-examining the data gathered under the payment reporting duty has helped with compliance with the voluntary code. We and the CICM believe that the best place for that duty is with the small business commissioner, so that the commissioner is, in effect, a one-stop shop and an easily identifiable pathway for small businesses.

The hon. Gentleman is right to talk about project bank accounts. Some hon. Members present, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), have lobbied me in the past on the matter of retentions. We have told the industry that we expect it to come to a consensus on a way forward, and we will take action if it does not.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have announced that from 1 September any company bidding for Government contracts over £5 million will be expected to pay 95% of their invoices within 60 days. If they do not achieve that target, they will not necessarily be able to bid for further contracts. In April 2019, we announced our new ambition that 90% of undisputed invoices should be paid to small businesses within five days.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Like the Minister, I ran a small business, so I recognise the challenge of late payments for small businesses. It is to the credit of this Government that they created the role of small business commissioner. The Minister said that she is holding a consultation on additional powers for the small business commissioner, who has often said that he needs more powers. Will she be a little clearer about when those powers might be available to him, and whether they will include the power to fine businesses that fail to honour their commitments? The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee has heard about many businesses that signed up to the prompt payment code but failed to adhere to its terms, and the small business commissioner needs a little bit more beef to get his teeth into that issue. Finally, will she consider making it mandatory to add interest to overdue accounts, because that would give businesses that are delaying payments a real incentive to get their payments made on time?

Kelly Tolhurst: Primary legislation would be required to give further powers to the small business commissioner, so we will seek views and consult. We do want to give the small business commissioner further powers—for example, the ability to apply sanctions to businesses that do not comply with requests for information, court orders or financial penalties. Such sanctions could include binding payment plans.

My hon. Friend asked whether we would consider making it mandatory to apply interest to overdue accounts. There is currently low take-up of the application of interest to invoices, so there needs to be an education piece for small businesses, which we very much hope to achieve through the small business commissioner. With all these elements coming under one roof, he can launch an ambitious PR strategy to enable small businesses to understand what powers already exist for them.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement, which in our case arrived in plenty of time for us to look at. We welcome initiatives to curb late payments, but let us be frank: this does not go nearly far enough. For anyone tuning in to last night’s Tory hard Brexit hustings, it will come as no
surprise that the UK Government remain opposed to taking the steps required to protect Scottish business. Does the Minister have the good grace to agree that it is now beyond a joke that, in place of serious policy steps, her statement merely proposes some minor technological measures and platitudes on best practice? And she did not fully answer this question, so can she confirm that she has looked at the Scottish Government’s project bank account scheme? Has she learned any lessons about how that is protecting smaller contractors and subcontractors on public procurement projects?

With the Federation of Small Businesses stating, “If all payments were made on time 50,000 more businesses could be kept open each year”, it is clear that small business needs legal protection, so does the Minister now regret her Government’s failure to support the Construction Industry (Protection of Cash Retentions) Bill, with which my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) aimed to stop late payments in that sector? Indeed, does she regret her Government’s failure to extend that sort of protection across the economy to all small and medium-sized enterprises?

Kelly Tolhurst: I stand here today and make announcements, but we also need to recognise that this is about culture. We want to use all the tools in the box to legislate and take action where possible, but we also want to work with the industry and businesses to change the culture. It is not right that large firms take advantage of smaller businesses through late payments, so today we bring forward our response to the call for evidence, to stem the scourge of late payments.

The hon. Gentleman mentions project bank accounts. As I briefly outlined in my response to the previous question, project bank accounts and the use of retention is obviously a concern for many people. It is part of the whole late payment arena. That is why, as I have said, we have worked with the industry and heard the views of both sides. A consensus has yet to be found in the industry. The challenge that we have set is that the industry must come to a way forward or we will take action.

To answer the hon. Gentleman’s question, I have indeed looked at some of the work that has gone on in Scotland and at what has happened in Northern Ireland. I highlight what the Federation of Small Businesses Scotland and at what has happened in Northern Ireland.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): The words that my hon. Friend just spoke were those of my constituent, Mr Mike Cherry. There can be no greater praise than that from such an advocate for small business. The FSB supports these measures, so I commend her on them.

Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the main challenges is not late but prompt payment? Far too many big businesses continue to extend payment terms—150 days, 180 days or even more. That is simply not acceptable and is unfeasible for many small businesses. Will my hon. Friend add that to her to-do list and really make a difference for small businesses?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and recognise his particular interest as my predecessor in this post. He is absolutely correct: prompt payment is a particular concern for small businesses, and some large companies alter their payment terms. We are seeking views on giving the small business commissioner more powers because he acts for small businesses that have struggled with getting prompt payment. Currently, his powers are not binding; we feel that if his powers were binding, that could be part of his suit of armour in tackling late and non-payments.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, Rachel Reeves.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

When our Select Committee looked into this issue, many small businesses insisted on giving evidence in private, so worried were they about retaliation from the big businesses that they supplied. Larger businesses, including Morrisons, Aldi and WH Smith, are not signatories to the prompt payment code, while Boots pays suppliers at a discount for the privilege of their being paid on time. The power imbalance is so great now between bigger and smaller businesses that I urge the Government and the Minister to look again, make the prompt payment code mandatory and bring down the period to a benchmark of 30 days.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady and highlight again the significant work that her Committee has done on this issue, including with our Department. She is absolutely right to highlight the power imbalance, which is why many small businesses feel that they are unable to speak out. That is why we are seeking views in our consultation on powers for the small business commissioner. We will seek to enable the Small Business Minister to make a referral to the small business commissioner; to give the commissioner investigatory powers similar to those of the Groceries Code Adjudicator; and to empower him to carry out an investigation without the small business involved having had to report the issue. There is a suggestion that the process could be anonymised.

The hon. Lady raises an important point, and I am very much aware of it. It will be very much part of my drafting, with the team, in regard to the consultation.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome this statement from the Minister and I know that she is committed to ensuring that small businesses are dealt with fairly.

The project bank accounts introduced by the Northern Ireland Executive have already been mentioned. That measure now applies to hundreds of millions of pounds of Government contracts and ensures that the money goes not to the main contractor but directly to the subcontractors when they have completed the work. That stops the main contractor holding on to the money or bargaining with the small companies and means that the small companies do not have to take the initiative,
which they are sometimes afraid to do. Will the Minister work with Northern Ireland officials to ensure that the lessons learned there can be applied here?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that. I highlight his particular interest in this area and the fact that he was one of the Ministers responsible in Northern Ireland when project bank accounts were introduced there. He is right that there are absolutely some merits in such accounts; as he knows, I have taken a particular interest in the subject and I will continue to work on it. The Government are clear that where project bank accounts can be used with Government contracts, they will be, although they are not always a suitable measure in some large contracts.

Today, I have announced a suite of tools to tackle late payments. Am I going to stand here and say that in future we will not have to do anything more? Of course not. Part of government and what we need to do in a changing economy and business environment is to make sure that we keep looking at ways to make things easier for small businesses.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. She talked about the challenges facing small businesses. Brexit, of course, will cause huge disruption to small businesses’ supply chains, given the added bureaucracy and tariffs.

This statement on late payments is welcome, but may I ask the Minister again the specific question put by the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves)? Why not make the prompt payment code mandatory—compulsory for large businesses? Why is there is further delay with consultations and what have you? She should make it mandatory, as we have been arguing for.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the statement and the moves that the Government have made today. He is absolutely right about the prompt payment code: it is voluntary. As it stands, there are more than 2,000 signatories to it; they sign up and commit to paying 90% of their invoices within 60 days. As he will know, the Government initiated the new duty on companies to report biannually on payment practices. To date, we have had more than 15,000 reports for over 7,000 companies. That data has enabled the Chartered Institute of Credit Management to scrutinise the voluntary code payment data.

We have seen action. Five businesses have been removed from the code and 12 have been suspended. As I have outlined today, when people are not complying with the legislation, we will take action. We are continuing to move forward to strengthen the prompt payment code and close any holes and weaknesses that there are.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): When it comes to cash retentions, the Minister said twice that it was up to industry to find a way forward, but they are actually a Government responsibility. It is about 40 years since it was first recommended that the use of cash retentions in the construction industry be phased out. In my time as an MP, the Government have consulted twice on the issue, voted down amendments to the Enterprise Bill, and refused to back both my private Member’s Bill and that of the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous). Instead of listening to the large, tier 1 contractors, will the Minister pledge to take action and give a timescale for the phasing out of the use of cash retentions in the construction industry?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of retentions. He says that this is not for industry, but for the Government. I have spoken to industry representatives and businesses about this issue, and it is clear that the industry has not come to a single way forward to deal with this. We hope that the measures that I have announced today on supply chain finance will make a big difference. With regard to cash retentions, I have been clear that if industry cannot come to a consensus on a way forward, the Government will step in and take action.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s statement, and I thank her for meeting me after I introduced my Public Sector Supply Chains (Project Bank Accounts) Bill earlier this year. However, the measures she has introduced are actually recommendations from the 2013 inquiry that I led into late payments. Six years on, this is a little late, although I recognise her commitment. These measures will be no comfort to Neil Skinner, who owns a business in my constituency and lost £176,000 when Carillion collapsed. That was not a one-off; we know that there are other Carillions out there. Some 380 small businesses closed directly as a result of Carillion’s collapse. I cannot understand why she is so reticent after decades of this issue and why she will not act on project bank accounts.

Kelly Tolhurst: I recognise the hon. Lady’s passion and commitment. As I have said to her in previous meetings, I am happy to continue to work with her on this issue. Project bank accounts have value. I have been clear that if industry cannot come to a consensus in the time it has taken to bring these measures forward, but we are taking action. These bad practices have been happening not only in recent years but for decades, and this Government are finally taking action.

The hon. Lady is right to mention her constituent and the losses that his business suffered through the collapse of Carillion. Carillion’s debt was estimated to be £900 million at the end, which excluded £500 million of supply chain finance. That is why we will work with the Financial Reporting Council to find ways to bring transparency to companies’ accounts and reporting, which we hope will address any larger failures in the future.
Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Government to prepare a strategy for recycling out-of-service Royal Navy nuclear submarines and to report annually on progress, to consult on extending decommissioning powers in Part 1 of the Energy Act 2004 to include the recycling of Royal Navy nuclear submarines, and to publish estimates of the taxpayer liability associated with such submarines; and for connected purposes.

Britain still has every nuclear submarine that it has ever had. There are 13 old nuclear submarines tied up in Devonport in Plymouth and seven tied up in Rosyth. When I was elected in 2017, I said that I would make safety, securely and sustainably recycling these submarines one of my priorities. I have asked the Prime Minister two questions at PMQs about the lack of a funded plan to recycle them. I have helped to put together a cross-party campaign with the hon. Members for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) and for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan). We have met Ministers, submitted proposals and encouraged the questioning of the Public Accounts Committee, which published an excellent report on the subject today. We now present our arguments and proposals in this Bill. The Bill has two questions at PMQs about the lack of a funded plan for their disposal...

...The submarines, and I want No. 3 basin in Devonport to be used to enhance the base-porting location for the brilliant new Type 26 frigates we will get, and hopefully the Type 31 frigates in due course.

...Instead of further delaying this decision, it is clear that the Government need to act now. I know that Rosyth has plans for the dock space currently used by the submarines, and I want No. 3 basin in Devonport to be used to enhance the base-porting location for the brilliant new Type 26 frigates we will get, and hopefully the Type 31 frigates in due course.

...Over a year ago, I helped to kick off this campaign with colleagues from all parties. We wrote to the Prime Minister urging her to fund a defuelling and dismantling strategy. These submarines will not go away on their own. Although they have been hidden out of sight for many years, the longer this recycling project drags on, the more expensive it becomes to deal with them. Retired submarines have been ignored by Governments of all colours for more than 50 years. They need to be dealt with properly—I think all parties can unite on that—to secure a safe and decent future.

...A properly funded defuelling and dismantling strategy—broadly, submarine recycling—would present opportunities to invest in skills and innovation. It would also foster greater collaboration between the defence and civil nuclear sectors. The workforce already moves between those sectors, as does the science of decommissioning, but at the moment the Government still deal with them in two broad, submarine recycling—would present opportunities to invest in skills and innovation. It would also foster greater collaboration between the defence and civil nuclear sectors. The workforce already moves between those sectors, as does the science of decommissioning, but at the moment the Government still deal with them in two distinct silos. There is an efficiency for the public purse in collaborating, and that work must be more joined up between the ministerial and official level and the work on the ground and in the docks. Decommissioning is highly skilled and technical work that creates good...
jobs and supports the local economy and community. Above all, recycling these old nuclear submarines is in the national interest. Plymouth and Rosyth cannot be asked to store old nuclear submarines indefinitely. That is why we need a properly funded plan for these submarines, using the same principles as in the civil nuclear clean-up programme, because they must be recycled safely, securely and sustainably.

We know that once people find out about these submarines, they are concerned about what will happen to them. We also know that once people have seen them—whether on Google Maps, in person by driving alongside the docks in Devonport and Rosyth, or on the warship tours in the dockyard in Devonport—they have no choice but to think about what should happen to them. That is why, on behalf of the hon. Members for Berwick-upon-Tweed and for Dunfermline and West Fife, I am presenting this Bill as part of a campaign that will not rest until we win. I am doing so to highlight that essential work can be delivered. That is what my Bill will do, and that is why it has cross-party support. I hope Ministers will pick it up and run with it.

**Question put and agreed to.**

Ordered,

That Luke Pollard, Anne-Marie Trevelyan, Douglas Chapman, Dr Julian Lewis, Meg Hillier, Mrs Madeline Moon, Ruth Smeeth, Sir Gary Streeter, Richard Harrington, Dr Alan Whitehead, Jamie Stone and Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi present the Bill.

Luke Pollard accordingly presented the Bill.

**Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 408).**

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**Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill**

**Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee**


**New Clause 1**

**EXAMINATION BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL**

“(1) The Comptroller and Auditor General may carry out an examination of—

(a) the Sponsor Body; or

(b) the Delivery Authority; or

(c) both the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority under section 6 of the National Audit Act 1983.

(2) For the purpose of an examination of the Sponsor Body or the Delivery Authority, or the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority under section 6 of the National Audit Act 1983, the Comptroller and Auditor General shall have a right of access at all reasonable times to relevant documents held or controlled by a person in circumstances in which that person has or had a contractual obligation to supply goods or services directly or indirectly to the Sponsor Body or Delivery Authority, and the Comptroller and Auditor General shall be entitled to require from such a person holding or accountable for any such document such information and explanation as are reasonably necessary for that purpose.

(3) For the purposes of subsection (2) a person has a contractual obligation to supply goods or services indirectly to the Sponsor Body or Delivery Authority if and only if that person has a contractual obligation to supply goods or services that arises from a contract which is a subcontract in relation to a main contract between the Sponsor Body or Delivery Authority, or the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority, or the Sponsor Body and another person or body.

(4) For the purposes of subsection (3), a contract is a subcontract in relation to a main contract if its performance would fulfil, or contribute to the fulfilment of, an obligation to supply goods or services in the main contract.

(5) In subsection (2) “relevant documents” means documents that relate to the contractual obligation to supply goods or services.”—(Mark Tami.)

**Brought up, and read the First time.**

2.23 pm

**Mark Tami** (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 1, in clause 2, page 2, line 16, at end insert—

“(f) to require the Delivery Authority when allocating contracts for construction and related work to have regard for the company’s policies on corporate social responsibility, including those relating to the blacklisting of employees or potential employees from employment.”

Amendment 6, page 2, line 21, at end insert—

“(h) to undertake, and publish, an annual audit of the companies that have been awarded contracts for the Parliamentary building works, with a view to establishing their size and geographical location.”
Amendment 7, page 2, line 44, leave out “desirability of ensuring” and insert “need to ensure”.  
This amendment requires the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body, in exercising its functions, to have regard to the need to ensure that educational and other facilities are provided for people visiting the Palace of Westminster (rather than requiring it to have regard to the desirability of ensuring that such facilities are provided).

Amendment 4, page 2, line 46, at end insert—
“(h) the need to ensure that economic benefits of the Parliamentary building works are delivered across the nations and regions of the United Kingdom, in terms of contracts for works and in any other way the Sponsor Board considers appropriate.”

Amendment 5, page 2, line 46, at end insert—
“(h) the need to conserve and sustain the outstanding architectural, archaeological and historical significance of the Palace of Westminster, including the outstanding universal value of the World Heritage Site.”

Amendment 8, in schedule 1, page 10, line 20, at end insert—
“( ) See also paragraph 7A, which makes provision about the appointment of the first external members.”

This amendment signposts the new paragraph 7A inserted by amendment 9 (which deals with the appointment of the first external members of the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body).

Amendment 9, page 12, line 2, at end insert—
“Appointment of initial external members

7A (1) The person who, immediately before the commencement day, was the chair of the shadow Sponsor Body is to be treated as having been appointed on that day as the chair of the Sponsor Body in accordance with paragraph 2.

(2) Appointment by virtue of subparagraph (1) is to be treated as being for a term of 3 years.

(3) A person who, immediately before the commencement day—

(a) was a member of the shadow Sponsor Body (other than the chair), and

(b) was not a member of either House of Parliament,

is to be treated as having been appointed on that day as a member of the Sponsor Body in accordance with paragraph 3 (external members).

(4) Appointment by virtue of subparagraph (3) is to be treated as being for a term ending with the last day of the period of 3 years beginning with the day on which the shadow Sponsor Body was established.

(5) An appointment by virtue of subparagraph (1) or (3) ceases to have effect at the end of the period of 1 month beginning with the commencement day unless, before the end of that period, the appointment is confirmed by a resolution of each House of Parliament.

(6) Paragraphs 2, 3 and 6 do not apply in relation to a member who is appointed by virtue of subparagraph (1) or (3).

(7) In this paragraph—

“the commencement day” means the day on which section 2(1) comes into force;

“the shadow Sponsor Body” means the body, established in July 2018 in connection with the restoration of the Palace of Westminster, which is known as the shadow Sponsor Body.”

This amendment provides for those who were external members of the shadow Sponsor Body immediately before clause 2 comes into force to be appointed as the first external members of the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body.

Mark Tami: I rise to speak to new clause 1 and amendment 6 on my behalf and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), and to amendments 8 and 9 on the behalf and that of the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin).

New clause 1 seeks to give statutory powers to the Comptroller and Auditor General to examine the preparedness of the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority to undertake the parliamentary building works required. Importantly, that power would come now, rather than looking at the project in the years to come.

The new clause would not mandate the Comptroller and Auditor General to do it, but it would give him the power and the opportunity to do so if he considered it appropriate. For public confidence, it is vital that this project delivers and is seen to deliver value for money for the taxpayer. There is clearly uncertainty about what exactly we will find when we start the work on the building. As we have already seen with the Elizabeth Tower, we can actually find some quite large increases in costs.

It is not currently easy for the CAG and the National Audit Office to access a company’s records of contracts. They can look at a contract between the Government and a body in the private sector, but the NAO does not have access rights to such companies’ accounts. While that is not detailed in the new clause, I hope the Government will look at it. Greater access and transparency is vital in this respect. In saying that, we do not want to put extra burdens on small and medium-sized enterprises and other companies looking to tender for work. In fact, as I will explain, we have to do everything to ensure that they actually tender, but I ask the Minister to look at this issue, because it will be important in the future.

Amendment 6 is very straightforward. It calls for an annual audit of all the contracts awarded under the programme so that we can see both the size of the companies and, importantly, where they are and where the money is spent around the country. This project, by its very nature, is based in London, but it should not just be a London-centric project. This is a national Parliament, and the work needs to be spread across the whole of the UK. I know that other amendments also look at that.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I entirely agree that where work has to be done, it should be spread around the country. Is the right hon. Gentleman envisaging that the audit should take into account the policy issues? For example, will it look at whether it is good value to move MPs out of this building, or whether there is some easier way of doing this without something so fundamental?

Mark Tami: As someone who has been involved in this from day one, I would say that we have looked at this very carefully, and the decision to decant from here was not taken lightly. A lot of work went into that, and I think we have made the right choice.

The two amendments in my name and that of the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales provide that the external members of the shadow Sponsor Body, including the chair, will be automatically transferred to the statutory Sponsor Body on the creation of that
statutory body. As a member of the shadow board, I can say that I greatly value the work and experience that the external members of the shadow board have brought to bear, and I think it is important that that carries on. The amendments cover the members who only last year went through a fair and open competition, based on merit, to be appointed to the shadow Sponsor Body. Given that the shadow Sponsor Body has only recently commenced its work, it is important to retain these members, for now, for the continuity of the restoration and renewal programme. I am grateful to the Minister for agreeing in Committee to work with the right hon. Gentleman and me on these amendments, which I hope the Government will accept.

These amendments will transfer all the external members of the shadow Sponsor Body to the statutory Sponsor Body. The chair will be appointed for a term of three years from the date the Sponsor Body is established in statute. The terms of the other external members of the Sponsor Body will be three years from the date the shadow Sponsor Body was established in July 2018. Once these terms have expired, the chair of the Sponsor Body will be responsible for setting the members’ fixed terms, which cannot exceed three years. The Bill provides that, in doing so, the chair must have regard to the desirability of ensuring that appointments do not all expire at the same time. These amendments are a practical way forward, and I hope the House will accept them.

John Redwood: Of course, when the works need to move on to parts of the Palace that MPs use more often and more directly, alternative arrangements will need to be made. However, I do not think that means that all MPs need to move out of the old Palace for a long period of time, when it has been shown that bits of work can be done around the historic Palace without everybody having to decamp.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is being kind in giving way. To support my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), in my 14 years in this Parliament, I do not think I have been in the Elizabeth Tower once. I think that strengthens the argument that has just been made from the Scottish National party’s Front Bench.

John Redwood: I do not think it does at all, because I have also pointed out that there are a lot of roofing works going on. The hon. Gentleman is using the parts of the building that are being reroofed without being interrupted in his work. Again, I pay tribute to those who are carrying out the works without the need for fundamental change.

If we want value for money, we need to ensure that before any full plans are adopted, the Delivery Authority has done a proper job of analysing the options.

I also make a more fundamental point about our democracy. I know that there are many Members here who do not want to restore a proper independent democracy in Britain and are doing their best to ignore the wishes of the British people, as expressed in the referendum. It would be doubly ironic if they not only had their way on that, but said that we cannot use the historic Palace in the way that was intended for a long period. That would be a symbol that the public’s wish—

Mark Tami: To reinforce your point, Mr Deputy Speaker, I was about to say that we have had these arguments for ever and a day. We could have them again, but this debate is about the governance.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Hence I am sure Sir John will now go back to where he wanted to be.

John Redwood: I am very willing to do so. As I say, I welcome the principle that while works are conducted, there needs to be a proper audit. However, I go back to the intervention that I made at the start of the debate, when I said that any audit should also look at the policy, because I note that the legislation we are being
asked to approve today makes it very clear that the policy has not been finalised. We are setting up authorities and bodies to sort out both the policy and the implementation, so I submit that the audit must apply to the policy as well as to the implementation.

Neil Gray: I will speak to amendment 4, which appears in my name and those of colleagues not just in the Scottish National party, but across the House. The amendment would insert something that presently does not appear anywhere in the Bill, but which is critical for the project to enjoy not only political support, but the support of the public, particularly in the devolved nations.

Nowhere in the Bill is there a commitment that the project will see benefit derived outside London. However, clause 9, which is about spending issues relating to the project, extends and applies to Scotland. That means that taxpayers in Scotland will pay for their share of these works on a project in London but, with the way the Bill is currently drafted, will get nothing in return. We have had warm words, but according to what the Bill actually says, which is what matters, this will be another massive capital project in London, which already enjoys a huge share of UK capital spending—a third of it goes to London and the south-east.

Why is this important? Of all spending, capital spending derives the greatest economic benefit, bringing higher growth and employment to the areas where it occurs. Right now, London and the south-east benefit from a third of all UK capital spending. This multibillion-pound project will widen that gap and, as it has been designated a UK-wide project, there will be no Barnett consequentials. I think that this project should go beyond Barnett and that there should be a capital investment fund, proportionate to the total cost of the project, to be allocated on a share even one to the nations and regions. Perhaps it could be a requirement that the money is spent on restoring and renewing old buildings in those areas.

If amendment 4 does not pass, there will be nothing in the Bill to mandate the Sponsor Board or the Delivery Authority to ensure that any spending, any procurement or even one single job is gained outside London, where the project will obviously be based.

John Redwood: Does the hon. Gentleman recall that some £400 million of common taxpayers’ money was spent on the Edinburgh Parliament, and no equivalent English Parliament has been granted? This is the Parliament of the Union, so we all share in it. His fellow countrymen and women voted to stay in that Union and are proud of their Union’s Parliament.

Neil Gray: It is for the former Secretary of State for Wales to promote the idea of an English Parliament, not for a Member of the Scottish National party.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I applaud the hon. Gentleman on his amendment. I will be happy to support it if he presses it to a Division. He is really serious if he is really serious with the huge geographical wealth inequalities within the British state, surely we should debate moving this Parliament outside London and the south-east.

Neil Gray: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. He will be aware that I pushed that idea when I sat on the first Joint Committee that reviewed the options appraisal. Unfortunately, I was outvoted 11 to one on that occasion, but it is something that the SNP has looked on favourably in the past.

Obviously I do not expect any kind of quota system for a nations and regions fund, which would fall foul of procurement law, but I do want something that ensures that the Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority have to at least be cognisant of discernible UK-wide benefit.

Why do we need to have this debate now? Look at what happened with the London Olympics. I am a massive sports fan and a former athlete, although I did not get to such heights as the Olympic games. However, I was a supporter of the London Olympics. As a fan, I watched it with interest. It was a fantastic event. However, it took a massive fight by my colleagues who were here at the time to ensure that there was even a semblance of UK-wide benefit. The Scottish Government received a fraction of what they should have had in Barnett consequentials, and the lottery good causes funding for Scotland was raided to help pay for the games. Only now, seven years on, are we starting to see some of that charity money returning, but it will be spread over several years and many groups needed that money years ago. Estimates at the time put the Scottish contracts won from the London Olympics in the tens of millions, when £7 billion of contracts were up for grabs.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My colleague and good friend is making a powerful speech. In describing the raid on the Scottish lottery budgets at the time of the Olympics, he is highlighting that what is happening here is another not very well disguised London subsidy from the pockets of Scottish taxpayers. This is why the Union is creaking. I say to Scottish Tory MPs who acquiesce in this: “You are not Unionists if you are doing this; you are submissionists. You should be making sure that Scotland gets its fair share of any subsidy that goes to London.”
Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I was there during the London Olympics and remember only too well the wrangling that went on because of the Barnett consequentials issue. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to want something on the face of the Bill that assures the rest of the UK that it will get some sort of benefit from this project. If it does not, we will have years and years of the type of wrangling we had over the London Olympics, and what a waste of time that was.

Neil Gray: I totally agree, which is why I am pushing these amendments.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making the case that there is too much capital expenditure in London and the south-east on this project. I remind him of the massive expenditure on the two aircraft carriers built in Rosyth in southern Scotland, at enormous expense for the Union’s taxpayers, for the benefit of Scottish companies and Scottish labour.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We have a debate on amendments and Members are meant to be speaking to those amendments. I am not going to let the debate drift wherever people decide they want it to drift to. We will now go back to Mr Neil Gray. We need to get back to where we should be.

Neil Gray: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have been referring to a relevant project, which was similar in status to the one under discussion today and one from which we should have learnt lessons. My colleagues and I have done our very best to be constructive in all our dealings on this issue, but there will come a point where we will have to ask for how long we can be ignored on this issue, but at no point does any amendment concern me, however, is that all the amendments we are considering today and indeed all the amendments that were considered in Committee and during the other stages, are really about process.

On the other amendments, we will support Labour’s amendment 1 on blacklisting companies. Amendment 5 is a little bit concerning for me. I understand the intention from the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), but as I have said before this project will throw up irreconcilable conflicts which will make for very difficult decisions. One will be the conflict between access for members of the public versus heritage. Amendment 5, as well-intentioned as it may be, will make it far more difficult to make this place more accessible to disabled people. Besides, if this is just going to be a project to empty everything out and return it all back as it was but a bit cleaner, then what on earth is the point? The building contributes to the culture here, which is elitist, inaccessible and out of date, and that must change. We support amendment 6 as a way of improving the Bill, but it does not in itself satisfy our desire for greater emphasis to be placed on the Sponsor Board and the Delivery Authority to ensure the project has discernible UK-wide benefits.

In conclusion, I intend to press my cross-party amendment 4 to a Division to test the willingness of the Government to do more than just talk about this being a UK-wide project. We have seen what happened in the past: they are no such thing. We need concrete action to confirm that.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I will do the rather unusual job, Mr Deputy Speaker, of talking to my amendment, which is amendment 5. I am delighted that the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), added her name to it. I am sure that will help to persuade the House that it would be a worthy addition to the Bill.

Amendment 5 adds an additional consideration for the Sponsor Body to have regard to. It is a probing amendment, but if anybody annoys me I will press it to a Division and see what the House thinks. I speak with my hat on as the chairman of the all-party group on archaeology and as a proud, sometime jobbing archaeologist.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: There are a lot of fossils around here.

Tim Loughton: There are certainly a lot of fossils on the Scottish National party Benches. [Laughter.]

2.45 pm

I thank the Minister for meeting me on this subject the other day—I know he takes an interest in it—and I pay tribute to the work done by the previous Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who worked over such a long time to make the Bill possible and put so much of her energy into it.

I support the Bill. I support the arrangements for the status, role and functioning of the parliamentary works Sponsor Body. It is a huge undertaking, as I think we all acknowledge, which we absolutely need to get right. I do not want to do anything to make the Bill in any way unduly prescriptive and impede the flexibility of members of the board, who face a huge and challenging task to help to restore and rebuild the Palace. I get all that and I take no issue with the need to move out of this place as soon as possible for the work to be done. What slightly concerns me, however, is that all the amendments we are considering today, and indeed all the amendments that were considered in Committee and during the other stages, are really about process.

There are lots of perfectly valid considerations about the companies that will undertake the work, the economic benefit that should flow across the nation and the membership of the Sponsor Body. Those are legitimate debates to have, but at no point does any amendment actually refer to the unique archaeological, historical and constitutional significance of the building about whose work and future we are talking. No amendment mentions that. At no point was it even discussed in Committee. I was very surprised, when I read the Committee stage in Hansard, that it did not come up once. That is why my amendment, which is supported by Historic England and the all-party group on archaeology, is necessary. I was specifically tasked at our last meeting to raise this issue. The archaeological community is concerned about the absence of the consideration of heritage in the Bill.
I know that we have moved on, but when the underground car park was built some 40 or 50 years ago archaeological rigour was not quite as thorough as it might have been. It is likely that part of Edward the Confessor’s original palace—a hugely significant building both to the nature of this whole area and its interrelation with Westminster Abbey—was lost in the construction of that car park. That was a piece of archaeological vandalism. We must absolutely make sure that, in the considerable work that will need to take place in this Palace, the full archaeological integrity and importance of the building—what is under it, what is on it and what is next to it—is appreciated and that we do not lose the opportunity to investigate more the history of this place or destroy, in our pursuit of getting a building that is more sustainable, user-friendly and so on, all that in the process.

**John Redwood**: These are very important considerations and I am glad my hon. Friend is raising them. One of the problems in dealing with a building that has 1,000 years of history on its site, as a royal palace and as legal and government buildings, is to know which era or eras one is most concerned about, what one is trying to conserve, and what one can hope to re-use or conserve. Does he have any thoughts on that complexity when there is so much history on site?

**Tim Loughton**: I will come on to that in a minute. It is said that all archaeology is destruction, because when you take something out of its context you cannot return it to that context. It is therefore absolutely essential that the context of what we find—part of archaeology is what you do not find and might have expected to—is absolutely respected and recorded in order to fit together the jigsaw puzzle, particularly for such an important building over so many centuries, and, most likely, over 1,000 years.

**Dame Caroline Spelman** (Meriden) (Con): I reassure my hon. Friend that at the pre-legislative scrutiny stage, which I had the privilege of chairing, archaeological significance was indeed touched on. A number of members of the Committee had the opportunity to tour these premises and it became very clear to us that there is great deal more than one can actually see. The deeper we go in any excavation work the more unknown are the important artefacts that may remain below. There was also the rather tragic but true fact that about 17 chimney sweeps are unaccounted for. When we come to deconstruct and reconstruct the building, we need to be very mindful that there may be human remains deep down or within the building—[Interruption.] It is a fact and we need to be very respectful in how we go about these works.

**Tim Loughton**: My right hon. Friend makes a very valid point. I had not considered the prospect of mummified chimney sweeps as part of the archaeological excavations. I am pleased to hear that this issue was considered in pre-legislative scrutiny, which makes it even more surprising and even more of an omission that it did not make its way into the Bill. It is absolutely crucial.

My right hon. Friend and I entered this House on the same day back in 1997 and I have travelled around an awful lot of it. I have not explored all parts of it that I have not explored. I was privileged enough to go right up into the roof of Westminster Hall during repair work on the beams. I saw the original graffiti when some of them were restored and the ways they had been put together. However, there was a great sadness at that stage. We lobbied through the all-party group on archaeology for a dendrochronology investigation of the beams, because it is likely that when their last major restoration took place in or around 1820, many of them originated from the hulls of ships broken in Portsmouth dockyard, as happened in many cases—an old part of my house is made from beams of ships that, it is thought, came from the 15th century. It is highly likely that some of the ships used here took part in the Battle of Trafalgar. We might have a major part of this country’s long history within the confines of this Palace, yet despite our entreaties no investigation took place when the work was going on, even though that would have made it much easier and given us yet further explanation about how this place was put together. It is really important that we do not miss such opportunities, which we will not have again.

**Neil Gray**: I have great sympathy with the hon. Gentleman’s amendment and I understand what he is trying to achieve. However, one of the great conflicts in this project will be between the need to restore heritage and the need to deliver greater access, particularly for disabled Members and disabled members of the public.

**Tim Loughton**: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that his amendment, as it stands, tips the balance in favour of heritage, and where does he feel the balance needs to be struck?

**Tim Loughton**: I absolutely do not accept that—the two are not mutually exclusive. The list of considerations that the Sponsor Body must “have regard to”—not “have a veto on” or “be a more important consideration”—includes “value for money”, “safety and security of people”, the protection of the environment, being “sustainable”, ensuring that it is accessible to visitors, accessible to people working here with disabilities—absolutely—“improved visitor access”, and ensuring that “educational and other facilities are provided for people visiting”.

I absolutely agree with all those—they are exceedingly crucial and worthwhile. So why is there a problem with adding that the Sponsor Body should “have regard to” the fact that this is a unique building?

It is not just a UNESCO world heritage site. Probably uniquely among UNESCO world heritage sites in this country, it is a working building where history is still being made. The history of the fabric of the building still has relevance to the ongoing organic development of our constitution and the way we govern this country. That is why it was so important that when people said, “Why don’t we just turn this into a museum and have Parliament move into a purpose-built building?”, the point was made that that would completely ignore the importance of the heritage, history and cultural background of this place, which we could not repeat in a soulless, characterless, heritage-less, new, modern building. It would completely change the whole character of what we do here.

**John Redwood**: Again, an additional complication is that this is a complete Victorian rebuild of an earlier building, which also reflects the Victorian view of the history that predated the building. We therefore have a double time capsule: it is a piece of Victorian Britain and it is their view of the previous few hundred years.
Tim Loughton: My right hon. Friend is dealing with the really modern stuff—I will go back a bit further in a minute.

As you know more than many, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Palace of Westminster is one of the United Kingdom’s most famous landmarks for UK citizens and it attracts thousands of tourists every year. The reason Parliament is committed to investing billions of pounds in the restoration and renewal programme is to protect the Palace, which is falling down, and its historical legacy for future generations. Considering that this could well be the whole nation’s most ambitious and costly restoration project ever undertaken, it seems remarkable, extraordinary and bizarre that heritage is not listed as one of the matters to which the Sponsor Body should “have regard to.” It should not “take precedence”, but it should just “have regard to”. That is why my amendment inserts, as an additional regard:

“the need to conserve and sustain the outstanding architectural, archaeological and historical significance of the Palace of Westminster, including the outstanding universal value of the World Heritage Site.”

What could be controversial about that? I am not trying in any way to impede disabled access. I want disabled access to work in a complementary way so that people, whether they are disabled, come here as tourists or are UK citizens, can continue to appreciate this building’s historical importance. By putting an historical and archaeological consideration in the Bill, it would and should mean that people with disabilities have equal access to be able to appreciate the archaeological and historical features of the building. It would not just be that the lift cannot go somewhere, so they will not see some of the building’s features that they might like to.

As I said, this is a living piece of history. Great things have happened in this building, which still shapes our constitution. Last year we celebrated the centenary of women at last getting the vote. The cupboard in which Emily Wilding Davison—[Interruption.] Perhaps I could have a little bit of attention from other Members on these Benches. The cupboard where Emily Wilding Davison hid on the night before the census, in 1911, was one of the most significant wheezes of the whole suffragette movement. It happened here, and the significance of that is that she was able to put the address of this place on the census form. Women were not able to stand for election or become MPs, and they were not even able to access the Public Gallery, bizarrely. That happened in this place, but that cupboard was completely neglected.

It was only some years ago when Tony Benn pointed out that that was a really significant part of our history, yet it was just a cupboard full of computer servers. It is still just a cupboard full of computer servers, but at least it has some historical narrative next to it, and it did feature in a rather louche BBC drama, “Apple Tree Yard”, which probably got more interest in it than anything else we might say in this place.

Neil Gray: In some ways, the hon. Gentleman is making the point that I referred to about the balance that will have to be struck between what he wishes to see in heritage being protected and people being able to access the building. He will know that access to that particular cupboard is by stairs in Westminster Hall. It will not be easy to provide step-free access or a lift facility to get there, so where does he see the balance being struck in preserving heritage—the steps in Westminster Hall and that cupboard—and allowing access for disabled people?

Tim Loughton: The hon. Gentleman does not know. Access might be provided through the cloisters if there were some compromise between access and—[Interruption.] That is what it is all about. It is impossible to compromise between two things if one of them is listed in the Bill and the other is apparently inconsequential. That is the whole point.

3 pm

Let us take an example. Last year, as part of the 100th anniversary of the suffragette movement, there was for a long time a very imaginative display in Westminster Hall, part of which involved the reconstruction of the flue gallery from which women had had to listen to the proceedings of an all-male membership. That gallery, where the hot air went out, was reconstructed, and several of us recorded some of the debates that had taken place in those days. I was asked to play the part of William Pitt the Younger, which I think I did with some aplomb, and for many months my voice boomed up through the reconstruction of the flue.

We should recognise and respect the historic significance of objects such as that cupboard. It might even be reconstructed somewhere if it proved completely impossible to facilitate disabled access to it without causing huge architectural damage, but if that is not on the face of the Bill it is not a consideration. It might actually help people with disabilities to be able to enjoy more of the archaeological and cultural heritage of the place as well.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The explanatory notes are quite helpful. Page 3 states:

“Parliament has a clear role in approving the…cost and timing of the R&R Programme.”

However, it also states that Parliament has a clear role in “approving the design”. Does the hon. Gentleman not take any comfort from the fact that all his concerns—and, indeed, the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) about access—can be addressed when Parliament as a whole is considering, and having an input in, the design of the final project?

Tim Loughton: What is the downside of including the archaeological and historical significance of the building on the face of the Bill as an equal consideration? For some reason, the hon. Gentleman wants to discriminate against the uniqueness and the constitutional historical importance of the building. If anyone is guilty of discrimination, it is him. I just want to see everything on a level playing field because of the significance of the building.

Great things have happened in this building. The hon. Gentleman may not agree about this one, but in 1305 the trial of William Wallace took place here, and we all know what happened to him. In 1649 there was the trial of Charles I, which absolutely changed our constitution. The fact that we are where we are today, and the fact that the only person not allowed into this Chamber is the sovereign, results from an event that took place a few yards from this Chamber. The trial of Thomas More in 1535 is integral to the relationship
between England and the Church of Rome, and to the supremacy of the monarch as the head of the Church of England.

Then there is the discovery recently— I say recently; it was in 2005— of the remains of the King’s High Table. I think it is a disgrace that that table is not on display in the Palace of Westminster. In 2005, some work was being undertaken in Westminster Hall because of subsidence on the steps. In the course of an archaeological excavation, people took up some of the flagstones— quite rightly, to explore what was going on— and discovered some table legs, made of perfect marble from Dorset. It transpired that they were part of the sovereign’s High Table, which features in mediaeval tapestries showing the king seated at it, in his High Chair, presiding over banquets in Westminster Hall. That was one of the original purposes for which the Hall was built.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): We do not know that.

Tim Loughton: We do not know that for sure, and I defer to the hon. Gentleman’s expertise, but it is a good story—

Chris Bryant: It may not be true.

Tim Loughton:— and we should have part of that story—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. It might be more helpful to the Chamber if the hon. Gentleman had this discussion afterwards.

Tim Loughton: If the hon. Gentleman turned up to meetings of the all-party parliamentary archaeology group more often, we could have the discussion there.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It has nothing to do with what we are discussing, or listening to, in respect of the Bill.

Tim Loughton: That table is part of the heritage of this place. It is thought that it may have been broken up by Cromwell to symbolise the fact that the monarchy was over and the new rule had begun. It is a really important part of the Palace’s heritage, and I think that it should be brought back from the museum and displayed here, with a considered explanation of where its origins and historical significance may lie.

If we look at the façade of the whole Palace, we see, for instance, the inspiration that came from the Henry VII chapel in Westminster Abbey, going back to the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

It is remarkable that what I have described in those few vignettes has made this such an important building, and continues to contribute to its importance. People come here not just to see the building with all its wonderful statues, carvings and other features, but to see the living embodiment of a Parliament that is working and doing its daily business in this place. Much of what we discuss is relevant to what we can see in the basement, in the roof, in Westminster Hall or in the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft.

After detailed evidence sessions, the Joint Committee concluded that the Bill should “recognise the significant heritage which the Palace of Westminster embodies.”

The Government welcomed that recommendation in principle, and said that they would look into it further; but alas, since then— as we heard earlier from my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman)— we have heard no new arguments for not listing heritage in the Bill.

I know that the Minister will argue that the considerations that I am trying to insert in the Bill are covered by planning law, and by the various agencies— English Heritage, as was, and others— which will have an input. However, things that have happened in the past have led to the neglect or destruction of major features in the House. I think it is crucial— and sensible— that when the Sponsor Body is carrying out all its other important functions, someone should be able to ask, “And how does that preserve, or promote, or make more accessible or available or better explain, the archaeological, historical and architectural importance of this building?” That is all I am asking. I do not think it unreasonable, and I think that many others, in another place, will advance a similar argument. Many of them have, perhaps, been in the Palace for many more centuries than I have, and will talk with more authority.

Chris Bryant: Centuries!

Tim Loughton: Quite.

I think that mine is a reasonable amendment. I think it is an oversight that it has not been included in the Bill, and I hope that the Minister will come to his senses, agree with the amendment, and add it.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I do not disagree with anything that my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) has just said. If his amendment were incorporated in the Bill, I would have no worries about it. However, I am not sure that he should have as many worries as he has articulated. I served on the pre-legislative scrutiny Committee. Those who are involved in this project or have taken an interest in it may disagree on many things, but one thing on which they are absolutely agreed is that we must preserve 100%, the historical and architectural integrity of this building. Indeed, my approach to the renewal and restoration of Parliament is based on that premise. I hope that when we return to this place after the work has been done, we will notice hardly any difference. No doubt there will be better disabled access and no doubt computer systems and lighting systems will all work much better, but in the architectural significance to which my hon. Friend refers, we should notice no difference.

Mark Tami: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that our ignoring the need for this work and putting it off for 70 or 100 years has led to the loss of important stonework and so forth? It has been allowed to go to rack and ruin.

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a valid point and I think we all agree with it.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham is wrong on one point, however. It is possible at the moment to get a wheelchair into the Crypt chapel and into that cupboard he was talking about through the Cloisters. Incidentally, the Cloisters have lain empty for a long time. They were used just as offices, but they are an extraordinarily interesting part of this building. That area is not on the line of route; the public are

[Tim Loughton]
totally unaware of it. It is a medieval remnant; it should be open to the public, and should be used as public open space. We could have done that years ago; instead, the Cloisters have been empty since—I think—Conservative open space. We could have done that years ago; instead, be open to the public, and should be used as public totally unaware of it. It is a medieval remnant; it should be open to the public, and should be used as public open space. We could have done that years ago; instead, the Cloisters have been empty since—I think—Conservative open space. W e could ha ve done that years ago; instead, be open to the public, and should be used as public totally unaware of it. It is a medieval remnant; it should be open to the public, and should be used as public open space. W e could ha ve done that years ago; instead, be open to the public, and should be used as public.

Tim Loughton: I would have mentioned that. The Cloisters are rather interesting because of the bomb damage during the war. The Labour research unit was there, and in one office—I doubt its occupants realised this—is the medieval altar of one of the early Plantagenet kings from when this was a royal palace. Nobody ever sees it; it is not appreciated, and it is not in the guidebooks at all. That sort of thing needs to be flagged up and made accessible.

Sir Edward Leigh: My hon. Friend has done a service in flagging up these historical vignettes, because they are extraordinarily interesting. I think everybody agrees with him that this place is not a museum; the whole point is that it is a living building. History is being made at the moment in our debates, at a most interesting political time, and all these little historical facts need to be incorporated into the restoration and made available to the public. I am perfectly happy with the amendment. I suspect that the Minister might say that it is not necessary, but this issue has been flagged up and it will be an important part of the debate.

You, Mr Deputy Speaker, will not want me to engage in past controversies about whether we should decant or associated issues, but—this is particularly relevant to new clause 1, and I refer to my days on the Public Accounts Committee—I have long thought that this will be the biggest feeding frenzy in the Exchequer for years and that there is a real risk it will get out of control. This is where the SNP has a valid point. The public will not forgive us if we allow this work to become a feast for the architects, surveyors and all the rest. Without getting into all the controversy over whether we should decant or not—I accept that we have to decant for a time—what has worried me is that once we leave this building and we lose control, it will be possible for the Delivery Authority to become a sort of self-perpetuating institution, spending taxpayers’ money without our having any adequate control, as guardians of the taxpayer. We should always spend this money not as if it is somebody else’s money but as if it is our money. We should always think, “What would we do if it was our money? Would we do this work in this way?” The SNP has a perfectly valid point.

I do not agree with the SNP plan to make this place a museum, however. Even if it became a museum, we would still have to do all the work, because this is a world heritage site. We have to make this building safe from fire and flood and to repair the general dereliction that comes with time. We as parliamentarians should not worry too much about whether we should decant; we should worry instead about the taxpayers and about doing a good job. We are repairing this building and not trying to create anything new and fantastic. I am very happy to improve disabled access and so forth, but that is where we should start, and we should constantly take control of costs, which is where new clause 1 comes in.

3.15 pm

I have worked for years with the National Audit Office and I think it is a superb institution, but I hope the Minister can deal with what worries me. New clause 1 says: “the Comptroller and Auditor General shall have a right of access at all reasonable times to relevant documents held or controlled by a person in circumstances in which that person has or had a contractual obligation to supply goods or services directly or indirectly to the Sponsor Body”.

That is the nitty-gritty; that is key. The mischief will come not from the Delivery Authority; it will come with our contractors and subcontractors. We must have the ability through the NAO to bore down into the detail and hold these people to account.

I will take the advice of the Minister on new clause 1. He might well say that it is not necessary, but I hope that he does not just dismiss it. I know it is an attitude in reserve of Ministers to say, “It’s not necessary; it’s already covered by something else” but we must have some mechanism for holding these people to account, otherwise the taxpayer could catch a tremendous cold.

I am perfectly happy with the other amendments; I am perfectly happy that the Delivery Authority should have regard for the company’s policies on corporate social responsibility”, but it would do that anyway; that is modern procurement practice. I am perfectly happy that it should consider the value of work that comes to the regions, as called for in amendment 4; this again is good modern practice. However, these points in a sense are all subsidiary. We do not want PACs in the 2020s and 2030s informing us and again that this project has cost not £4 billion, but £5 billion, £6 billion, £7 billion or £8 billion and that we have been out of this building for not four or five years, but for six, seven, eight, nine or 10 years.

We have to take a grip now, and the way to do that is not to hand control to the Delivery Authority. I am not saying that it is in any way wrong, and it is certainly not corrupt, but many of its advisers and experts come from the world of architects, surveyors and builders and they have a certain ethos, and if we tell them we want a gold standard operation and that cost is of no importance, they will take us for a ride. They will not do it deliberately or corruptly, but I firmly predict that we will have PAC hearing after PAC hearing and we will be shocked at the waste of public money.

Craig Mackinlay: I hear what my right hon. Friend says about the Comptroller and Auditor General having access to the records under new clause 1, but I am concerned that there is not a sufficient value-for-money assessment and that we might be, to put it in general language, taken for a ride with this project.

Sir Edward Leigh: Value for money is what the PAC and the NAO are about. That was a very good intervention.

I hope the Minister can convince us that his No. 1 concern is safety—this is a world heritage site and we do not want it burning down or flooding—but the No. 2 consideration must be value for money. That is what worries me—again, without going into past grief—about many of the present plans. We have heard about architectural significance from my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, and I am worried about the proposal to demolish Richmond House. It is an important modern building that has won architectural awards, but I am worried not just that we might be knocking down a listed building but that this would again create an opportunity for waste. I will always look
for the cheapest option, and I have been arguing that if we have to leave the Chamber—I accept the decision of the House that we will leave for a time—we should use the courtyards to build a temporary Chamber rather than knocking down large parts of Richmond House.

Unfortunately, we have told the Delivery Authority that there has to be an exact replica of where we are standing, with the same size Chamber, the same height and the same width in the Division Lobbies. I am not sure that that is entirely necessary—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is shaking his head. If I am wrong, I am wrong, but I am saying that if we can have a cheaper option with a narrower temporary Chamber that can be used for other purposes afterwards, and if we have to have electronic voting and not go through wide Division Lobbies, we should consider all those options. This is not a matter for today, but it all comes down to value for money, and it is important that we highlight these matters in these debates.

John Redwood: New clause 1 seems to imply, in answer to a question I was asking earlier, that the Comptroller and Auditor General would have a duty to examine policy value for money with regard to how much work is done, the timing of the work, whether we need to move, and so forth. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is absolutely fundamental that that should be part of the process, because the way in which the most money is likely to be wasted is through policy error rather than through contractors slightly overdoing a contract?

Sir Edward Leigh: Yes; my right hon. Friend has made a worthwhile intervention, and perhaps I have been too unfair on contractors. My experience of public sector contracts over the years is not so much the importance of those in the private sector who work for us, as that it is our fault for treating these projects like a Christmas tree. We have our own prejudices and policies, we constantly change personnel, and we add things on to the Christmas tree. The private sector—either correctly or incorrectly, depending on the way we feel—then takes the opportunity to charge us more and more. We have to grip this now.

I am slightly worried about amendment 9, and perhaps the Minister, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) who tabled the amendment, can reassure me that there is nothing in it that takes away the democratic right of us in this Chamber to elect the members of the Sponsor Body and to dismiss them if necessary.

Mark Tami: The intention is to avoid a cliff edge, because we could lose their experience at a crucial time. That is why it was felt that we really need those people to carry on and then have a system where they are subject to elections and are replaced. We did not want to have a cliff edge at the start of the project.

Sir Edward Leigh: I take some reassurance from that. I was trying to understand the amendment. I have no problem with my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales, who is doing a good job, but I do not want us to give away our democratic right to elect the people we think should be on the body.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): Just to clarify, the amendments cover only the external members, not the parliamentary members, so parliamentary members will be appointed in the usual way and will not transfer in that way.

Sir Edward Leigh: I do apologise. I am glad that I raised this matter, however, because that has reassured me that we will constantly have control over who we send on to this body. I think I can end there. I hope the Minister will reassure me that even if he cannot accept new clause 1—I accept that that is often the default position of Ministers—he will be able to argue that the Comptroller and Auditor General really can drill down into all these contracts, because that will be absolutely vital.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I rise to speak to the amendments standing in my name on the Order Paper, and with your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would also like to talk briefly about some of the other amendments. Before I do that, I thank the Minister for the way in which he has conducted himself during this process. I accept that this has not necessarily been a party political process, but he has sought to engage with me and colleagues on my side of the House at every stage of the process. We have not always agreed, but he has always been there to consult, and I am most grateful for the way in which he has conducted himself.

I want to speak briefly to amendment 5, to which the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) spoke so admirably that it has the support of my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), the shadow Leader of the House. I also want to speak to amendments 8 and 9, tabled by the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), to which the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) has just referred.

We believe that these amendments are self-explanatory and straightforward. As the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham mentioned, this is a world heritage site, and the intrinsic value and history of the site must be in our minds throughout the lengthy process. We therefore believe that amendments 8 and 9 are common sense, and I will certainly be supporting them.

Moving on to new clause 1, I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier)—I am unsure whether my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) said this while moving the amendment, but I believe that she is currently chairing the Public Accounts Committee and is therefore unable to be in the Chamber—for her work. In basic terms, the new clause aims to ensure that this multibillion-pound taxpayer-funded project gets the most effective scrutiny possible. The hope is to highlight to the public that the utmost efforts have been made to ensure that the strongest possible audit of the project’s value for money has been carried out. Given the value of the contracts involved—we have been given suggestions of a total project spend of between £5 billion and £10 billion—it is particularly important that we set up the necessary scrutiny.

The new clause would ensure that effective access arrangements were in place to allow the Comptroller and Auditor General to scrutinise the relevant information held by contractors, subcontractors and grant recipients
The restoration and renewal process is a project of national significance, and it would be a mistake to overlook the opportunity to create an innovative new education or learning centre at the heart of Parliament. While the cost of renewal will be high, the benefits will be great. We could create a newly refurbished education centre with accessible, modern resources for those wishing to visit the building and engage with the work of both Houses.

Amendment 7 would secure the creation of an education centre while allowing flexibility within the Bill, which the Minister called for in Committee, for the creation of future unforeseen facilities. Such flexibility would keep the door open to new ideas and changing technologies leading to new demands on facilities. Again, I thank the Minister for his positive engagement in this area.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch for her work on amendment 6 and to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for his work on amendment 4. Both amendments cover the important area of spreading work around the United Kingdom, and I moved a similar amendment in Committee.

3.30 pm

I am sure the House will agree that this project presents a fantastic opportunity for any company to work on a building of such historic significance, and it is only right that regions and nations across the UK should have the opportunity to benefit from it economically. Crucially, amendments 6 and 4 are not prescriptive and do not restrict the legislation or define how the Sponsor Body or the Delivery Authority should spread economic benefits around the country, nor do they define which companies should be awarded the contracts. The sole aim of the amendments is to provide the public with confidence that, wherever possible, the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority will make efforts to ensure that opportunities are provided to relevant companies across the whole country, as opposed to being given solely to companies in London and the south-east.

In highlighting where the work is going, the hope is that the project’s positive impact on the UK as a whole will be clear to the public. Unless we measure and monitor what is happening, people and businesses may lose out. I see that the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) is in his place, and he made an excellent point in Committee that this would be a way of demonstrating the project’s value to the whole country and, therefore, of selling the project to the whole country. I have not forgotten his telling contribution in Committee.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to have signed amendment 6, the key part of which is the annual audit of companies. My experience, from a distance, was that Wembley started as an important national stadium—admittedly for England—but the endgame was that many of the companies involved did not have any local accountability. I am afraid that the Football Association lost control of the project, so it is important that this place has an annual audit to know who is building the project, what they are doing and whether they are doing it properly.

Christian Matheson: As a trade union official during the construction of Wembley, I have mixed memories of the conduct of that project, but my hon. Friend makes a fair point. Amendment 6 is not onerous, and it would allow for an audit that gave us the opportunity to keep a
handle on where the work was going and how much of it was being spread around—no more, no less, but at least it would give us an opportunity to see what was happening.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): The point I was trying to make in Committee was simply that, yes, this is a substantial investment—many billions—but, equally, if we get this right, it is a huge investment in trades and crafts right across the country. My only problem with the audit notion is that it is post decision making. If we are to make sure that there is a reasonable sharing of the procurement process, the policy needs to be set before the contracts are issued, not afterwards.

Christian Matheson: The hon. Gentleman is right that this could be a bonus for the whole nation. That is covered by amendment 4, but if the Sponsor Body, the Delivery Authority and the main contractors know they will be audited and under scrutiny, I hope that will help to focus and concentrate their minds on where they give the contracts.

Sir Edward Leigh: This is an important point. Of course we must not tell the Comptroller and Auditor General what to do, but in recent years we have tried with the National Audit Office not just to do this post hoc, as we did in the past when, years after the event, we would look at some scandal or waste of public money. The Comptroller and Auditor General now tries to look at these contracts as they come on stream. He started to do that with the Olympics and, although we cannot tell him what to do, I hope we can encourage him to look at this as it goes through.

Christian Matheson: As a distinguished former Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the right hon. Gentleman is able to give the House that guidance, for which I thank him.

John Redwood: The project will also reveal part of our industrial history. When the building was first constructed, it drew on crafts and skills from across the country, and some of the companies involved might still be around in one form or another and be able to bid again. It was a national endeavour, not a London endeavour.

Christian Matheson: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for pointing that out; he is right. Perhaps the successor companies of some of those original suppliers will be able to bid—what a lovely connection that would be.

Some of the work for this project can clearly only be done in London. Obviously we are not going to move the Palace lock, stock and barrel to another part of the country, so the work has to be done in London. But efforts must be made, where possible, to include a diverse geographical range of companies. It is an opportunity to change old habits and step outside the old London-centric focus in which projects in our capital city are so frequently dominated by large London businesses—the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew).

Chris Bryant: I hate to correct my hon. Friend, but I am going to anyway. Quite a lot of the work will not be done here. The parts of the clock are currently not in London but elsewhere in the country, and the cast-iron roofs have all been made elsewhere in the country. There is a real opportunity to build old trades, which perhaps we have not used for a very long time, all across the country. There could be benefits for every part of the country.

Christian Matheson: If I am going to be corrected, I would choose always to be corrected by my hon. Friend. The point I am making is that whatever is made elsewhere in the United Kingdom will eventually have to be installed here in London, but he is absolutely right, and the amendments show that we hope to encourage such opportunities. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside pointed out in Committee that in practical terms that would require the widespread promotion and advertisement of contracts across the country. Market engagement and involvement must begin early and reach as widely as possible to include geographically diverse companies. I re-emphasise that the amendments are deliberately open and do not prescribe which companies should be considered; they would simply ensure that contracts were measured and monitored with consideration of the geographical context and the value context.

Furthermore, amendments 4 and 6 focus on the size of businesses bidding for contracts. This project provides us with the opportunity to upskill and invest in small and medium-sized enterprises as well as larger businesses. We must ensure that we support our thriving and exceptional small business sector, which regularly still feels cut out of large Government contracts. Efforts must be made to integrate small specialist companies and prevent big companies from winning contracts and subcontracting to companies that they already know and work with, rather than opening things up more widely.

Without placing those promises and that scrutiny in primary legislation, there is no guarantee that the Sponsor Body will not disregard any lack of geographical diversity. I re-emphasise that the amendments are deliberately open and do not prescribe which companies should be considered; they would simply ensure that contracts were measured and monitored with consideration of the geographical context and the value context.

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Christian Matheson: I give way to my next-door neighbour from Alyn and Deeside.

Mark Tami: Before my hon. Friend moves on from procurement, the other point, particularly for smaller companies, is that the actual cost must be kept to a minimum. If it costs about £10,000 to enter the process, small companies will not risk that sum of money, because it means a lot to them, whereas it means nothing to big companies.

Christian Matheson: My right hon. Friend from the other side of Boundary Lane in Chester is absolutely right. We have to encourage small and medium-sized enterprises not simply by telling them that it would be good to bid for the contracts, but by making it as easy as possible for them, and by identifying and removing the barriers.

Finally, amendment 1, which stands in my name, is about corporate social responsibility and blacklisting. I remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—I am a proud member of Unite the
union and the GMB, and I have received support from both in the past. However, I remind the House that I have tabled the amendment on my own initiative and with the support of hon. Members, not at the behest of any trade union, because we believe that it is the right thing to do.

In Committee I tabled an amendment that might be considered stronger than amendment 1. That previous amendment called for the Delivery Authority to proscribe from the bidding process any firm that had been involved in blacklisting and had not subsequently signed a recognition agreement with a UK-registered trade union. The amendment was narrowly defeated. Nevertheless, I did welcome at the time the Minister's strong condemnation of blacklisting as a practice, and the support of other hon. Members in Committee. We can condemn, or we can take action. Aside from legislating to outlaw blacklisting, this project is the most direct influence we can have on making a stand against this terrible practice, because this House, along with their lordships' House, is the ultimate client and can set the terms.

I remind the House that blacklisting is pernicious. It destroys lives, it is dangerous, and it is still going on. Skilled and qualified tradesmen are still refused starts, or are finished up on a job after just a couple of days, without explanation. If a workers' name appears on a blacklist, it may well be because he or she has been a trade union representative or—more likely—because they have in the past complained about poor health and safety standards. Construction is a dangerous business. Site managers are under pressure to keep costs down, but that can lead to lower standards. Too often, the men or women who have been willing to stand up for their fellow workers and challenge lax health and safety regimes are the ones who have been marked down as troublemakers, when the truth is that in many respects they do their employers a service.

I remind the House of the scale of the problem. The Consulting Association is the most recent example of an organised blacklist—that we know of. In 2009, its offices were raided by the Information Commissioner's Office, and it was found to be running an organised blacklisting operation, with 3,300 names. In the 2008-09 financial year, subscribers spent £87,749 on name checks. That means that, at £2.20 for each check, 39,886 names were checked. I emphasise that that was in just one year. That is the opportunity to take a stand and ensure that that reputational damage does not continue?

**Christian Matheson:** We did take a reputational hit on that contract, unfortunately. The hon. Gentleman says that this is the opportunity; the fact is that there will not be many more opportunities, because we are the principal client on this programme so can set the terms.

The amendment is a lot simpler than the one tabled in Committee: it simply calls for the Delivery Authority to take account of a bidding firm's policies on corporate social responsibility, including on blacklisting. It does not mention proscribing any transgressors from bidding and it does not mention trade union recognition agreements, but it does ask that CSR is considered. As I have just said, as the ultimate client for the programme, we would be doing the right thing if we put this requirement in the Bill. In doing so, we would send the message to the construction sector, and to workers in this dangerous industry, that we take the matter seriously and take their health seriously.

**Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab):** My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. Does he agree that the changes made to the wording of the amendment since Committee give more scope to the authority to have regard to a company's policy on corporate social responsibility other than in respect of blacklisting? Have I read that correctly? If so, perhaps my hon. Friend could give the House an example of where else that might be valuable for the promotion of the highest standards in contracts.

**Christian Matheson:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but what we have tried not to do is to be too prescriptive in what we tell the Delivery Authority to do. The Minister had expressed concerns about being too prescriptive in the past. As long as companies can demonstrate that they have a corporate social responsibility policy—they might want to bring various different factors into that—that would be a start.

**Christian Matheson:** I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for that illustration of how action of this kind can raise standards. When we raise standards in the construction sector, we save lives. It is a dangerous sector and whenever standards are allowed to fall, workers are regularly harmed, maimed and injured.

**Neil Gray:** I commend the shadow Minister for tabling the amendment; we will of course support him in his endeavours. He talks about taking a stand; of course, the House of Commons did not take a stand on the contract for the Elizabeth Tower and suffered immense reputational damage as a result. Does he agree that now is the opportunity to take a stand and ensure that that reputational damage does not continue?
included, I say to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), being critical about its being awarded the Elizabeth Tower contract. The chief executive assured me that the company was no longer involved in the practice. He said:

“I wanted to take the opportunity to share with you our commitment to ensuring that blacklisting stays firmly in the past... We have a zero tolerance policy towards blacklisting, illegal or unfair recruitment practices, and while blacklisting is part of the industry’s history, I can assure you that it has no place now or in the future at Sir Robert McAlpine. We are the first UK construction companies to gain Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority accreditation—positioning us as a leader in the industry. Despite this being an industry-wide problem, we were one of only eight companies that settled the claims brought by the unions and other groups in the High Court.”

I make this point and quote from the letter for two reasons: first, as he has taken the trouble to contact me, it is right that he is given the right to reply after I had been very critical of him; and, secondly, it demonstrates that there are firms that do see blacklisting as a problem and no doubt have developed CSR policies that I am sure they would be only too pleased to present to the Delivery Authority. Indeed, those firms that have abandoned blacklisting would surely be only too pleased to see this amendment in the Bill because in putting a marker down, however gentle, we are helping to stop the race to the bottom and requiring standards, which as McAlpine tells me, it is already meeting.

For those firms that have not abandoned blacklisting, they will be given pause for thought as they seek to apply for contracts, or seek to give contracts out to their subcontractors. I remind the House that existing laws on blacklisting are weak, based largely around data protection laws with some gangmasters legislation. All Members say that they are appalled by blacklisting—the Minister told us that very strongly in Committee and I believe him—but this is a gentle amendment, which allows us in the gentlest terms to put our money where our mouth is. Yes, we should condemn, but we should also do something about the problem in one of the few major construction contracts in which we will have any direct influence. I therefore commend the amendment to the House.

Kevin Foster: It is a pleasure to reply to the fantastic debate that we have had this afternoon. I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have engaged with this important Bill from the Joint Committee through to Second Reading and Committee stage, and now today on Report. The input of all Members has been invaluable, and I particularly appreciate the kind remarks from the shadow Minister about the engagement that we have had. Similarly, I have also had a constructive engagement with the spokesperson from the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), in taking this project forward. Clearly, there is a consensus across the House that this work is essential for the safety of our staff and visitors, to establish better facilities to support the Palace’s function and to ensure that it can continue to be the home of this UK Parliament for generations to come.

Before addressing the main amendments, it is worth saying that there is not a “do-nothing” option here. Just carrying on patching and spending is more expensive than taking the decision to grasp hold of this project and move on. This decision is not just about spending money. We will carry on doing that. This is a decision about whether we want to set up a governance body to do the work in an organised and structured way that is clearly accountable to this House, and with a Sponsor Body that has the majority of parliamentary members on it, again, would be accountable to Members both of this House and of the other place.

Let me turn to the amendments. I always think it is nice to start on a positive note, so I will start with amendment 7 on education, which was moved by the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), who made some very good points in Committee. Having reflected on those points afterwards—and having had discussions with the hon. Gentleman, to which he alluded—we will certainly accept and support this amendment. The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts said when we were discussing heritage issues that there are going to be decisions to be made all the way through this project, and although we were keen to have a Bill that is a framework allowing the Delivery Authority to get on practically, it did seem rather inconceivable that Members in this House or the other place would support a project that did not include an education centre. As an inevitable part of the project, it makes sense to make an education centre a need, rather than an option. This does not unduly constrain the ability of the Sponsor Body to take the project forward. Therefore, the amendment will enjoy my own support and I am sure that it will also enjoy broad support across the House.

Amendments 8 and 9 relate to the transfer of the shadow Sponsor Board’s external members—not the parliamentary members. When the Sponsor Body comes into existence, there will be a need to reappoint parliamentary members, who will form the majority of the body via the usual ways. The amendments are about transferring the external members. The right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) made the powerful point that we have just got the Sponsor Body going—I think it was last year—and gone through a full recruitment process for external members; therefore, rerunning the process a year later may not produce a benefit, but could produce inconsistency. As we look forward to 2021, when the major business cases and the main estimates will be presented to this House with comments from the Treasury, there is a need for consistency. As Members will have noted, the amendments would slightly alter the terms; the chair would have a slightly different term from the other external members. Terms can last for up to three years, so the chair would come to a point whereby there was effectively a phasing of appointments, and we are liaising with external members of the Sponsor Body in that regard.

Although we felt that the original drafting of these amendments gave a flexibility, it was one that was very unlikely to be exercised. This would have produced a situation whereby people who had just been appointed and were just getting into this incredibly complex project would find themselves having to reapply for their roles, with debates about whether they would initially be prepared to do that. However, I certainly support the amendments as tabled today, and the Government believe that it will propose no threat or danger to the Bill. This does not unduly constrain the ability of the Sponsor Board to take the project forward. Therefore, the amendment will enjoy my own support and I am sure that it will also enjoy broad support across the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) gave a passionate speech, setting out his superb knowledge of the archaeology and history of this Palace, including its outstanding
value as a world heritage site. My hon. Friend made important contributions in this debate and on Second Reading, in which he reminded us how easy it is to overlook, and in some cases destroy, our heritage when undertaking extensive building projects. In particular, he cited the damage that was believed to have been done to the old palace of Edward the Confessor when the underground carpark was built. I am sympathetic to his point and, like all of us here, I am keen that the work is undertaken in a way that preserves the unique heritage of this building for future generations while respecting the fact that there is no intention for this building to become a museum; it has to continue to be a functioning Parliament for visitors, the staff who work here and others.

Chris Bryant: I am happy that the Minister is, as I understand it, supporting the amendment to which he is referring. But let us just be a little bit careful about some of the things that are often portrayed as absolute facts of our history in this building that turn out to be myths invented by the Victorians, such as the fact that the two red lines are two swords’ lengths apart. They are not. In fact, they only appeared in the 19th century when people could no longer wear a sword in the Chamber.

Kevin Foster: It is always a joy to hear another expert on the history of this building.

We have some concerns about the wording—not the thrust—of what my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham has said. For example, the Government recognise the significance of the Westminster UNESCO world heritage site designation, but note that that encompasses an area larger than just the Palace of Westminster; it also includes Westminster abbey and St Margaret’s church. I am mindful of the possibility that the inclusion in the Bill of the UNESCO status of the Palace of Westminster could be misinterpreted. The Government also share the concerns of the Joint Committee that explicit provision aiming to protect the heritage of the Palace could override opportunities to renew and enhance its purpose.

I appreciate the evidence supplied by Historic England and congratulate it on its solutions for ensuring the preservation of heritage on other projects, such as Lincoln castle, Manchester town hall and St Paul’s cathedral, while also increasing disability access. I certainly encourage the Sponsor Body to engage early with Historic England about the works so that it can learn from those projects.

It is also worth noting that the House is not its own planning authority: in seeking planning permission, there will be the usual protections. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on archaeology, my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham made a passionate case. If he is prepared to withdraw his amendment, there could be some useful engagement with him, his group and Historic England, to look for appropriate wording that could be inserted into the Bill in the other place. That would cover the legitimate concerns he has picked up.

I thank the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside and the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) for tabling new clause 1, which relates to the role of the Comptroller and Auditor General, whom it would provide with the right to carry out examinations of the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority under section 6 of the National Audit Act 1983. Such examinations are commonly known as “value-for-money assessments”.

The new clause also makes specific provision for a right of inspection and interrogation in respect of information held by contractors and subcontractors for the purposes of the conduct of value-for-money assessments by the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority. Although I am sympathetic to the principle behind the new clause, the Government are unable to support it due to the potential impact on small suppliers, which, unlike larger contractors, might not be able to engage with that type of audit.

It is worth noting that scrutiny of the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority is already provided for in the Bill. Existing legislation also ensures scrutiny of contractors—for example, section 6 of the National Audit Act 1983 already applies to the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority. That provides for the Comptroller and Auditor General to carry out examinations of the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority, given that the Bill requires the accounts of both bodies to be examined and certified by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Additionally, article 5 of the Government Resources and Accounts Act 2000 (Rights of Access of Comptroller and Auditor General) Order 2003 means that, for the purposes of their audit function, the Comptroller and Auditor General will have the right to inspect and interrogate information held by the Sponsor Body’s and Delivery Authority’s contractors and subcontractors. The Bill provides that the Comptroller and Auditor General will have the same powers as they do in respect of any public body when it comes to audit and examination.

Subsections (2) to (5) of the new clause go beyond the Comptroller and Auditor General’s current powers in relation to other public bodies. That is the provision allowing the Comptroller and Auditor General to access documents and information held by contractors and subcontractors for the purposes of their value-for-money assessments. Those subsections would be an extension of the Comptroller and Auditor General’s powers. The Comptroller and Auditor General’s current powers, provided for in section 8(1) of the Government Resources and Accounts Act 2000, allow for the Comptroller and Auditor General to access documents and information held by contractors and subcontractors for the purposes of their audit functions only.

John Redwood: Will the Minister remind the House of the latest estimate of the total cost of the whole project and the timing of the payments—how many years?

4 pm

Kevin Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. To be clear, the Bill is about setting up the governance framework. I can reassure him that once the Sponsor Body is established, it will set to work on a business plan and detailed set of costings, which then need to be approved by Parliament; it cannot go ahead and implement the project without doing so. There will also be Treasury commentary on the estimates that come before this place. We will reflect on it in engagement with the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, but it is almost certain that the NAO will wish to look at the quality of the Treasury’s work, so that the Public Accounts Committee can make recommendations to the House.
It would clearly be inappropriate to modify the Comptroller and Auditor General’s powers on the face of the Bill. Any extension of powers should be properly considered, fully consulted on and effectuated globally, and should not be done as part of this specific case. Indeed, such an extension of powers could make the parliamentary building works less attractive to potential contractors.

It is worth pointing out that the Bill already puts in place transparent and accountable funding mechanisms for the parliamentary building works. Schedule 2 specifies that the Delivery Authority is required to prepare a statement of resources, which must be submitted to the Sponsor Body annually for the latter’s review and approval or rejection. If the Sponsor Body accepts the statement provided by the Delivery Authority, it will be reflected in the estimate prepared by the Sponsor Body and submitted to the Estimates Commission for the financial year to which the statement relates.

It is almost certain that the Sponsor Body will be subject to extensive parliamentary scrutiny, and its parliamentary members may, for example, answer oral questions in this House and the other place. I hope the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside feels reassured that there is a range of abilities to audit and that it is unnecessary to press his new clause.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The Government have just announced their net zero strategy. Will the work of the Delivery Authority take account of that strategy, and will the terms of reference include this building being net zero ready?

**Kevin Foster:** The Delivery Authority and Sponsor Body will be required to adhere to any legislation that has been passed in this place. Members have touched on disability issues and heritage issues. The Bill also refers to environmental considerations. We are keen to ensure that this is not a question of one interest automatically trumping another. Heritage issues will not automatically trump disability issues, and disability issues will not automatically trump environmental issues. There will be a range of choices to be made by Sponsor Body members, and they will then be held to account by Members on their decisions and how the project is taken forward. We certainly know that not taking the project forward will not improve the environmental impacts of this Parliament—in fact, quite the opposite.

I turn to amendments on which there is more disagreement, starting with amendment 1, tabled by the hon. Member for City of Chester. As he rightly said, I made it clear in Committee that I see blacklisting as a scourge. It is an inappropriate and shameful practice. However, we have concerns about particular aspects of the amendment, even though we appreciate the intentions behind it.

Provision is already made in legislation against blacklisting. The Public Contracts Regulations 2015 already provide mechanisms by which the Delivery Authority will be able to look into the practices of prospective suppliers in relation to blacklisting. In particular, it is also open to the Delivery Authority to exclude a provider from participating in a procurement where it can demonstrate a violation of obligations in the field of national social and labour law. That would include a breach of anti-blacklisting legislation. I could go into the Employment Relations Act 1999 (Blacklists) Regulations 2010 in more detail, but I am sure the hon. Gentleman is very familiar with them.

It is a mandatory requirement for potential suppliers to declare that they have not breached any of the exclusion grounds, including labour law obligations. A completed declaration is also required of any organisations that potential suppliers may rely on to meet the selection criteria, including essential subcontractors. If a prospective supplier declares that they have been found to be in breach of the anti-blacklisting legislation by a court or tribunal, it would be reasonable for the contracting authority to ask to see details of the judgment.

The Government believe that the Bill provides mechanisms to address the concerns that the hon. Gentleman rightly raised. For example, it would be open to the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority to make specific provision within the programme delivery agreement between the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority provided for in clause 4. Such provision could require construction companies to declare their policies on corporate social responsibility for the Delivery Authority to consider. Of course, whether such provision is made in the programme delivery agreement will be for the Sponsor Body and Delivery Authority to agree upon, but I am sure that members of the shadow Sponsor Board here today—including the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside—are listening carefully to the issues that he and other Members have raised.

While I understand the principle behind the amendment, the Government do not consider it necessary. We consider that the current legislative framework and the Bill’s provisions already include the necessary safeguards to ensure transparency, accountability to Parliament through the period of the parliamentary building works and ongoing scrutiny of the parliamentary building works. Parliamentary Committees will also have the opportunity to scrutinise works that are ongoing. While the Government cannot support the amendment, we believe many measures are in place that will allow us not only to tackle blacklisting but to ensure there is constant accountability to this place on the widest range of environmental, social and labour legislation, and to ensure that this project is an exemplar of them all.

I now turn to amendment 6 and the amendment from the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru—amendment 4—which are on a similar theme of looking to spread the work across this United Kingdom. In many ways, I welcome the enthusiasm of the hon. Members for Airdrie and Shotts and for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), the right hon. Members for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and the hon. Members for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) in wanting to make this project one that really represents the whole Union, so that for generations to come and decades for come, Scottish Members of Parliament will be able to see in this House the symbols of being part of this Union Parliament.

Where I have concerns, sadly, is in how this amendment relates to procurement law. The Delivery Authority will need to create a level playing field as per the public procurement rules. Within these parameters, it is of course open to the Delivery Authority to encourage nations and regions across the UK to participate fully.
in and to benefit from the works processes. For example, the Delivery Authority may take steps to ensure that companies UK-wide are aware of the bids process by taking out advertising in regional media outlets and perhaps by doing roadshows, as Heathrow airport has done. However, in developing its procurement strategy and assessing bids, it would not be lawful to factor in the geographical location of companies. Adjusting the playing field in the way the amendment prescribes would, I am advised, expose the Delivery Authority to challenge under procurement law.

Neil Gray: I thank the Minister—well, I think I thank the Minister, who has just said he is not going to support my amendment—but this will not of course fall foul of procurement law, will it? There is no prescription here, and no quotas are set out. All the amendment does is to reiterate some of the comments that have been made by this Minister and previous Ministers and Leaders of the House that this will indeed be a UK-wide project with discernible benefits across the UK. Why on earth can a very wide-ranging amendment such as this not be enacted to guarantee the words of the Minister, unlike in the case of the Olympics, where that did not happen?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his overall constructive intervention. The problem is where the amendment says “in terms of contracts for works”, which implies a change to how the Sponsor Body would assess procurement, and where it says “and in any other way”, which is an unusually wide statement to put in a piece of primary legislation and could in effect give the Delivery Authority and the Sponsor Body in particular very wide range to do things that may not have been the intention of this House. Unfortunately, while I appreciate the intention of amendment 4, it is not one that the Government can recommend the House to accept or support.

Stewart Hosie: Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Foster: I will now move on—I am conscious of the time I have been going on for—to amendment 6, which is on the similar theme of having a report. Again, I appreciate the intention behind this amendment, which is the wish to spread this work across the United Kingdom. I have been clear that this is about spreading it not just to the nations, but to the regions. We all wish to see it go to places such as the south-west of England—the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karim Smyth), a fellow south-west MP, is in her place—and to make sure that this work is shared.

What we do not think is right is to put this in the part of the Bill that the amendment suggests. Given the intention for reporting, this could be put in the part of schedule 1 that already lists, for example, the annual statement of accounts and the report on the building works that must be presented and laid. It would make sense to work on such an option and present in the other place something that sums up these areas, without putting it where it would look unusual and making sure that we do not violate the procurement rules.

Mark Tami: I am pleased to hear that the Minister will look at this proposal in the other place. All amendment 6 asks for is an annual report to see how we are doing at spreading the work around. Hopefully, we will do very well, but I think we need a report to see whether the work is being spread around or is still stuck in the south-east.

Kevin Foster: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the intention of his intervention. We have listened to Members’ submissions, but we feel it would be better to introduce an amendment to schedule 1 in the other place, because it would sit more appropriately with the other reports that will be made.

I have outlined the Government’s position on the amendments. I welcome the broad level of consensus that has been achieved and look forward to the Bill making further progress.

Mark Tami: On the basis of what the Minister has said, I will withdraw new clause 1. However, we will keep the matter under review, because the project involves very large sums of money, as a number of Members have made clear.

I welcome what the Minister said about amendment 6. We will certainly return to it in the other place. I am delighted that amendments 7, 8 and 9 will be supported by the Government.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 2

The Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body

Amendment proposed: 1, page 2, line 16, at end insert—
“(f) to require the Delivery Authority when allocating contracts for construction and related work to have regard for the company’s policies on corporate social responsibility, including those relating to the blacklisting of employees or potential employees from employment.”—(Christian Matheson.)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided:

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<tr>
<th>Division No. 421</th>
<th>AYES</th>
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<tr>
<td>AYES</td>
<td>211</td>
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Question put, That the amendment be made.

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Abrahams, Debbie
Antonacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bacon, Mr Richard
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana (Proxy vote cast by Mr Gavin Shuker)
Blackman, Kirsty
Blomfield, Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Brabin, Tracy
Bradysh, rh Mr Ben
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bruce, Fiona
Bryant, Chris
Buckland, Robert
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cardbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
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Davis, Mr David
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Amendment 1 agreed to.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Amendment 1 agreed to.

Amendment made: 7, page 2, line 44, leave out “desirability of ensuring” and insert “need to ensure”—(Christian Matheson).

This amendment requires the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body, in exercising its functions, to have regard to the need that educational and other facilities are provided for people visiting the Palace of Westminster (rather than requiring it to have regard to the desirability of ensuring that such facilities are provided).

Amendment proposed: 4, page 2, line 46, at end insert—“(h) the need to ensure that economic benefits of the Parliamentary building works are delivered across the nations and regions of the United Kingdom, in terms of contracts for works and in any other way the Sponsor Board considers appropriate.”—(Neil Gray).

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 203, Noes 117.

Division No. 422][4.25 pm

**AYES**

| Abrahams, Debbie | Creasy, Stella |
| Antoniazzi, Tonia | Cryer, John |
| Ashworth, Jonathan | Cummins, Judith |
| Austin, Ian | Cunningham, Mr Jim |
| Bacon, Mr Richard | Daby, Janet |
| Bailey, Mr Adrian | Dakin, Nic |
| Beckett, Mr Margaret | David, Wayne |
| Benn, rh Hilary | Day, Martyn |
| Berger, Luciana | De Cordova, Marsha |
| (Proxy vote cast by Mr Gavin Shuker) | Debonnaire, Thangam |
| Blackman, Kirsty | Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh |
| Blomfield, Paul | Docherty-Hughes, Martin |
| Brabin, Tracy | Dodds, rh Nigel |
| Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben | Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M. |
| Brennan, Kevin | Doughty, Stephen |
| Brock, Deidre | Dowd, Peter |
| Brown, Lyn | Drew, Dr David |
| Brown, rh Mr Nicholas | Duffield, Rosie |
| Bryant, Chris | Edwards, Jonathan |
| Burden, Richard | Efford, Clive |
| Burgon, Richard | Elliott, Julie |
| Cadbury, Ruth | Elmore, Chris |
| Cameron, Dr Lisa | Evans, Chris |
| Campbell, rh Sir Alan | Fitzpatrick, Jim |
| Carden, Dan | Fletcher, Colleen |
| Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair | Flint, rh Caroline |
| Chapman, Douglas | Forbes, Lisa |
| Cherry, Joanna | Foxcroft, Vicky |
| Coaker, Vernon | Furniss, Gill |
| Cooper, rh Yvette | Gaffney, Hugh |
| Corbyn, rh Jeremy | Gapes, Mike |
| Cowan, Ronnie | George, Ruth |
| Coyle, Neil | Gethins, Stephen |
| Crausby, Sir David | Gibson, Patricia |
| Creagh, Mary | Gill, Preet Kaur |
| | Glindon, Mary |
| | Goddiss, Mr Roger |
| | Goodman, Helen |
| | Grady, Patrick |
| | Grant, Peter |
| | Gray, Neil |
| | Green, Kate |
| | Greenwood, Lilian |
| | Greenwood, Margaret |
| | Griffith, Nia |
| | Gwynne, Andrew |
| | Haigh, Louise |
| | Hayes, Helen |
| | Hayman, Sue |
| | Healey, rh John |
| | Hendry, Drew |
| | Hepburn, Mr Stephen |
| | Hermon, Lady |
| | Hill, Mike |
| | Hillier, Meg |
| | Hoare, Simon |
| | Hobhouse, Wera |
| | Hollobone, Mr Philip |
| | Hopkins, Kelvin |
| | Hosie, Stewart |
| | Howarth, rh Sir George |
| | Huq, Dr Rupa |
| | Jones, Darren |
| | Jones, Gerald |
| | Jones, Ruth |
| | Jones, Sarah |
| | Jones, Susan Elan |
| | Kane, Mike |
| | Keeley, Barbara |
| | Khan, Afzal |
| | Kyle, Peter |
| | Lake, Ben |
| | Lamb, rh Norman |
| | Lavery, Ian |
| | Law, Chris |
| | Lefroy, Jeremy |
| | Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma |
| | Liddell-Grainger, rh Mr Ian |
| | Lloyd, Tony |
| | Long Bailey, Rebecca |
| | Lucas, Caroline |
| | MacNeil, Angus Brendan |
| | Madders, Justin |
| | Mahmood, Mr Khalid |
| | Malhotra, Seema |
| | Mann, John |
| | Maskell, Rachael |
| | Matheson, Christian |
| | Mc Nalty, John |
| | McCabe, Steve |
| | McCarthy, Kerry |
| | McDonald, Andy |
| | McDonald, Stewart Malcolm |
| | McDonnell, Stuart C. |
| | McDonnell, rh John |
| | McFadden, rh Mr Pat |
| | McNinnes, Liz |
| | McKinnell, Catherine |
| | McMorran, Anna |
| | Mearns, Ian |
| | Mills, Nigel |
| | Monaghan, Carol |
| | Moon, Mrs Madeleine |
| | Moran, Layla |
| Morden, Jessica | Morgan, Stephen |
| Murray, Ian | Newlands, Gavin |
| Norris, Alex | O’Hara, Brendan |
| Onn, Melanie | Onwurah, Chi |
| Peacock, Stephanie | Pennycook, Matthew |
| Percy, Andrew | Perkins, Toby |
| Phillips, Jess | Phillipson, Bridget |
| Plott, Jo | Pidcock, Laura |
| Pollard, Luke | Pond, Stephen |
| Powell, Lucy | Rees, Christina |
| Reynolds, Emma | Reynolds, Jonathan |
| Rodda, Matt | Russell-Moyle, Lloyd |
| Saville Roberts, rh Liz | Sharma, Mr Virendra |
| Sheerman, Mr Barry | Shuker, Mr Gavin |
| Siddiq, Tulip | Skinner, Mr Dennis |
| Slaughter, Andy | Smeth, Ruth |
| Smith, Cat | Smith, Jeff |
| Smith, Nick | Smith, Owen |
| Smyth, Karin | Snell, Gareth |
| Sobel, Alex | Spellar, rh John |
| Spellar, rh John | Spelman, rh Dame Caroline |
| Starmer, rh Keir | Stephens, Chris |
| Streetering, Wes | Stringer, Graham |
| Sweeney, Mr Paul | Swinson, Jo |
| Tami, rh Mark | Thelluss, Alison |
| Thomas, Gareth | Thomas-Symonds, Nick |
| Timms, rh Stephen | Turley, Anna |
| Twigg, Stephen | Twist, Liz |
| Vaz, Valerie | West, Catherine |
| Westerman, Matt | Whitford, Dr Philippa |
| Williams, Hywel | Wilson, Phil |
| Wishart, Pete | Wragg, Mr William |
| Yasin, Mohammad | Zeichner, Daniel |

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

Alan Brown and Mr Marion Fellows
This amendment signposts the new paragraph 7A inserted by amendment 9 (which deals with the appointment of the first external members of the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body).

Amendment 9, page 12, line 2, at end insert—

‘Appointment of initial external members

7A (1) The person who, immediately before the commencement day, was the chair of the shadow Sponsor Body is to be treated as being appointed on that day as the chair of the Sponsor Body in accordance with paragraph 2.

(2) Appointment by virtue of sub-paragraph (1) is to be treated as being for a term of 3 years.

(3) A person who, immediately before the commencement day—

(a) was a member of the shadow Sponsor Body (other than the chair), and

(b) was not a member of either House of Parliament, is to be treated as having been appointed on that day as a member of the Sponsor Body in accordance with paragraph 3 (external members).

(4) Appointment by virtue of sub-paragraph (3) is to be treated as being for a term ending with the last day of the period of 3 years beginning with the day on which the shadow Sponsor Body was established.

(5) An appointment by virtue of sub-paragraph (1) or (3) ceases to have effect at the end of the period of 1 month beginning with the commencement day unless, before the end of that period, the appointment is confirmed by a resolution of each House of Parliament.

(6) Paragraphs 2, 3 and 6 do not apply in relation to a member who is appointed by virtue of sub-paragraph (1) or (3).

(7) In this paragraph—

“the commencement day” means the day on which section 2(1) comes into force;

“the shadow Sponsor Body” means the body, established in July 2018 in connection with the restoration of the Palace of Westminster, which is known as the shadow Sponsor Body.‘—(Mark Tami.)

This amendment provides for those who were external members of the shadow Sponsor Body immediately before clause 2 comes into force to be appointed as the first external members of the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body.

Third Reading

Queen's consent signified.

4.38 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I give my thanks to my fellow Devonian Member of the House, the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for all the work that he has put into the earlier stages of the Bill, not least because he arrived on the Bill after its Second Reading. He has done an excellent job in liaising with others and getting himself over all the considerable detail of the matters that we are discussing today. I also thank those who served in Committee and those who contributed on Report.

I shall not dwell on the Bill for too long, as there is a high level of consensus across the House, and of course it is a Bill for Parliament as a whole and not for the Government in particular. It is important that we protect, restore and renew the parliamentary estate, not just because there are 3,000 or 4,000 people working here who have a right to work in a place of safety that is not falling apart around our ears, quite literally in some instances, but because the estate—the building and this...
Chamber in particular—is a symbol of the cradle of democracy that has inspired many millions all around the world. It is a symbol of our heritage, rooted in that sense of democracy.

The estate is also a positive symbol of defiance. One thinks of this Chamber and these buildings as having been forged out of the great fire of 1834, but this Chamber itself burned down in its former incarnation during the final days of the blitz, when Westminster Hall was also struck by incendiary bombs. The difficult decision had to be taken as to which one to save, given that there were not enough fire appliances to save both. With Westminster Hall being almost 1,000 years old, the decision was taken to save the older part of the Palace, which was undoubtedly the right decision. This Chamber rose out of the ashes at the end of the second world war and serves as a great inspiration to our country, and it is important that we do the right thing by the estate.

As my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary has amply outlined, the Bill sets the governance structure for the work that will be required to bring everything up to the standards that we should expect. It will ensure that the work runs to time, runs to budget and has a high emphasis on ensuring value for the taxpayer.

Of course, one of the reasons why the Bill is in such good shape is the excellent work of the Joint Committee that conducted pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Bill. I extend my thanks to my right hon. Friend, the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) for her excellent chairmanship of that Committee. It should be noted that, in broad terms, the Committee endorsed the approach that the Bill takes. I also thank my right hon. Friend, the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), my predecessor as Leader of the House, for all her excellent work in pushing the project forward and for taking the Bill through its Second Reading.

The consensus across the House has extended to the Government drafting some of the amendments that we have agreed this afternoon. Most notably, we drafted amendments 8 and 9, which were in the names of my right hon. Friend, the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) and the right hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami)—I will call him my right hon. Friend, the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), my predecessor as Leader of the House, for all her excellent work in pushing the project forward and for taking the Bill through its Second Reading.

We also worked with the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) on amendment 7, which relates to education facilities. We absolutely accept that such facilities are not just desirable but necessary. We thank him for the constructive way in which he engaged with my hon. Friend, the Parliamentary Secretary on that matter. There were many other contributions, and two amendments—amendments 1 and 4—have now passed by way of Division in addition to those that I have mentioned. We look forward to examining them and to considering whether they might be improved or changed in some way when this Bill goes to the other place, but that is down to the will of the House.

I conclude by thanking the Bill team, all those involved in the restoration and renewal programme, the Whips, the PPSs—my hon. Friends the Members for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis)—the Clerks, the Opposition Front-Bench team and, in particular, the shadow Leader of the House for having sponsored the Bill. The Bill has been improved during its swift progress, and the House has risen to the occasion. I commend the Bill to the House.

4.44 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I endorse the Leader of the House’s full list of thanks to the Official Reporters having to record it again. I am pleased to support the Bill, as amended, and I thank the Chairs in Committee—my right hon. Friend for Delyn (David Hanson) and the hon. Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter)—and the other members of the Committee for debating the Bill on 4 June. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) and the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for taking the Bill through. I understand that it was quite a pleasant affair—[Interruption.] Perhaps I should not have used the word “affair”!

Her Majesty’s Opposition support the Bill, which follows a long process of assessing and reviewing the state of the Palace of Westminster and of determining how best to proceed. The House debated and voted on restoration and renewal on 31 January 2018, and agreed that the Palace of Westminster is in need of restoration and renewal.

I thank both former Leaders of the House, the right hon. Members for Aylesbury (Mr Liddington) and for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), for unlocking the difficulties and allowing the passage of the Bill—particularly the right hon. Lady, who is here in the Chamber.

The House resolved by 234 votes to 185 that immediate steps be taken to establish a shadow Sponsor Board and Delivery Authority. I thank the members of the shadow Sponsor Board, who will hopefully step out of the shadows and become fully fledged members. These bodies will be able to make strategic decisions on the restoration and renewal programme so that the Palace of Westminster can be secured as the UK Parliament for future generations.

The Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body will have overall responsibility for restoration and renewal, will act as a single client on behalf of both Houses and will be empowered to form a Delivery Authority. The Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body will hopefully also have responsibility for the northern estate programme.

On Report, hon. Members touched on the successful London Olympics project, and one of the key things is that the project had an end date, so I suggest that the Leader of the House looks at arranging a proper schedule so that restoration and renewal does not run into never-ending dates for completion. It is important to have a date for completion.

I, too, thank the Joint Committee, chaired by the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), for scrutinising the draft Bill and making recommendations. The Joint Committee reported on 21 March 2019, and it said that the basic structure of governance proposed by the draft Bill is correct.

This has not been mentioned but, now Parliament has agreed that there is a climate change emergency, I understand that, within the necessary constraints of
[Valerie Vaz]

heritage and conservation planning, the refurbishment will support the energy efficiency of the buildings by using more energy-efficient building fabrics, including, where feasible, in the Palace of Westminster.

I am delighted that the education centre has been accepted and will be in its new place, as it will be a key part of the legacy of the building works. It should be established and remain in place during the works on the northern estate and the Queen Elizabeth II conference centre. I know from experience that my constituents love the education centre, and it is important in helping them to understand what democracy is about so that they know exactly what we do in this place. The education centre is a fantastic building, showing the reality of sitting in the Chamber and in the House of Lords, so I thank the Leader of the House.

I heard what the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office said about the Comptroller and Auditor General, and I hope some sort of oversight can be agreed. The Government mentioned cost and value for money approximately 13 times in their response to the Joint Committee's report, so it is vital that we all agree that costs should be kept in check, particularly for taxpayers and for Parliament.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester did a grand job of addressing amendment 1 on blacklisting, and I am delighted that the House has accepted that amendment. The Leader of the House will know that the Employment Relations Act 1999 (Blacklists) Regulations 2010 prohibit the compilation, use, sale or supply of trade union blacklists. It is a terrible thing to be on such a blacklist, which destroys lives, and I am pleased that the House has spoken and that it will not be the case, certainly in terms of contracts.

Talking of contracts, one of the key considerations that Opposition colleagues are keen to proceed with in restoration and renewal—the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) addressed this in amendment 4—is the need to ensure that the economic benefits are available to all countries and regions of the UK, not just London. There used to be something called contract compliance, so contracts can be worded in such a way to include that. We know that some European countries— dare I mention Europe?—are able to benefit their own companies in that way without falling foul of state aid rules. I certainly think that contracts could be worded in such a way as to make those benefits available to the whole country. I know that it has been accepted now; but perhaps the Leader of the House could write to the shadow Sponsor Body to suggest that it looks at that.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Anybody with experience of local government will know that a contract has to include every item. If it does not, there will be a lot of additional costs that were never expected. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Valerie Vaz: Absolutely. I know that my hon. Friend had a very good career as the leader of a local council, so he knows all about it.

Turning to heritage, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) made a valuable and robust contribution, and I agree with every word he said—I must declare an interest, because my daughter is an archaeologist. This is a unique building and we must protect it. I understand the Minister's point about the distinction of a UNESCO world heritage site, which is slightly different, but it is an historic building. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) suggested that we should have a craft school, which is something they do in Scotland. Perhaps Historic England could link up with Historic Environment Scotland and do something somewhere in the middle of the country—

Kevin Foster: In Walsall, perhaps?

Valerie Vaz: Yes, I would love that. We have a great manufacturing tradition and there are many skills.

Mark Tami: Many of the skills that we will need are currently very limited, whether those of stonemasons or people who can work on the thousands of windows in this place. We need to train those people, because those skills are not readily available. We will be importing those skills if we do not train people.

Valerie Vaz: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. For me, having apprentices is a key consideration. It is also a good opportunity to make the workforce more diverse. I do not know whether the Leader of the House is aware of this, but there is a specific company that employs only women builders, decorators, plumbers and electricians. I think that looking at that would be a good way of showing that we are diverse. I would have liked to see the heritage aspect included in the Bill, but the Minister has suggested that there will be discussions, particularly in the other place, where there is a lot of expertise on heritage—he might regret that slightly. I am glad that the amendments have been won. Perhaps the Government will consider making them slightly stronger. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester will be very happy to work with the Government on any future wording.

Finally, we have a duty to protect this amazing building. I know that lots of hon. Members have worked hard, whether in Bill Committees or through contributions they have made in discussions with House authorities, including the Minister. It affects all of us. We might not be here when the building is finally restored to its glory and is in its best condition, but we do this for future generations. Her Majesty's Opposition are absolutely delighted to support the Bill as amended.

4.54 pm

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I am delighted to see you in the Chair again, Madam Deputy Speaker, for my second speech in two days—my first contributions from the Back Benches since 2014—on another subject about which I feel so passionately. Yesterday, I talked about my passion for this place, this much-loved Parliament, in the context of the need to ensure that everybody who comes here to visit or to work is treated with dignity and respect. Today, I shall talk briefly about my other passion: making sure that Parliament is a safe and modern place for all those who work in it and for the hundreds of thousands of visitors each year.

It was no mean feat—in fact, it was quite a great achievement—to introduce the Bill and to make progress where countless other Governments have failed. I pay tribute to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your commitment as a member of the House of Commons Commission, and to the shadow Leader of the House,
the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), and the representatives of other parties on the Commission, for their commitment to making progress on this issue. The Bill is a significant tribute to all those who serve on the Commission, who were so determined to see that we take action.

Since the repairs made after the second world war, very little has been done to restore the Palace’s fabric. It is clear that 80% of the cost of R and R will lie in mechanical and engineering works. There is no doubt that we have almost left it too late. There have been 66 fire incidents since 2008. There are regular masonry falls, with the potential to cause serious injury. There are constant leaks—in the Palace rather than the Cabinet—blockages and failures of systems, and there is of course the ever-present risk of an asbestos leak, which would have us move straight out of here.

I wish to pay tribute to those with whom I worked closely over the past couple of years. I pay tribute, first, to those who served on the original Joint Committee, the advice of which has been so fundamental to the making of progress; to the programme team, particularly Tom and Kate, who did such a fantastic job; to the superb Leader’s Office team, particularly Joanna and Roxy, who did a marvellous job; to the joint Select Committee, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman); to the shadow Sponsor Board itself—I wish Liz Peace every success as she takes it forward; to the Bill Committee, with huge thanks to the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who literally jumped in and got stuck straight into the Bill, and what a fantastic job he has done; and to the Cabinet Office Bill team, particularly Ellen and Tim.

I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who has been such a supporter and advocate of restoration and renewal, and to the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who has been a superb Chair of the Public Accounts Committee and has proven herself to be a completely determined advocate for the restoration of this place. It has been a vital, cross-party effort. Finally, I pay tribute to my now ex-Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who was a huge support to me personally as we tried to persuade Members right across the House to back the Bill. I am so glad that, between us all, probably with some fraught conversations and a bit of persuasion—with no bullying, of course, because that would not be acceptable, but with some strong persuasion and strong argument—we have got there.

As we send the Bill to the other place for consideration, I would really like the Delivery Authority to consider looking into three issues that are critical to value for money and to the securing of a modern and functioning democracy. The first is the Elizabeth Tower. You will know as well as I do, Madam Deputy Speaker, that this has been a fraught issue. Elizabeth Tower is being restored. It is probably halfway through its restoration—a significant cost to the taxpayer—and will be open long before we leave this place. It is my strong desire that, once the restoration work starts and we have decanted out of here, Elizabeth Tower should remain open to members of the public. It will have been extensively restored, and the programme team have confirmed that having Elizabeth Tower remain open would not add to the cost or complexity of R and R. I urge the Delivery Authority to ensure that that happens and that we do not end up putting the Elizabeth Tower under wraps again, having just reopened it.

The second issue to consider is the availability of the second Chamber in Westminster Hall—the Grand Committee Room—which, in itself, will not be significantly affected by restoration and renewal. It is a more complicated matter because, of course, there will be building works, earth movers and so on all around the Palace, but we should give it consideration, bearing in mind that the decant option gives us only 75% of the footprint of the Palace. If we want to try to squeeze some of that back, we could keep the Grand Committee Room as our second Chamber throughout. That would enable us to provide more space for valuable Committee rooms and so on in Richmond House during the decant period. I urge the Delivery Authority to consider retaining access to that second Chamber, certainly through St Stephen’s entrance, and potentially keeping the Jubilee Café open as a place for Members and visitors to be able to eat and get cups of tea. The second Chamber is a particularly useful place, and I urge colleagues to consider that point seriously.

I have one final point to make in the context of the entire project. I have some concerns about the proposed way in which the media will be facilitated during the decant period. I met the head of the Lobby on a couple of occasions to discuss the needs of the media. I am aware that, under the current proposals for decant, the amount of space for the media is proposed to be considerably restricted to potentially half what it currently has. There is also a proposal to put a glass screen between members of the press and the temporary Chamber. I urge the Delivery Authority, if it takes on the northern estate programme, to reconsider that and ensure that the press has adequate space. Day in, day out, we see the consequences of different Parliaments around the world not having a free press to scrutinise their work. We constantly see the consequences of dictators who try to shut down the freedom of the press and what that does to their societies and their communities, and I would hate for us to do anything that did not permit the freedom of the press that we so value in the United Kingdom.

I am so glad to see this vital legislation moving forward and that the House itself has come to accept that, if we want to stay here for decades to come and pass this great Palace on to future generations, we simply must get on with it. I will stay close to the R and R programme over the coming years, and I look forward to the establishment of a professional Delivery Authority that will be tasked with ensuring good value for taxpayers’ money and with ensuring our legacy.

5.2 pm

Neil Gray: I do not plan to detain the House for very long. You will be pleased to know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that my speaking notes had to be ripped up after the result of that last vote. We are very pleased that the SNP secured the amendment of the Bill with the support of Members from all parties, for which I am very grateful.

It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom). She perhaps inadvertently provided several thanks not just to me but to the likes of the right hon. Member for Alyn and
Deeside (Mark Tami) for the service that we provided through all stages—from the Joint Committee to the pre-legislative scrutiny Committee, the Finance Committee, the Sponsor Board and various other incarnations in which we have been involved. Certainly thanks must also go to her, as she was the first Minister who took this project very seriously and started to drive it forward. The House must thank her for her efforts in this regard. Previously, the Government were rather lukewarm and standoffish about the project.

I want to pick up on some of the points that the right hon. Lady made, because they were very sensible and should go on the record. The suggestion about Elizabeth Tower should be considered. I know that she and others have made that point before, and it is right that the relevant bodies consider it. I think she understands that her idea about Westminster Hall might present a greater challenge. Discussions need to be had with the contractors and the programme board about whether it would be possible, given the fact that we are looking for a full decant to make it easier for the contractors to work, but certainly it should be considered.

The right hon. Lady was absolutely right to make her point about facilities for the media. Under the current proposals, their facilities would be greatly downgraded from the already inadequate facilities they currently have, so that issue definitely needs to be looked at as part of the decant process.

I thank Joanna Dodd and Michael Everett in the Clerks team for their assistance in drafting our amendments, which were successful in the end, and SNP researcher Eoin Bradley, who provided support on the Bill. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie), who is soon to be a Privy Counsellor; he provided a great service for us on the House of Commons Commission. He and I have worked closely together throughout the process leading up to this point. His replacement will be my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart)—[Interruption.] Indeed, he should also be a Privy Counsellor. My hon. Friend led on Second Reading and has been heavily involved in this process to date.

I thank the new Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for his approachability and willingness to engage. Although we disagreed on my amendment 4, he was willing to engage and we had a very forthright, honest meeting and discussion about it. I have a challenge for the current Leader of the House—not to sabotage amendment 4, which has just been passed and which is about ensuring that there is discernible benefit across the nations and regions of the United Kingdom when the Bill moves to the other place. We will be watching closely and with great interest.

It seems a long time since 31 January last year, when we were on a knife edge here—not knowing. I hot-footed it here from my daughter’s hospital bed to ensure that we could get the amendment through, but we were really not sure what was going to happen. I give real credit to the former Leader of the House for taking up the ball and running with it, and ensuring that the Bill reached this position today. I also thank the Ministers since then who have picked up the pace.

It is really important that we get on with this now, and there is a real will to do so. As Members, we need to keep a very close eye on the process. The Public Accounts Committee will certainly do that, although probably not under me. I think my term of office will have almost come to an end—if I am still here—by the time we move out, so I will leave a note to my successor. The National Audit Office is already looking at how it can engage with the process, although there are still some discussions to be had about how that will work.

I urge Ministers to look again at amendment 6. I apologise for not being here when the Minister discussed it—I was chairing the Public Accounts Committee—but I thank him for the assurances that it will be looked at in the other place. It seems to me that amendment 6 follows neatly on from amendment 4, which has been adopted, because for amendment 4 to work we will need some sort of audit of how the work is going. Amendment 6 is a very simple measure, so I welcome the fact that the Minister has agreed to look at it and I know that colleagues in the other place will do so.

It feels like a long journey since January last year, but this has actually been going on since 2016 in this Parliament, and of course it has been decades coming. The key lesson is that we must ensure not only that we move out, get the work done and move back, but that no future Parliament allows the future, modernised, refurbished, restored Parliament building to fall into such disrepair. If this building is going to work for successions of future MPs, peers, staff and members of the public who visit, and if it is to remain the icon of democracy that it was set up to be, we need to maintain it in the future. We must make sure that that is part of the plan now—I lay a warning for our successors. That cyclical maintenance, boring though it may be, is vital so that we are not in this position again in our dotage. I can imagine the former Leader of the House sitting up in the Public Gallery and getting very frustrated if we come here as we get older. Let us hope that we do not have to do that, and that future Members will be good custodians of this building, as we and some of our predecessors have sadly not been in the past.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 3 and 4 together.

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

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I will not repeat the many thanks outlined by the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) and others, because they have listed everybody that I would list. However, I pay tribute to them and particularly to the members of the original Joint Committee, who really set the tone.
CAPITAL GAINS TAX
That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (Israel) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 13 May, be approved.

INCOME TAX
That the draft Double Taxation Relief (Cyprus) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 29 April, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

Visa Processing Algorithms
Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

5.10 pm
Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): This is an important debate about technology, automation, the Home Office, immigration and people’s lives. I came to the House in 2010 and have since often raised issues to do with technology, and I also feel that a better debate on immigration has often been needed, so the opportunity to spend two hours and 20 minutes debating this subject is an unexpected but welcome surprise. However, I do not intend to detain the House for much longer than the half hour originally estimated, although I will be happy if other Members wish to.

I want to start by saying that I am happy to call myself a “tech evangelist”, having worked as an engineer in the tech sector for 20 years before coming into Parliament. Since then, I have worked to champion technology and how it can make all our lives better; I was the first MP to mention the internet of things in this place, for example. Over the years, I have also raised concerns about the impact of technology, especially with a Government who refuse to put in place a regulatory framework that reflects its potential for harm as well as good, and who, critically, refuse to accept that the impact of technology on society is a political choice.

Along with others, I have been highlighting the potential harms of algorithmic decision making, artificial intelligence and data exploitation for years, yet the Government have done nothing. In fact, we now learn that they have done worse than nothing: they have taken advantage of the current regulatory chaos to implement algorithmic management in secret.

On 9 June, the Financial Times revealed that the Home Office was secretly using algorithms to process visa applications, which is making a bad situation worse. I say that because of my experience as a constituency MP in Newcastle with a significant level of immigration casework—I will talk more about that. I am also chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Africa. We are currently conducting an inquiry into UK visa refusals for African visitors to the UK. We have met the Minister—we are grateful for that—and our report will be published next month. Furthermore, I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on diversity and inclusion in science, technology, engineering and maths; algorithmic bias is one important example of how the lack of diversity in STEM is bad for tech and society.

According to the Financial Times journalist Helen Warrell, the Home Office uses an algorithm to “stream” visa applicants according to their supposed level of risk—grading them red, amber or green. The Home Office says that that decision is then checked by a real-life human and does not impact the decision-making process, which is the most ridiculous justification for algorithmic decision making ever—that it does not make any decisions! Presumably it is just there to look good. We must not forget the inevitability of confirmation bias in human decision making, which was raised by the chief inspector of borders and immigration.

The Home Office refuses to give any details of the streaming process, how risk is determined or the algorithm itself. That lack of accountability would be deeply
\[\text{Chi Onwurah}\]

worrying in any Department, but in the Home Office it is entirely unacceptable, particularly when it comes to visa processing. The Home Office is broken. We know that it is unable to fulfil its basic visa-processing duties in a timely or consistent manner. If we add to that a powerful and unregulated new technology, Brexit and bias, we have a recipe for disaster.

I know that there are many able and hard-working civil servants in the Home Office, though fewer than there were. When I say that the Home Office is broken, it is not a criticism of them, but of the resources they are given to do their job. The all-party parliamentary group for Africa received detailed and, at times, excoriating evidence from a whole range of people and organisations—academics, artists, business owners, scientists and family members—who had been wrongly denied entry to the UK. I will give just a few examples.

LIFT, the world-famous London International Festival of Theatre, applied for visas for well-known artists from the Democratic Republic of the Congo for a performance exploring their experience of civil war. They were denied visas on the basis that UK dancers could perform those roles. We also heard from the Scotland Malawi Partnership, which highlighted a case where a high-profile musician invited to the UK from Malawi was given a visa rejection letter from UK Visas and Immigration that essentially stated, “We reject your visa because [insert reason here].”

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and wholeheartedly endorse everything she is saying. We have worked closely together. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on Malawi and assist her on the APPG for Africa. As she says, these examples are just the tip of the iceberg. She is right that we should not blame the individual decision makers in the Home Office. It is the policy, the lack of resourcing and, as I think she is getting to, the increasingly broad-brush approach to the use of automation. This is damaging the whole of the UK and everything the Government say about wanting to make Britain a great country to come to; that simply will not be the case if people cannot get through the door.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Unsurprisingly, as we have worked together in the all-party parliamentary groups, I agree with everything he said. In fact, he anticipates some of the points that I will come on to make.

Our APPG also heard of ordained ministers and priests being denied visas either because they did not earn enough—as if they had taken a vow of poverty—or because the Church of England is not considered a reputable sponsor. We heard of a son unable to reach his father’s deathbed and grandparents unable to see their grandchildren.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I have seen similar cases, particularly when somebody wants to bring a member of their family over here. I will not go into great detail, but I had a case where an individual was dying of cancer, which meant that her husband would have to give up his job to look after their four kids. The problem was trying to get somebody from her home country to come here to look after her until she died. It took a long time for us to sort that out, but eventually they were allowed a visa to come here. Nine times out of 10 with visas or even leave to stay, there are major problems with the Home Office. My hon. Friend is right; something has to happen. The Home Office is under-resourced and has a lack of personnel. It might tell us that it can put an application through in a given time, but it does not happen that way. People often turn up at our surgeries, and they are sometimes very distressed about the way these things are handled.

Chi Onwurah: I really thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, because he is of course absolutely right. He raises a heartbreaking case, but he also hints at the fact that, as a consequence, we as MPs are seeing more casework and having a higher case load. That in itself is putting more pressure on the Home Office because we raise cases and ask for them to be reviewed. It takes longer to effect a decision—a final, just decision—and the people concerned have their lives disrupted, in some cases heartbreakingly so, for a longer period of time.

I want to mention the case of a United Kingdom mayor who was denied the presence of their sister at their inauguration, presumably because they were not considered to be a credible sponsor. Finally of these national cases, Oxfam has highlighted that, because of visa rejections, only one of the 25 individuals from Africa expected to attend a blog-writing training course at the recent London School of Economics Africa summit was able to do so. Non-governmental organisations and so on are trying to support in-country skills development, but it is often the case that it is very difficult to bring people, particularly young people, working for Oxfam or other NGOs to this country for training.

The Minister should know that her Department is notorious for a culture of disbelief, with an assumption that visitors are not genuine. I will give one example from my own constituency. Last year, the University of Nigeria Alumni Association UK branch chose to hold its annual meeting in Newcastle—by the way, it is a fantastic location to hold all such events—but a significant number were initially denied visas on the grounds that they might not return to Nigeria. These were all businessmen and women, academics or Government workers with family in Nigeria. After my intervention, their visas were approved, but that should not have been necessary.

Entry clearance officers are set independent targets of up to 60 case decisions each day, and our all-party group investigation found that this impacted on the quality and fairness of decision making. Home Office statistics from September 2018 show that African applicants are refused UK visas at twice the rate of those from any other part of the world. When visitors are denied entry, arbitrarily, the UK’s relationship and standing with those countries is damaged, as has been mentioned, and we lose culturally and economically. International conferences and events, new businesses, trading opportunities and cultural collaborations are being lost to the UK because of the failings of the Home Office.

The last report on visa services from the independent chief inspector in 2014 found that over 40% of refusal notices were “not balanced, and failed to show that consideration had been given to both positive and negative evidence.”

Last month, it was announced that the six-month target for deciding straightforward asylum cases is being abandoned. This was a target that, as the Home Office’s
own statistics show, was repeatedly missed. In 2017, one in four asylum cases was not decided within six months, while immigration delays have doubled over the past year, despite a drop in cases. As a constituency MP, I know from personal experience about the significantly longer delays to visa applications.

This is a failing system, but it is run for profit. Applicants are routinely charged up to 10 times the actual administrative costs of processing applications. For example, applying for leave to remain in the UK costs £2,389, while the true cost is just £243. Fees for refused visas are not refunded and there is no right of appeal for the refusal of a visa application. Within the process, even communication with the Home Office is monetised: people are charged £5.48 to email the Home Office from abroad and non-UK-based phone calls cost £1.37 per minute.

The fact that the Department has reputedly lost 25% of its headcount under the austerity agenda must be part of the reason for these failures, but there is also the culture of disbelief, which I mentioned earlier, the hostile environment, of which we have heard much, and the impact of Brexit, because what staff do remain are being moved on to Brexit preparation. It is in this environment that the Home Office decided that the answer was an algorithm.

According to the Home Office, the use of algorithms in visa processing is part of an efficiency drive. They are being used not to improve the quality of decision making, but to make up for a lack of resources and/or to drive further resources out. As an engineer, I often say that whatever the problem is, the answer is never technology—at least, not on its own. I will say categorically that algorithms should not be used for short-term cost savings at this stage in their evolution as a technology.

Let me define what we are talking about. An algorithm is a set of instructions, acting on data entered in a particular format, to make a decision. If the algorithm learns from performing those instructions how to make better decisions, that might be called machine learning. If it both learns from performing those instructions how to make particular decisions and can act upon data in different and unpredictable formats, it might be considered to be artificial intelligence—might, but not necessarily is, because not everything that is artificial is intelligent.

Critically, algorithms are only as good as their design and the data they are trained on. They are designed by software engineers, who tend to come from a very narrow demographic—few are women, from ethnic minorities or working class. The design will necessarily reflect the limits of their backgrounds, unless a significant effort is made for it not to.

There are many examples of problems with the training data for algorithms, from the facial recognition algorithm that identified black people as gorillas because only white people had been used to train it, to the match-making or romantic algorithm that optimised for short-term relationships because the training data showed that they generated more income, due to the repeat business. Unless algorithms are diverse by design, they will be unequal by outcome.

Algorithms are now an integral part of our lives, but without any appropriate regulation. They drive Facebook’s newsfeeds and Google’s search results; they tell us what to buy and when to go to sleep; they tell us who to vote for and whom to hire. However, there is no regulatory framework to protect us from their bias. Companies argue that the results of their algorithms are a mirror to society and are not their responsibility; they say that the outcomes of algorithms are already regulated because the companies that use them have to meet employment and competition law. But a mirror is not the right metaphor; by automating decision making, algorithms industrialise bias. Companies and especially Governments should not rely on algorithms alone to deliver results.

I hope that the Government are not accepting algorithms in their decision making processes without introducing further regulation. The Home Office has denied that the algorithm for visa streaming takes account of race, but it refuses to tell us anything about the algorithm itself. Home Office guidance on the “genuine visitor” test allows consideration of the political, economic and security situation of the country of application, or nationality, as well as statistics on immigration compliance from those in the same geographical region, which can often be proxies for race.

When I announced this debate, many organisations and individuals sent me examples of how Home Office algorithmic decision making had effectively discriminated against them. Concerns were also raised about other automated decision making in the Home Office—for example, the residency checks in the EU settlement scheme, which uses a person’s Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and Department for Work and Pensions footprints to establish residency, but does not consider benefits such as working tax credit, child tax credit or child benefit. All those benefits are more likely to be received by women. Therefore, the automated residency check is likely to discriminate against women, particularly vulnerable women without physical documents.

We do not know whether the visa processing algorithm makes similar choices, whether it was written by the same people, or indeed whether it originated in the private sector or the public sector. The Home Office says that algorithmic decisions are still checked by people—a requirement of GDPR, the general data protection regulation—but not how much time is allowed for those checks, and has admitted that the purpose of the algorithm in the first place was to reduce costs.

Unfortunately, the Government’s track record on digital and data does not give confidence. When the Tories and Liberal Democrats entered Government in 2010, big data was a new phenomenon. Now it drives the business model of the internet, but the Government have done nothing to protect citizens beyond implementing mandatory European Union legislation—GDPR. They are happy to preside over a state of utter chaos when it comes to the ownership and control of data, and allow a free-for-all to develop in artificial intelligence, algorithms, the internet of things and blockchain. In 2016, for example, the DWP secretly trialled the payment of benefits using shared ledger or blockchain technology. Despite the privacy implications of using a private company to put sensitive, highly personal data on to a shared ledger that could not be changed or deleted, we still do not know what the process was for approving the use of this technology or the outcome of the trial. The Government should have learned from the Care.data debacle that the misuse of technology damages public trust for a long time.
I like to consider myself as a champion of the power of shared data. I believe the better use of data could not only reduce the costs of public services, saving money to be better used elsewhere, but improve those services, making them more individual, more personal, faster and more efficient. However, I am not the only one to raise concerns. Algorithmic use in the public sector was recently debated in the Lords, where it was estimated that some 53 local authorities and about a quarter of police authorities are now using algorithms for prediction, risk assessment—as in this case—and assistance in decision making. Now that we find it being used in the Home Office, it is essential that the Government—I am glad to see the Minister here today—answer the following questions. I have, I think, 11 questions for the Minister to answer.

Will the Minister say whether this algorithmic visa processing is part of machine learning or artificial intelligence? Is the algorithm diverse by design? Will the Minister say whether the algorithm makes choices about what data is to be considered, as with the settled status check example? Who was responsible for the creation of the algorithm? Was it the Home Office, the Government Digital Service or a private sector company? What rights do visa applicants have with regard to this algorithm and their own data? Do they know it is being used in this way? How long is their data being stored for and what security is it subject to?

What advice was taken in making the decision to introduce this algorithm? Did the Government consult their Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport or the Cabinet Office? Does the duty of care in the Online Harms White Paper from DCMS apply to the Home Office in this case? What redress or liability do applicants have for decisions that are made in error or are subject to bias by the algorithm? What future algorithms is it planned to introduce into visa processing or elsewhere? Finally, why is it that journalists—in this case, from the Financial Times, as well as Carole Cadwalladr—seem to have identified and brought attention to the misuse of algorithms but the Government or any of their regulators who are supposedly interested in this area, such as Ofcom or the Information Commissioner’s Office, have not? Will the Minister say which regulator she feels is responsible for this area?

A Labour Government would work with industry, local authorities, businesses, citizen groups and other stakeholders to introduce a digital Bill of Rights. This would give people ownership and control over their data and how it is used, helping to break the power of the monopoly tech giants, while ensuring a right to fair and equal treatment by algorithms, algorithmic justice and openness. We need to be able to hold companies and Government accountable for the consequences of the algorithms, artificial intelligence and machine learning that drive their profits or cost-cutting. A Labour Government would protect us not just from private companies, but from the cost-cutting of this Government, who I suspect either do not understand the consequences of their technology choices or do not care.

I hope that the Minister can reassure me and answer my questions and that she can demonstrate that the use of algorithms in the Home Office and elsewhere across Government will be subject to proper transparency, scrutiny and regulation in future.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) on securing this debate. I welcome her passionate contribution and recognise the importance of this issue and the sensitivities around it. She described herself as a tech evangelist and she has brought a great deal of knowledge and experience to the House in this debate and with some of the wider issues that she has consistently raised in the House since she arrived in 2010. I hope that the House will forgive me if I spend a bit of time focusing on the wider visa and immigration system before moving on to the specific points that the hon. Lady made, because she raised some wider concerns about the Home Office and the borders and immigration system.

We welcome people from all over the world to visit, study, work and settle here. We welcome their contribution and the fact that Britain is one of the best countries in the world to come and live in. That is why we operate a fair system, under which people can come here, are welcomed and can contribute to this country. However, we need a controlled system: because this is one of the best countries in the world to live in, many people wish to come here. A controlled system, where the rules that make that possible are followed, is what the Government are building and that is certainly what the public expect.

At the end of 2018, we published a White Paper on the future borders and immigration system, which will focus on high skills, welcoming talented and hard-working individuals who will support the UK’s dynamic economy, enabling employers to compete on the world stage. Following its publication, we have initiated an extensive programme of engagement across the UK, and with the EU and international partners, to capture views and ensure that we design a future system that works for the whole United Kingdom.

Just last week, as part of that engagement and as part of London Tech Week, I enjoyed the opportunity to participate in a roundtable with members of Tech Nation, where I was joined by the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries, my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James). That occasion is always a great opportunity for Ministers to engage in cross-Government work, to understand the challenges that our future visa system may provoke, and to understand how those who are actually using the system have been finding it and what aspirations they may have for the future.

When discussing the scale of our visa system, I always think it important to remind the House of just how large it is. Thousands of decisions are made every single day, the overwhelming majority of which are completed within published service standards and enable people to visit the UK, to study here, to work here, or to rebuild their lives here. In 2018, UK Visas and Immigration received more than 3.2 million visa applications, of which just under 2.9 million were granted. The service standard for processing a visit visa is 15 working days, and last year UKVI processed 97% within that target.

As I have said, the UK welcomes genuine visitors, and more than 2.3 million visitor visas were granted for leisure, study or business visits—an increase of 8% in the past year.

The scale of the work that UK Visas and Immigration undertakes means that it has always used processes that enable it to allocate cases in as streamlined, efficient,
and rapid a manner as possible to deliver a world-class visa service. It allocates applications to caseworkers using a streaming tool that is regularly updated with a range of data. The tool is used only to allocate applications, not to decide them. Decision makers do not discriminate on the basis of age, gender, religion or race. The tool uses global and local historical data to indicate whether an application might require more or less scrutiny.

As the hon. Lady explained so comprehensively, an algorithm is a series of instructions or a set of rules that are followed to complete a task. The streaming tool which is operated by UKVI decision-making centres is an algorithm, but I should make it clear that it is not coding, it is not programming, it is not anything that involves machine learning, and, crucially, it is not automated decision making. It is, effectively, an automated flowchart where an application is subject to a number of basic yes/no questions to determine whether it is considered likely to be straightforward or possibly more complex. As I said earlier, the streaming tool is used only to allocate applications, not to decide them.

**Chi Onwurah:** I thank the Minister for the remarks that she is making, and also for the way in which she is responding to my own remarks. She has said that the algorithm is used for allocation purposes. I understood that it was also used to assess risk. That is the “red, amber, green” traffic-light approach, which is about something slightly more than allocation.

**Caroline Nokes:** I am glad that the hon. Lady has made that point, because I was just about to deal with it.

As I have said, a decision maker assesses every application against the immigration rules, on its individual merits, and taking into consideration the evidence provided by the applicant. The effective streaming of applications ensures that those requiring more detailed and closer scrutiny are routed to appropriately trained assessing staff. It is essential in delivering enhanced decision quality by developing robust decision-making structures, and—as the hon. Lady just mentioned—directing a risk-led approach to decision manager reviews. Streaming does not determine the decision; it determines only the process that is undertaken before a decision officer assesses the application and the requirements for decision manager assurance.

Since 2015, UKVI has developed a streaming tool that assesses the required level of scrutiny attached to an application. It is regularly updated with data relating to known immigration abuses, and with locally relevant data. It is also used to prioritise work—for example, when the applicant has paid a priority fee for faster processing.

Streaming indicators can be positive as well as negative, and might include a previous history of travel to the UK and other Five Eyes or EU countries, or previous compliance with immigration rules. The streaming might indicate potential safeguarding concerns. It could also be used to indicate criminal records and of course a sponsor with a very good record of associated compliance. Use of the streaming tool creates a globally consistent approach and supports an objective data-driven approach to the consideration of an application. For every application regardless of its stream, an entry clearance officer must carry out a range of decision-making functions before arriving at a decision, most notably an assessment of whether an application meets the requirements of the relevant immigration rules.

The hon. Lady referred to the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration. In 2017 his report on the entry clearance processing operations in Croydon and Istanbul raised no concerns that applications would be refused because of streaming and contained figures that indicated that over 51% of applications streamed as requiring further scrutiny were issued.

The hon. Lady referred to her significant and important work with the all-party group on Africa, and as she said I was very pleased to meet the group earlier this year. She will know that over 47,000 more visas were issued to African nationals in 2018 than in 2016, an increase of 14%. The percentage of African nationals who saw their application granted is up by 4% on 10 years ago and is only slightly below the average rate of the past 10 years of all nationalities. Visa applications from African nationals are at their highest level since 2013.

The average issue rate for non-settlement visa applications submitted in the Africa region is consistent with the average issue rate for the past three years, which has been 75%.

The UKVI Africa region is responsible for the delivery of visa services across sub-Saharan Africa. The region currently processes in excess of 350,000 visa applications per year. On average—and in line with other regions—97% of non-settlement visa applications submitted in the Africa region are processed within the 15-day service standard.

There are 31 modern visa application centres in the Africa region, 28 of which offer a range of added-value services and premium products to enhance the customer experience and/or speed of processing. I had the privilege of visiting one of our visa application centres in Africa last year when I visited Nigeria and met a wide range of students who were coming to the UK to study.

The hon. Lady mentioned visas for performers at festivals. I am delighted to see the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) in her place, because I recently had a meeting with her and the Edinburgh festivals organisers. We had what I thought was a very constructive dialogue about problems that international artists may have previously experienced and how to ensure that there are improvements going forward. We are also working closely with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to understand the requirements of the creative sector and, as part of the introduction of the future borders and immigration system, which will be phased in from January 2021, we are engaging widely across many sectors and all parts of the UK to work out how we can improve our system.

The hon. Lady asked a wide range of questions, some of which—such as those on the regulation of algorithms and the tech sector—are perhaps not best addressed by the Home Office. I was somewhat sad to have seen the Cabinet Office Minister my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) leave his place. I spent a happy six months at the Cabinet Office as Minister with responsibility for a wide range of matters, including the Government Digital Service. In that role I did not perhaps come to the Chamber to discuss things very much, but the hon. Lady has made an important point about the design of algorithms and the painfully high prevalence of young white men in the sector. We all understand, particularly in terms of artificial intelligence
and machine-led learning, that bias can certainly exist—I was going to say creep in, but I fear that is in no way explicit enough. Bias can exist when a narrow demographic is designing algorithms and machine-led learning. We must all be vigilant on that.

I am not going to stand at the Dispatch Box and promise regulation from the Home Office, because that would be inappropriate, but the hon. Lady has made some important points which must be taken up by the Cabinet Office and DDCMS to make sure that we have regulation that is effective and in the right place.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for her remarks, and I appreciate the approach that she has taken. I did not expect the Home Office to make the decisions on how algorithms should function within the Department. I am happy to hear her recognise the concerns that I have raised, but I fear she is coming to the end of her remarks, so may I ask her two things? Will she commit to discussing with the Cabinet Office, or whoever is responsible, how algorithms may or may not be implemented in her Department? I do not know whether she is made aware of this, or whether there is perhaps a working party. Also, will she accept the invitation to help to launch the report of the Africa APPG, from which I have quoted some excerpts in this debate?

Caroline Nokes: Turning to the hon. Lady’s second question first, I very much enjoyed coming and speaking to the Africa APPG, and I would be delighted to come to the launch, diary permitting. The hon. Lady will know that things are very fluid in the House at the moment, but I would certainly be pleased to come along to the launch of the report if at all possible. There is a significant amount of work to be done when it comes to the use of algorithms within and across Government. There is increasing use of greater technology not simply in the Home Office but in every Government Department, and the hon. Lady, as a tech evangelist, will welcome that. However, it is important that we get it right, and I am absolutely prepared to take away the 11 questions she has asked. I fear that they are somewhat above my pay grade, owing to their very technical nature, but we will undoubtedly provide her with answers; I absolutely commit to that. There is significant work to be done between the different Departments, including the Cabinet Office, to ensure that we get this matter right.

Question put and agreed to.

5.52 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Thursday 20 June 2019

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

Account of the Contingencies Fund 2018-19

Ordered,

That there be laid before this House an Account of the Contingencies Fund 2018-19, showing—

(1) A statement of Financial Position;
(2) A statement of Cash Flows, and
(3) Notes of the Accounts; together with the Certificate and Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General thereon.—

(Iain Stewart.)

Mr Speaker: A Whip or a Minister nods in such situations. Nothing further is said or done. There can be no opposition.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Government Contracts: Climate Emergency

1. Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Minister for the Cabinet Office on including provisions to tackle the environment and climate emergency in future Government contracts.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): How grateful I am, Mr Speaker, to hear you say that there can indeed be no opposition.

Tackling the climate change and environment emergency is a cross-Government priority and an issue that I discuss regularly with Cabinet colleagues. The greening government commitments include specific targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving sustainable procurement. Those commitments demonstrate the Government’s leadership in improving the environmental sustainability of their own estate, and the 2018 revisions to the Green Book have also improved the evaluation of the natural capital impacts of Government decision making.

Alex Norris: Tomorrow, young people in Nottingham will demonstrate because we are not moving quickly enough on our climate emergency. This House declared such an emergency on 1 May, saying that the Government should “set ambitious, short-term targets for... low carbon energy and transport”.

When we will see those targets?

Michael Gove: It is already the case that we are the first Government of a developed nation to embrace the ambition of reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. I congratulate the Members across the House who have campaigned to ensure that that commitment is at the heart of this Government’s proposals—indeed, it is a vision—to ensure that we leave a cleaner, greener planet for the next generation.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the Foreign Secretary and the Foreign Office team on their amazing diplomatic success in the negotiations with Italy, which mean that next year’s global climate change conference is almost certain to come to London?

Michael Gove: The Foreign Secretary has done an outstanding job on the diplomatic stage and will continue to do so. Co-operating with our partners across western Europe, including Italy, will ensure that the 2020 conference of the parties brings nations together to deal with this global challenge. The Secretary of State for International Development has also played a distinguished role alongside the Foreign Secretary in using our global footprint to ensure that our planet is in a more sustainable state.

17. [911467] Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): As has been said, this House declared a climate emergency on 1 May. In recent weeks, pupils at Abercanaid Community School and Ysgol Rhyd y Grug in my constituency have been in contact with me to urge this Parliament to do all that we can to address the climate emergency. Will the Secretary of State outline the specific actions that he will take on Government contracts, and on any other measures, to give the pupils in my constituency and elsewhere the confidence that this Government are serious and will meet their target of net zero emissions by 2050?

Michael Gove: I congratulate the students in his constituency and so many other students across the country on helping to ensure that our climate and environment emergency is at the heart of our decision making. We will put greening government and greening the whole country at the heart of our decision making in the forthcoming spending review.

Food Producers: Overseas Marketing

2. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for International Trade on (a) promoting and (b) supporting UK food producers in marketing their produce overseas.

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): I met with the Secretary of State for International Trade yesterday, and he told me that he had just come back from Turkey, where he had been exploring opportunities for British trade, including in food and drink. On Monday, I signed an agreement with China which means that British beef could be back on Chinese dinner plates by the end of the year, which could be worth £230 million over five years to our world-class beef producers. Those are just two examples of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for International Trade working closely to raise the international profile and reputation of the UK’s high-quality food and drink products, to open new markets, and to boost our exports.
**Mr Goodwill:** It has been great, as it says on the can. DEFRA’s “Food is GREAT” campaign supports DIT’s trade promotion activity, including at trade shows and meet-the-buyer events. It helps businesses to succeed in overseas markets by ensuring global recognition of UK excellence in food and drink, while encouraging our food and drink companies to export more.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This just shows what a barny army we have on the Government Front Bench. To want more beef to be produced and shipped thousands of miles to China shows that they have not learned the lessons of sustainability or climate change danger. They had better learn those lessons quickly and do something to save our planet.

**Mr Goodwill:** As a former Shipping Minister, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that 30% of containers go back to China empty, so there is tremendous potential for shipping goods to China without increasing our carbon footprint.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): British breakfast cereals are among the best in the world and none is finer than Weetabix, which is based in the Kettering constituency and which sources its wheat from farms within a 50-mile radius of the factory. Will my right hon. Friend be the great British breakfast champion?

**Mr Goodwill:** I am a great fan of Weetabix, not least because I am a wheat producer myself. Indeed, I have driven past the Weetabix factory in his constituency with my hon. Friend, and I quite fancy going to visit when my diary allows.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): At the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said that the EU would continue to protect UK-protected geographical indications because they are European law. That seems to be incorrect. Was he mistaken, or did someone mislead him? Will he now put the record straight?

**Mr Goodwill:** Geographical indications are important not only for producers but so that consumers know they are getting the real thing. It is important that we get that protection in our negotiations with the EU through the implementation period while, at the same time, talking to other trading partners around the world who may have different systems. We need to ensure that those systems dovetail closely with ours.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): On a recent visit to seafood companies in the Grimsby and Cleethorpes area, the American ambassador encouraged Young’s Seafood to export even more to the United States. What assistance can the Department give?

**Mr Goodwill:** We are keen to export seafood around the world. Brown crab from my constituency is exported to China, whelks are exported to South Korea, and I hope that the Americans will enjoy even more of our seafood and other products when we leave the EU and can negotiate trade agreements around the world.

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I want to press the Minister on geographical indications, which are vital in our marketing of goods and products made across the country. In the event of a no deal, about which the frontrunner in the Tory leadership contest seems quite keen, protections for Cornish pasties, Buxton blue cheese, traditional Welsh perry, Cornish clotted cream and Whitstable oysters, to name but a few, will be at risk. What steps is DEFRA taking to ensure that those vital goods produced by our farmers and growers are protected come Halloween this year?

**Mr Goodwill:** In a no-deal situation, we would wish to set up our own scheme and to negotiate with our friends across the channel to ensure some degree of co-operation, but I stress that no deal is not an option I would want to support. We need to get a deal, and we need to get it over the line. If, like me, Opposition Members had voted for the deal on the three occasions it came before the House, we would have left the European Union on 29 March and we would be in a much better situation for UK producers.

**Tree Planting**

3. **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the rate of tree planting.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs** (David Rutley): To increase tree planting rates, we have changed how our main grant schemes work. The woodland carbon fund now supports infrastructure such as roads and is available for smaller projects. The countryside stewardship woodland creation grant is now open for applications all year, rather than in short windows, which demonstrates the Government’s commitment to planting 11 million trees during this Parliament.

**Maggie Throup:** I thank my hon. Friend for his response. However, his passion for planting trees seems to be in conflict with the practice of both Network Rail and Highways England, which have decimated thousands of mature trees that lined the railway and motorway embankments through Long Eaton, Sawley and Breaston in my constituency and that acted as a vital natural sound and visual barrier. May I urge him and his counterparts in the Department for Transport to intervene to ensure that mature trees are reinstated on those embankments as soon as possible?

**David Rutley:** My hon. Friend is, and continues to be, a strong champion for Erewash in all ways. I recognise that removing trees can be concerning, which is why DEFRA is working closely with the DFT to deliver a new policy for Network Rail, with the aim of improving its current approach to managing vegetation so that it enhances biodiversity on our rail network. That is in line with the recommendations of John Varley’s review of Network Rail’s vegetation management.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I planted some 3,500 trees on my land 10 years ago, so I see the benefits. Will the Minister further outline what help, advice and practical and financial support is available for landowners to prepare land for trees to be planted?
David Rutley: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I am grateful for his efforts in helping to achieve our wider target. As I have explained, we are working hard to make our current schemes much more flexible. We will also be introducing the woodland carbon guarantee—£50 million in the Budget—and we launched the £10 million urban tree challenge fund just a few weeks ago.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the Minister join me in celebrating the 9 million trees planted over the past 30 years to create the new national forest? My constituency, at the centre of it, has seen a massive improvement in not only the environment but the quality of life, for visitors and residents alike.

David Rutley: I have had the chance to go to the national forest in my hon. Friend’s constituency on two occasions, and he is a fantastic champion and ambassador for the national forest. We need to take lessons from that and apply them in the northern forest as well, to see what the exciting opportunities can be.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): The role of tree planting in tackling climate change is well documented. The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) promised during his leadership bid to plant 100 million trees. The Minister has been mentioning targets, so it is disappointing to read this week that the Government are falling woefully short—by 71%—of their targets. Can the Minister explain why that is? What is he doing about it? How long will it be before we see the Secretary of State’s targets actually met?

David Rutley: We have set out a clear target of planting 11 million trees in this Parliament. We are at 3.6 million now and on the trajectory to achieve that target of 11 million, so I assure the hon. Lady that we are working in that direction. We have also set out strong aspirations to increase our woodland cover from 10% to 12% within the 25-year environment plan. We have stretching targets and we will move further forward.

Leaving the EU: Food Shortages

4. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps has he taken to help prevent food shortages in the event that the UK leaves the EU without an agreement.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): The Government have been undertaking extensive work to prepare for a no-deal scenario for the past two years, to ensure that trade continues to operate smoothly from the day we leave. We have long-established relationships with industry, and we are working closely with key stakeholders to prepare for all scenarios. The UK has a high level of food security, built on diverse sources, and this will continue to be the case when we leave the EU.

Dr Huq: In reality, only just over half of the food we eat is made in Britain, with more than a third coming from the EU. Given that the Food and Drink Federation is predicting that after a no-deal Brexit fresh fruit and veg would run out after two weeks, why are the remaining contenders in the Tory leadership battle continuing to entertain this damaging prospect? Does he not agree that scurvy back on our streets is more important than the whims of fundamentalist party members’ wishes?

David Rutley: The hon. Lady has ruined a perfectly reasonable question by exaggerating. Of course we are preparing for every eventuality. As we have said already in these questions, a deal is the best outcome, and we all have a responsibility to help deliver that. We are preparing for all outcomes.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): So will my hon. Friend confirm that my constituents do not need to stock up with tins of Spam or apricots in syrup?

David Rutley: We are not going to endorse any particular brand, but it is important to note that we have a rich and diverse source of food, and that will continue when we leave the EU.

John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): Can the Secretary of State reassure my local businesses, which supply millions of people across the UK with high-quality food products, that enough refrigeration units will be in place to cope with the predicted delays at UK ports after our exit from the EU?

David Rutley: The hon. Gentleman can be assured that I have regular meetings—each week—with the main stakeholders in the food industry to prepare for no deal. We are looking at all eventualities. Primarily, we are looking at how we can ensure the flow of trade; that is our vital priority.

Agri-Environment Payments

5. Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): What steps is he taking to tackle late agri-environment payments.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Yesterday, the Rural Payments Agency announced that it will make payments next month to all those who have been waiting on the historical revenue payments, and therefore every farmer who has been taking part in environmental and countryside stewardship schemes, which deliver important benefits for our environment, will receive the money that they deserve.

Bim Afolami: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, because many farmers in my constituency have regularly complained to me about the delays in countryside stewardship scheme payments. Will he expand on that answer for those who, in some instances, have had to wait more than 600 days for payments?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is a brilliant advocate for Hertfordshire farmers and indeed for workers across the English countryside. He is absolutely right: past performance has not been good enough. That is why I am so pleased that the RPA’s chief executive, Paul Caldwell, will make sure that all back payments are cleared next month.

Mr Speaker: I hope the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) realises that he has just been canvassed.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Last Thursday, the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), and I visited Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Services. We met farmers who had not been paid for 18 months, so payments in July would be welcome. Will they get interest on the late payments?
Michael Gove: The hon. Lady is a superb advocate for the farmers of upper Teesdale, County Durham and England, and it is not too late for her to cross the House. She makes a fair point, and I will look into it.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), as we leave the European Union we will build up more and more environmentally friendly agricultural policy, so stewardship schemes will be more important than ever. There has been a loss of faith in them, and I am worried about the future programme, because farmers really do not like the complexity and have waited far too long for their payments.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a fair point; the schemes have been bedevilled by unnecessary complexity in the past. It is critical that as we leave the European Union and have new environmental land management schemes, they are both simpler and more effective in supporting farmers in the wonderful work that they do.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: In calling Dr David Drew, I remind Members and inform others that the hon. Gentleman has a doctorate in rural economy.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I know that, as always, you are my biggest fan, Mr Speaker.

I hear what the Secretary of State says, but one reason for the current collapse in the take-up of environmental agri-ecology schemes is the slowness and lateness of payments, which is bedevilling the pilots for the environmental land management schemes. Will the Secretary of State assure me that those pilots will now get under way?

Michael Gove: Yes.

Wildlife Habitats

6. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that developers in England enhance habitats for wildlife.  [911456]

11. Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that developers in England enhance habitats for wildlife.  [911461]

13. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that developers in England enhance habitats for wildlife.  [911463]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): We have strengthened the national planning policy framework to make it clear that all development within its scope should achieve net gains for biodiversity. We have consulted on proposals to mandate biodiversity net gain for development, and will use the forthcoming environment Bill to legislate for a net gain system.

Craig Tracey: I thank the Minister for that answer, but will she assure me that she is taking action to ensure that all major infrastructure projects comply with all environmental licences, permissions and protections?

Dr Coffey: Large infrastructure projects may require an environmental impact assessment of the likely effects. In the case of nationally significant infrastructure projects, the EIA forms a part of the planning process and the development consent order. I assure my hon. Friend that each consenting regime has appropriate enforcement mechanisms.

Robert Courts: West Oxfordshire wants the design of the Oxfordshire Cotswolds garden village to enhance, not harm, the environment. What guidance have Ministers given to developers on how garden villages can enhance things such as wildlife corridors and biodiversity in new developments?

Dr Coffey: Well-planned, locally led garden communities can play a vital role, not only in meeting the country’s housing needs and providing a stable pipeline of high-quality homes but by providing such opportunities as my hon. Friend referred to. In fact, they will be mandated to do so, to improve wildlife corridors and promote health and wellbeing and quality of life. That could be a win-win for my hon. Friend’s constituents.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What levers will the Minister have?

Dr Coffey: We have updated the planning guidance for the planning policy. As we set out in the consultation, we intend to develop in the environment Bill an update of metrics for biodiversity and wider environmental net gains. We will provide practical tools to support developers and, critically, local planning authorities to achieve better environmental outcomes for every development.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): A 38 Degrees petition started by Norman Pasley from Bristol is calling for legislation on the installation of swift boxes in all new housing developments, and it has more than 130,000 signatures. As parliamentary species champion for the swift, I urge Ministers to support the campaign. Perhaps the Secretary of State in particular would like to make it his legacy from his time at the Department.

Dr Coffey: Hopefully, the hon. Lady will be swift in her praise for the work we are doing with the forthcoming environment Bill. As the species champion for bitterns, which are literally booming as we speak, I know that this issue matters. We want to take more proactive approaches to how we protect species. I am not sure whether a swift box in every single house is the right thing, as opposed to all sorts of other things such as beetle hotels—there is a wide variety—but we need to make sure that we encourage a wide range of biodiversity for birds, for wildlife and for the protection of nature for future generations.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The crowing from the Department about their bird policy this morning is rather touching. The Minister will be aware that changes by the water undertakers to discharge water regulations are causing concern for the Bathroom Manufacturers Association and house builders. Will she meet me and a small delegation to discuss how future developments can better look after our waste water?
Dr Coffey: I am sure that we can work that in with the question on developers and biodiversity, Mr Speaker. I recently responded to a written question and a letter from the hon. Gentleman. Perhaps he can look at that first before we consider a further meeting.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): The RSPB and the Wildlife Trusts, which both have fantastic reserves in my constituency in the Newport wetlands and the Magor marsh, are strongly supportive of establishing a nature recovery network to restore and repair habitats. Will the Government commit to putting that on a statutory footing?

Dr Coffey: I have the wonderful RSPB Minsmere and various Suffolk Wildlife Trust sites in my constituency. That is already our pledge. It was in the 25-year environment plan and will be in the forthcoming environment Bill.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): My constituents are up in arms about the felling of trees and vegetation to make way for HS2 during the nesting season. Will my hon. Friend confirm the Government’s commitment to biodiversity net gain for new developments?

Dr Coffey: That is absolutely the case. My right hon. Friend spoke to me this morning about this issue. I will follow up on it, because when major infrastructure projects go ahead, it is important that people should have confidence, and while some vegetation might need to be removed, HS2 is supposed to be planting at least 5 million trees. We will make sure that it does so.

Seasonal Agricultural Workers Pilot Scheme

7. Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): If he will hold discussions with the Home Secretary on increasing the limit on workers in the seasonal agricultural workers pilot scheme.

Mr Goodwill: Absolutely. We understand how big an issue this is. Some 28% of those working in food and drink manufacturing, including fish processing, are from the European Union. That is 106,000 people. It is important that they understand that, whichever way we leave the European Union, including no deal, they will still be able to come here to work and participate in these important industries.

Tree Planting

8. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What progress he has made on implementing the tree planting strategy.

Mr Goodwill: The Government have introduced a new immigration pilot scheme for 2019 and 2020 to enable up to 2,500 non-European economic area migrant workers to come to the UK to undertake seasonal employment in the edible horticultural sector. DEFRA and the Home Office will evaluate the outcome before taking any decisions on future arrangements.

Susan Elan Jones: Government Members seem to be obsessed with 31 October. That is a pity, because harvest is coming rather sooner, and I wish they would show a similar interest in that. The National Farmers Union has made it absolutely clear that we need a permanent, fully functioning system and that at least 10,000 new workers are required in this area. Why will the Government not act, and why will the Home Office not take proper action?

Mr Goodwill: It is important that we evaluate the pilot before moving further. From my point of view, we are meeting the requirements. We had 700 workers here already by the end of May and we expect to reach the peak in the middle of the summer picking season, although the Home Office might look at how many of those workers go back to the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Moldova at the end. We will need to evaluate that after the pilot before going further.

Mr Goodwill: But clearly the strategy is not working when councils such as City of York Council fail to sign up to the White Rose Forest project. As we have heard, the Government have failed to reach their target by 71%, so there is no chance that we will see a growth in the number of trees across our country. Will the Minister look at mandating local authorities to sign up to the Government’s initiative?

David Rutley: We will do all we can to encourage local authorities to get involved. It is good to hear that Yorkshire Water is planting 1 million trees in Yorkshire. We need to do more, particularly in the hon. Lady’s area, with natural flood management techniques upstream. There is lots we can do.

Rare and Native Breeds

9. George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): What plans his Department has to support (a) rare and (b) native breeds in future agriculture policy.

Mr Goodwill: Our rare and native breeds are an important genetic resource. There are several purposes under clauses 1 and 2 of the Agriculture Bill for which financial assistance could be provided to support our genetic heritage.

George Eustice: I declare my interest in that my family are long-standing breeders of both the British Lop pig and pedigree South Devon cattle, but genetic diversity is critical to maintaining resilience in our livestock sectors, and protecting genetic resources is a primary responsibility.
DEFRA. Will the Minister therefore agree to convene a meeting at DEFRA of representatives of our native and rare breeds to discuss what support would be appropriate for them under future policy?

Mr Goodwill: I was already aware of my hon. Friend’s considerable interest in this policy area. I am pleased to tell him that a workshop with breed societies will be taking place in London on 12 September to look at the issues that he has in mind. Later today I will be visiting the Lincolnshire show, where I hope to see some of the rare breeds that are bound to be there.

Mr Speaker: This is all very encouraging, but I must say that as we are discussing rare breeds, I feel a great sense of personal sadness that we are not joined this morning by the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), who knows a thing or two about these matters.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): As does my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis).

Mr Speaker: I had not seen the hon. Lady but I have now, and I am grateful to the Secretary of State, who is doing what might be called a side line.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I probably should also declare an interest in South Devon cattle, as my family have bred them for generations as well. However, I wanted to ask the Minister about rare wildlife, if I might segue into the matter. Given all his work on general licences recently, what communications has he had with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds about sites of special scientific interest and the work it does culling birds in those areas?

Mr Goodwill: It is important, particularly for ground-nesting birds, that other bird species that can predate on them and damage their nests are controlled. The RSPB carries out that work on land that it controls, and I hope that it will continue doing so to protect those particular rare species.

Badger Culling Programme

10. Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): What recent assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the badger culling programme.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): During 2018, badger control operations in 32 areas of England were all successful in meeting their targets. According to Natural England’s chief scientist, the results show that “industry-led badger control continues to deliver the level of effectiveness required by the policy to be confident of achieving disease control benefits”.

Assessments of the effectiveness of badger control are published annually on gov.uk.

Stephen Lloyd: Given the extended roll-out, it is estimated that about 150,000 badgers will have been culled by the end of 2020. This animal, which has been around since the ice age, faces extinction in various parts of the country. What would the Secretary of State say about investing the money in a national badger vaccination programme? To quote the Wildlife Trusts, should not the Government be investing in “medicine, not marksmen”?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. When it comes to dealing with bovine TB—a terrible disease that damages the lives of cattle and the livelihoods of farmers—we need to consider all steps that are appropriate. Culling and vaccination are both tools in our armoury.

Clean Air Strategy

12. Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on delivering the clean air strategy 2019.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has regular discussions with his counterpart at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Discussions are also held at an official level about delivering the clean air strategy and relevant provisions that we hope to bring forward in the forthcoming environment Bill. Local authorities will continue to play a vital role in delivering improvements to the air that we all breathe.

Wera Hobhouse: The Minister knows that Bath has a considerable air pollution problem. Idling cars make a measurable contribution to inner-city pollution. I recently tabled a private Member’s Bill to give local authorities greater enforcement powers to stop idling cars. Will the Minister consider my proposal to strengthen anti-idling legislation?

Dr Coffey: I believe this is already circulating around the Government and has been for a couple of months. I hope that an announcement will be made very soon.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): One local council that could do a much better job on air quality is Labour-controlled Hammersmith and Fulham, by reopening Hammersmith bridge. The diversion of traffic through Fulham and Chelsea is horrendous. Will the Minister join me in calling on the council and the Mayor of London to introduce proper air quality monitoring, particularly on Fulham High Street, to properly assess the catastrophic impact of the council’s decision?

Dr Coffey: It is fair to say that air quality across the country is improving, but these sorts of congestion hotspots are really damaging that progress. I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend that the bridge should be opened as quickly as possible.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) has withdrawn his question, so I call Mr David Duguid.

Leaving the EU: Fisheries Policy

15. David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What plans he has for fisheries policy after the UK leaves the EU.
The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): The Government’s vision for future fisheries policy as we leave the European Union is set out in the fisheries White Paper “Sustainable fisheries for future generations”, which was published in July 2018.

David Duguid: Will my right hon. Friend confirm his commitment to boosting investment in the fisheries sector to help with expansion outside the common fisheries policy but also to promote export opportunities and the UK domestic market for Scottish seafood after Brexit?

Michael Gove: Absolutely I will. The UK Government will work with the Scottish Government to make sure that we have investment in port facilities in Peterhead and Fraserburgh, and that we have the marketing budget necessary to ensure that the power of our United Kingdom is harnessed to help Scots fishermen and, indeed, Scottish fish processors.

Alastair Jack: (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State has already promised Danish and Iberian fishing fleets that their access to UK waters will continue unhindered after Brexit. How many promises has he made to other foreign countries, and what percentage of the quotas is going to be reserved for UK fishing?

Michael Gove: I have promised no such thing. What I have promised is to ensure that we are out of the European Union and out of the common fisheries policy, in stark contrast to the Scottish National party, which wants to keep us in the European Union and in the common fisheries policy. The Scottish National party and the Scottish Government claim to stand up for Scotland, but at every turn they prefer the politics of grievance and the ideology of separation to the interests of Scotland’s fishermen and Scotland’s citizens.

Topical Questions

T1. [911469] Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I am delighted to announce that Tamar Finkelstein OBE has been appointed as the new permanent secretary at DEFRA. She is the fourth woman in succession to be permanent secretary at this Department. With respect to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), I do think it is a very good thing if important institutions in this country are, wherever possible, led by women.

Jo Swinson: I congratulate the new permanent secretary at the Secretary of State’s Department. It is always good to see senior women in leadership roles.

The Government have set out a new net zero emissions target. Putting our country on track to meet that in order to tackle the climate emergency is going to take urgent and bold action, so will the Secretary of State commit to bringing forward the date to end the sale of new petrol and diesel cars to 2030, allow onshore wind facilities to be built again, and re-establish the Department of Energy and Climate Change?

Michael Gove: Those are important points, well made. Bringing forward the target by which we get rid of petrol and diesel cars is always kept under review. At the moment, we believe that the target is achievable and stretching, but we will of course keep it under review as more progress is made. On renewable energy, we lead the world in offshore wind, and we have also done a huge amount on solar energy, in particular—99% of the solar power generated in this country has been generated since 2010. I pay tribute to Ministers who served in the coalition Government between 2010 and 2015 for their work in this area.

T2. [911473] Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): When visiting the local Co-op shop last night on my way home from Parliament, I noticed that shoppers were being presented with bags emblazoned with the words, “100% compostable”. These bags were perfectly serviceable for the job that they were asked to do. Given that this technology is now available, is it not time that we banned the use of single-use plastic bags and bags for life to help the environment?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The environmental impact of bags, including bags for life, can be reduced simply through reusing them. We will be publishing our response on extending the carrier bag charge to all retailers very soon, so we are not currently considering stopping the use of plastic bags altogether. In our bio-economy strategy, we are committed to issuing a call for evidence, because it is important to note that these biodegradable bags need careful treatment when they come to the end of their life.

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Dr Coffey: This is something that the Government have worked on extensively. I have visited several countries, including Germany, and it is fair to say that not all deposit return schemes take glass. As I have said to the House before, the front end of these schemes is very simple, but how we make the back end work is complex. That is why it is taking some time. We are considering carefully with the devolved Administrations how we can make progress, and I hope we will be able to announce more soon.

T4. [911475] Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Reforesting the Iberian fishing fleets that their access to UK waters will continue unhindered after Brexit. How many promises has he made to other foreign countries, and what percentage of the quotas is going to be reserved for UK fishing?

Michael Gove: I have promised no such thing. What I have promised is to ensure that we are out of the European Union and out of the common fisheries policy, in stark contrast to the Scottish National party, which wants to keep us in the European Union and in the common fisheries policy. The Scottish National party and the Scottish Government claim to stand up for Scotland, but at every turn they prefer the politics of grievance and the ideology of separation to the interests of Scotland’s fishermen and Scotland’s citizens.

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We have a number of policies that we will implement as with air quality, we need to deal with ammonia emissions. She is right: when it comes to dealing impact of pollution.

I was able to sponsor National Refill Day with Water UK. Reusing our water bottles means that we could get rid of millions of plastic bottles that we do not need. It is about not only recycling plastic, but using a lot less. filtration, so that we keep plastics out of the rivers.

Dr Coffey: I grew up in Liverpool, and it is sad to hear that terrible statistic revealed by Greenpeace. I think it is fair to say that the Government have already taken action by reducing microplastics from certain cosmetic products and rinse-off products. We will do more by taking forward the ban on plastic straws and other single-use plastic items. We will continue to work with the water industry on what more we can do about filtration, so that we keep plastics out of the rivers.

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman knows of what he speaks, as a distinguished former taxi driver, as well as a very effective spokesman for the people of Eltham in the borough of Greenwich. We absolutely do need to take account in all new road building schemes of the impact of pollution.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Yesterday I was able to sponsor National Refill Day with Water UK. Reusing our water bottles means that we could get rid of millions of plastic bottles that we do not need. It is about not only recycling plastic, but using a lot less. Does the Secretary of State welcome that?

Michael Gove: I hugely welcome that, and I am grateful to water companies and others who have made the provision of water fountains a critical part of ensuring that answer. Youth violence is often a symptom of a lack of role models and moral leaders. What part does she feel the Church can play to help communities in this area?

The Secretary of State said that he wanted to close the current loopholes by 2025. May I suggest that it would be a marvellous legacy for him as he leaves the Department—which he presumably will, whatever happens today—to introduce a comprehensive ammonia reduction strategy?

Michael Gove: Intense and productive discussions, but it is also important to recognise that a majority of Labour MPs and Scottish National party MPs support Heathrow expansion.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Secretary of State has answered this several times, but it bears asking again: is it still his contention that other European Union countries are looking enviously at this Government’s efforts to leave the EU?

Michael Gove: Increasingly enviously, and I think it is the case that other European Union countries, many of which I love, are looking enviously at the gallimaufry of talent that exists on the Government Benches at this time. I suspect that those other European Union countries appreciate the festival of democracy in which we are currently engaged.

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we turn to the next session of oral questions, I must advise the House that the urgent question I had granted to the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) has now been withdrawn by the hon. Gentleman, so we will proceed from Question Time to the business question, and then to the two ministerial statements that are scheduled to follow it. That is really for the benefit of Members’ timekeeping, so that they know when the sessions they may wish to attend will be.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Serious Youth Violence

1. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to help tackle serious youth violence; and if she will make a statement. [911477]

7. Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to help tackle serious youth violence; and if she will make a statement. [911484]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church was represented at the knife crime summit organised by the Prime Minister at No. 10 earlier this year, and the General Synod will be debating this subject at its session next month. There is no question but that this issue is of the utmost seriousness, as too many young lives are being lost.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Youth violence is often a symptom of a lack of role models and moral leaders. What part does she feel the Church can play to help communities in this area?
Dame Caroline Spelman: I think it is very well known that the Church provides role models for young people, such as youth workers. In the community, we work alongside young people in schools, youth groups and congregations. Our clergy, teachers and members of our congregations are supporting young people who are at risk of getting caught up in violence and their families, and young people in pupil referral units.

Vicky Foxcroft: My constituent Ben Lindsay recently set up Power the Fight, a charity that enables churches to become part of the solution to tackling youth violence. The period after school is one of the most dangerous times for violence among young people. Churches have resources, buildings and volunteers that Power the Fight believes could be used to disrupt violence and keep young people safe. Will the right hon. Lady meet me and my constituent to talk about this valuable work?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady, who will know that the Church uses its community halls and facilities in particular to reach out to young people. There are a number of examples of that, but may I especially cite the work of Premier Christian Radio, which broadcasts from London? It has raised awareness of youth violence and what the Church can do to help. We are certainly active in this area, and I would be happy to meet her.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in praising the work of street pastors, including those active in Kettering, who often find themselves helping to defuse potentially violent situations in our town centres late at night?

Dame Caroline Spelman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to pay tribute to the work of street pastors. In Birmingham, the nearest city to my constituency, I have gone out with street pastors at night and seen them minister to very vulnerable young people, making sure they are safe on their streets. The street pastors do amazing work.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Lady for her response. Will she outline the benefits that church-run youth clubs provide, and has she had discussions with the Chancellor to secure additional funding for faith-based youth clubs?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I think I have been outlining that. The Church actually provides youth workers in our communities where many have fallen away, and it continues to support the presence of such role models in our society, as is recognised by the Government. I could give the hon. Gentleman a whole series of examples of how the Government’s community fund is being used, through churches, to deliver knife crime awareness training and to help to tackle this problem. Indeed, many churches provide amnesty boxes for weapons that may otherwise cause people to lose their lives.

Mr Speaker: As the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) is a member of Kettering Borough Council and also a special constable, my only surprise is that he does not serve as a street pastor, but that may be only a matter of time.

Clergy Recruitment: London

2. Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): What steps the Church of England has taken to recruit clergy in London in the last 12 months.

Dame Caroline Spelman: London presents a very positive picture in the life of the Church for the recruitment of clergy. The Church set itself a target to increase the number of vocations in all dioceses by 50% by next year. Most dioceses are well on track, and London expects to reach that target this year.

Greg Hands: I welcome that great news on recruitment in London. A year ago three of our major parishes in Fulham had vacancies, but in April I was delighted to attend the induction of Rev. Ross Gunderson at St Etheldreda. Next Wednesday will be the induction of Rev. Penny Seabrook at All Saints, and we hope soon to fill the vacancy at St John Waltham Green. Will the right hon. Friend join me in congratulating and welcoming our new clergy in Fulham?

Dame Caroline Spelman: With pleasure—I wish all those incumbents great success in their new parishes. That demonstrates that the commitment to more training for vocations is really working, and I should share with the House the fact that there is now a 50:50 ratio of men and women in training.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Temporary Chamber

3. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent discussions the Commission has had on the design of the proposed temporary Chamber for the House of Commons.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The Commission has heard various oral representations. At its meeting on 14 May 2018, it considered a statement of accommodation requirements for the House of Commons decant. Most recently, on 20 May, the Commission considered the northern estate programme, which includes the temporary Chamber for the House of Commons, and endorsed the scheme’s proposals. Those proposals are currently out to a public consultation that closes on 28 June, and all comments and observations will be welcomed.

Patrick Grady: The right hon. Gentleman will not be surprised if I ask whether there is the intention to ensure that any temporary Chamber is equipped with facilities for electronic voting so that we can at least experiment with a bit of modernisation. However, when MPs and the public make submissions to the consultation, will they have the opportunity to suggest even more radical proposals, such as desks that we might lean on or facilities for plugging in electronic devices, as are seen in other Parliaments around the world?
**Tom Brake:** It was no surprise that the hon. Gentleman made his point about electronic voting, which is something that I would like to see tested in the temporary Chamber—that is a personal opinion. I will monitor the responses to the consultation that are received by 28 June, and I will be astonished and extremely disappointed if the hon. Gentleman does not submit a response setting out exactly how he would like the temporary Chamber to operate.

**CHURCH COMMISSIONERS**

*The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—*

**Cathedrals: Contribution to Local Economies**

4. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What estimate the Church of England has made of the contribution that cathedrals make to the local economy; and if she will make a statement. [911481]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman):** It is estimated that in 2017 there were more than 10 million tourist and leisure visitors to our cathedrals, including Westminster Abbey, generating some £125 million for their local economies. That is a 37% increase from 2004, the last time that that was measured.

**Michael Fabricant:** That is an encouraging news; I know how Lichfield Cathedral benefits the local community.

Mr Speaker, you may be interested to learn that next year will be the 900th anniversary of the birth of Thomas à Becket and the 400th anniversary of the establishment of the American colony of the Pilgrim Fathers. To mark that, I believe there will be an initiative: the year of the cathedrals. Will my right hon. Friend say a little more about how that will stimulate local economies?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** We had a meeting of the deans of cathedrals in Parliament this week, and the Dean of Lichfield, who is a fantastic champion for that cathedral, came up with an interesting proposal, through the Association of English Cathedrals, to introduce a pilgrimage passport. That would encourage people—not the Association of English Cathedrals, to introduce a cathedral, whereas Coventry, the city across the other side of my constituency, had an ancient cathedral which was bombed and then renewed. I think the best thing I can do for the hon. Gentleman is to write to him about how this is arrived at.

**Mr Speaker:** As the hon. Gentleman is now at the mid-point of his parliamentary career, having served for 40 years, perhaps he can devote the next 40 to campaigning on this important matter for his constituents.

**HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION**

*The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—*

**Provision for Cyclists**

5. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment the Commission has made of the adequacy of provision for cyclists on the parliamentary estate.[911482]

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): Parliamentary authorities continue to review the use of bicycle spaces to ensure that demand is met.

**Rachael Maskell:** Like many colleagues, I cycle to the parliamentary estate and I have to say that the parking facilities are woeful. If we are going to achieve a modal shift to encourage more employees of the House, as well as Members of Parliament, to cycle to this place, it is absolutely vital that we have adequate parking facilities. Will the right hon. Gentleman meet me and others to explore how that can be achieved?

**Tom Brake:** I am very happy to do so. I am a cyclist myself, and I must say that the facilities within Parliament are perhaps not quite what they should be, certainly given the lack of covered parking provision for cycles, so I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady. I should point out that access to the parliamentary estate for cyclists has been improved, but I agree that there is a need to look at not just current provision, but provision under the northern estate programme and, at a future date, the restoration and renewal of the Palace.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab) rose—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We have not reached the hon. Lady yet. She is ahead of herself.

**CHURCH COMMISSIONERS**

*The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—*

**Employee Pay Gap**

6. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What estimate she has made of the gap between the highest-paid and lowest-paid employees of the Church Commissioners. [911483]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman):** The national Church institutions have a unified pay policy that operates across all the institutions. There is an eight-band pay structure that is designed to ensure that staff in posts of equal value are paid the same. If we were to exclude staff in the Church Commissioners investment division, the ratio between the highest and lowest paid would be 7.3:1.

**Diana Johnson:** I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for that answer. The Archbishop of Canterbury has talked extensively about the need for economic justice, so I was shocked to read in *Personnel Today* that the Church Commissioners have a 23:1 pay ratio between...
the highest and lowest paid in the organisation. The
highest paid person receives £256,000 and one staff
member was given a bonus of £250,000. For charities,
the ratio is 10:1 and for local government the ratio is
15:1, so what does she think about what is going on in
the Church Commissioners?

Dame Caroline Spelman: As I explained, the ratio, if
we exclude the highest paid investment division, is 7.3:1.
The investment division includes asset managers, who
have to manage assets of over £8 billion. They are paid
at the market rate for asset management, but they are
nowhere near the top of the range. External advice is
taken by the Church Commissioners on what and how
we should pay, but those are the going rates for top
asset managers in this country, and the assets of the
Church of England have to be well managed.

Global Businesses’ Working Practices

8. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What
steps the Church Commissioners are taking to use their
influence and responsible investment policy to engage
positively with global businesses on their working practices.

Dame Caroline Spelman: This question relates to the
previous one in an interesting way.

This month, the Church of England was ranked second
globally in an industry survey of responsible investors.
One of our most recent engagements has been holding
accounting the mining company, Vale, as responsible for
the collapse of the dam in Brumadinho, Brazil. That
underlines the point that really good, responsible asset
management is something that one has to pay for.

Helen Goodman: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady
for that answer. The dam collapse claimed the lives of
246 people. Vale is a British company and it is totally
unacceptable to have lower standards of health and
safety abroad than at home. What is the Church of
England’s strategy, as an investor, for tackling that?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church Commissioners
hosted a roundtable meeting with other investors and
senior management from a number of the largest mining
companies in the world, which exposed the fact that this
is a widespread problem. To date, 29 of the top 50
mining companies have made disclosures about tailings dams.
This is how investors can have an influence in an ethical
way over their policy.

Mobile Phone Masts

9. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What
guidance the Church Commissioners issue to
parishes wishing to install mobile phone masts on church
buildings.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church of England
signed an accord with the Government in 2017 that
signalled its intent to support national targets on mobile
and broadband connectivity, particularly in rural and
hard-to-reach areas. At previous Question Times, I have
encouraged Members of the House by saying that if
they have hotspots for broadband and mobile provision,
all the towers, spires, buildings and land of the Church
of England are at their disposal to address that.

Sir Desmond Swayne: But the new telecommunications
code has wrecked the market by advantaging big business
at the expense of small sports clubs and churches. Can I
enlist the support of the Commissioners?

Dame Caroline Spelman: There is evidence that changes
by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and
Sport to the electronic communications code are making
it more complicated, although not impossible, for churches
and other community buildings to be used to address
shortcomings in the roll-out of digital infrastructure.
We should work together and go and lobby DCMS to
tackle the unintended consequences of the changes in
that communications code.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon.
Lady will be aware of the growing controversy over 5G
and of those who worry about its installation. It
would be quite wrong if the Church was brought into
those arguments in such a way that an unfair burden
was put on it.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman
would like to join the lobbying party, because this is one
more aspect that needs to be seriously looked into.
There are gaps in provision under 4G, and the worst
possible thing would be for the digital divide to continue
or get worse as we move to 5G technology, so I think we
should seek an early meeting.

Persecution of Christians: Bishop of Truro’s Inquiry

10. Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): What steps the
Church Commissioners are taking to promote the Bishop
of Truro’s inquiry into the persecution of Christians.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church welcomed the
decision by the Foreign Secretary to invite the Bishop of
Truro to chair an independent review of the work of the
Foreign and Commonwealth Office. That is not a Church
of England inquiry, but a Foreign Office inquiry. However,
the Church is actively encouraging its agencies and
charities to feed in their experiences.

Andrew Griffiths: I thank my right hon. Friend for
that answer. I wholeheartedly support her in congratulating
the Foreign Secretary and the Bishop of Truro on
producing the report, which highlights the persecution
of Christians not only on a large scale, as we saw in
places such as Sri Lanka, but on a small scale in
everyday life. Is not promoting the good work of Christians
and Christianity in our society one of the best things
that we can do? May I draw her attention to the Renew
church in Uttoxeter, which has its mission week this
week involving digging gardens, helping schools, washing
cars and showing the best of Christianity?

Dame Caroline Spelman: It is just the interim report
that has been published, and the important thing was
that it mapped where the persecution takes place around
the world. We await phase 2 with great interest, when we
expect to hear more about what we can actually get
done. I agree with my hon. Friend about the kind of
approach that could be taken.
The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Relocation of Parliament

11. Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Ind): What assessment the Commission has made of the potential merits of permanently moving Parliament outside London.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): An option to move Parliament out of the Palace of Westminster to a new purpose-built building was included in the restoration and renewal pre-feasibility study of 2012. The House of Commons Commission reviewed that study in October that year and decided to rule the option out, agreeing that no further analysis would be undertaken on it. The House of Lords Commission took a similar view, and that commitment was reaffirmed by the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster in 2016, and more recently, in resolutions of both Houses in 2018.

Mr Shuker: I note the right hon. Gentleman’s answer, but when we rebuilt this Chamber, Churchill said: “We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us.”—[Official Report, 28 October 1943; Vol. 393, c. 403.] Given just how broken our political culture has now been demonstrated to be, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is time to take a bold approach and move into a modern Parliament in one of the great cities of the UK?

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his supplementary question; I might have expected him to call for Parliament to be moved to Luton, but he did not. Clearly a decision has been taken. Some of the things that he would like might be possible for the temporary Chamber—that matter that was raised earlier—and I hope that he will want to make a written submission pressing for that Chamber to be used to trial and test some of the things that would improve our democracy.
Business of the House

10.34 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): The business for the week commencing 24 June will include the following:

Monday 24 June—Second reading of the Kew Gardens (Leases) (No.3) Bill [Lords], followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019.

Tuesday 25 June—Second reading of the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill.

Wednesday 26 June—Opposition day (un-allotted half day). There will be a debate on a motion on immigration in the name of the Scottish National party, followed by a general debate on Armed Forces Day.

Thursday 27 June—Debate on a motion relating to the contribution of co-operatives and mutuals to the economy, followed by a general debate on the children’s future food report. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 28 June—The House will not be sitting.

Colleagues will also wish to know that subject to the progress of business, the House will rise for the summer recess at the close of business on Thursday 25 July, and will return on Tuesday 3 September.

Valerie Vaz: That is very helpful to all Members.

I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) for suggesting the business. I am pleased that we now have a recess date, but can the Leader of the House tell us who will be at the Dispatch Box on Wednesday 24 July?

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): How can he know that?

Valerie Vaz: Well, that is what I am asking him. I am asking him when the identity of the new Prime Minister will be confirmed. I understand that all the results will be out on 22 July; perhaps he could let us know. I am pleased to learn that the House will sit in September, and I am sure that the Leader of the House will announce the conference recess dates as well. I think it is only fair to the outgoing Prime Minister that she knows when her last Question Time will be, and, more important, only fair to us—to Parliament.

The Leader of the House will know that we have had a busy week. He will also know that on Tuesday we had a Back-Bench debate about the Cox report. When is he likely to table a motion for a debate in Government time? It may be necessary to change a Standing Order, so will he find a date as a matter of urgency, before the House rises on 25 July?

I know that Back-Bench debates are important, but there is a backlog of very important legislation. The Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill, the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill, the Agriculture Bill and the Fisheries Bill need Report stages, and the Trade Bill is again stuck in the other place. When are we likely to debate those Bills?

Ministers are so occupied with their bids to become the next Prime Minister. Only after dropping out of the Conservative leadership race did the Health Secretary order a root-and-branch review of NHS food. Parts of the country have been unsettled by torrential rain, homes have been left without power and roads have been flooded in Lincolnshire—people in Wainfleet are in tears—but there has been no statement from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I know that there have been questions to him, but there has been no specific statement about the people in Wainfleet. The Home Secretary has said that he will put 20,000 more police officers on the beat if he is elected leader, but the Government have cut the number already. He is merely repeating a commitment made by Her Majesty’s Opposition.

As for the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), he has been careless with his words. He has said that his comments about Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe had made “no difference”, but they were used at her trial. He has put a woman’s life at risk and separated a family. For the record, Nazanin was on holiday visiting her parents. She has been in jail for three years. I met Richard Ratcliffe yesterday, and other Members have visited him too. Will the Leader of the House raise Nazanin’s case with both the former and the current Foreign Secretary, and send the Iranian Government the message that they should show the international community their seriousness, and free Nazanin and reunite the family now?

A motion scheduled for next Tuesday is to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019. The motion is a step in the right direction, but why are we waiting until 2050? Heathrow is already the largest single source of carbon emissions in the UK. Plans published on Tuesday revealed that Heathrow airport will construct a third runway by 2026 and complete its 50% expansion by 2050. This includes diverting rivers, moving roads and rerouting the M25 through a tunnel under the new runway. The Government’s own figures show that nearly 1 million households are to face increased daytime noise from allowing a further 700 flights a day. May we have a statement on the new plans for the expansion of Heathrow airport, including the environmental impacts?

It is Children’s Hospice Week this week. Hospices across the country are under threat, including one in my constituency, Acorns. It employs 70 people to care for 233 Black Country children and their families. It is facing closure due to lack of Government funding. I met my constituent Mark Lyttle, a bereaved parent, who spoke about his daughter Isabella, who was cared for by Acorns. Mark said Acorns Walsall extended and improved her quality of life and provides the family with ongoing bereavement help, because, sadly, Isabella passed away earlier this year at the age of 11. Black Country MPs across parties are working to save this hospice, and it is the only one of the three in the area to close.

I know that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care should be accountable. We have heard the phrase “A bedpan dropping and we hear it Whitehall,”
but so much for accountability: at this stage we have to write to the Health Secretary and the head of NHS England, and the Prime Minister said yesterday that they would match-fund what the clinical commissioning groups put forward. May we use the good offices of the Leader of the House to raise this with the Health Secretary? We need the Health Secretary to make the decision so that children’s hospices, particularly Acorns, have their long-term funding. We cannot crowdfund and fundraise to save a children’s hospice.

The third anniversary of Jo Cox’s murder was on 16 June. The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) is working very hard on one of Kim Leadbeater’s key asks for all of us: to focus on the humanitarian emergency in Syria, one of the issues that mattered most to Jo, by highlighting the plight of civilians trapped under the merciless bombing in Idlib.

It has been a busy week for me and the Leader of the House. Yesterday we agreed that we would save the education centre. It is also Refugee Week, and the education and engagement service will be providing a workshop to the refugee and migrant centre in Walsall, “An introduction to your UK Parliament”. I am pleased that is going ahead and that education is also to be part of any restoration and renewal.

Finally, I offer my commiserations to the Scottish football team but wish the Lionesses well in the next stage of the World cup.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for her various questions, which I will go through in some detail in a moment. I also thank her for welcoming the recess dates, which I think we are all relieved have now finally been announced.

Having just announced the summer recess dates, an idea has occurred to me. We meet as a merry band on Thursdays—we are like a tightly knit club—and I wonder if this recess we might perhaps keep the camaraderie going, and all go off on holiday together. I would be happy to hire a bus or a charabanc, Mr Speaker, and as the new Leader who, as you know, has brought such a powerful sense of direction and renewed purpose to this House, I would be happy to drive it. Nothing would give me more pleasure than for my new-found friend, the shadow Leader of the House, to join me. She would be serenaded of course by the ever-cheerful hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) on the pipes, or maybe the banjo, and accompanied by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) displaying his musical prowess on the spoons while spouting Wordsworth and Keats and John Clare and regaling us with cheery tales of those halcyon Victorian times when small boys cheerfully shinned up chimneys and widespread malnutrition and rickets were a mere footnote to a far happier age. And as the sun slips below the horizon we will hear the extraordinary tales of the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) explaining how he quietly took over the entire business of government with his Backbench Business Committee. Or perhaps we should stick to our original plans.

The hon. Lady raised several important points. First, she asks who will be at the Dispatch Box when Parliament goes into recess. Of course, that is unknown; I have no crystal ball. There are four finalists, all extremely strong candidates, and we will have to wait and see. I can offer her a membership form for the Conservative party so that next time she can participate in the excitement and fun. I was grateful to receive her satisfaction, however, at our having set out the situation for September and at the fact that we will be sitting from early that month.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Cox report. Her request for a debate would need to be taken up through the usual channels, but I have taken her request on board—it is the second time she has raised it with me—and undertake to come back to her later today at least with something by way of a response, even if it is to say that I have asked the usual channels at my end of the usual channel to consider it seriously. She also asked about various pieces of future legislation and when they will be coming forward. They will come forward in due course. On flood defences, which she mentioned, we have of course just had Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions, which was an opportunity for Members to address that issue.

The hon. Lady made various important points about Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has now spent three years in jail in Iran. I can assure her that, whatever may or may not have been said by others in the past, the Government are working extremely hard to do whatever they can to ensure her imminent release. She also raised carbon emissions, which she will know the Government have reduced by 25% in terms of greenhouse gases since 2010. We have now had over 1,700 hours of producing power in our country without the use of coal, which is the longest stretch in the history of power production in the United Kingdom.

The hon. Lady made some very important points about hospices, particularly relating to the care of children, on which subject there will be an Adjournment debate on 1 July in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson). The hon. Lady may wish to attend and urge others to do likewise. I would certainly be prepared to facilitate the approaches she requested to the Secretary of State for Health in terms of funding.

The hon. Lady made some very important points about Jo Cox and the excellent work of Kim Leadbeater and her concerns about humanitarian aid in Syria. In that regard, we have a proud record in this country and have allocated some billions of pounds of assistance. Given that she also referred to Refugee Week, I should remind the House that we have agreed to take 20,000 refugees and 3,000 children from Syria.

Like the hon. Lady, I was pleased that during the remaining stages of the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill yesterday we underscored our commitment to education in this place, and, like her also, I commiserate with our Scottish colleagues on the football result yesterday while also cheering on the England team.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I think that the Backbench Business Committee is universally regarded in this House as a complete success. One of the great policies of David Cameron and Nick Clegg was to bring in a business of the House committee after the 17 years of the coalition Government coming to power. The chaos in this place over the last few months caused by people trying to suspend Standing Orders was the
result of our not having a business of the House committee. Can we have a debate on this matter? If we are to have a new Prime Minister, it would be a very good thing if all the parties could agree to have a business of the House committee so that we do not repeat the farce of the last few months.

Mel Stride: The Government’s position on a House business committee remains unchanged: we will not be bringing forward proposals to establish such a committee. There was an absence of consensus on the issue at the end of the previous Parliament, and we believe that that remains the case today.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the purgatory for next week. As for his recess plans, they sound like some kind of holiday from hell, and I think I will resist the temptation to join him in that particular venture. I also thank him for his kind regards about the Scotland football team. I think we are recovering from the heartbeat of last night, and we all wish the Lionesses the very best in the remaining stages of the contest.

This business statement is unbelievable. Other than half a day for the Scottish National party, it is another week of absolutely nothing. This House should now be done under the Vagrancy Act. Never before in the history of Parliament has so little been done by so many on behalf of so few, as Churchill would never have said. But small mercies—at last this is the final day of the contest to see who will be gubbed by the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). It has become a kind of grotesque “Love Island”, without the love, the entertainment or the island. Maybe it is just Boris island. And I seriously do not get all this fuss about the issue of the racist rantings of the right hon. Gentleman being raised. If people say racist and unacceptable things, they have to expect to be held to account for them. I represent the most marginal SNP/Tory seat in the country. My leaflet is set to go, and it is simply a picture of the right hon. Gentleman and all his choice comments, with added quotes from Ruth Davidson, Scotland just will not take to his appalling “Etonic” buffoonery, and reasonable soft Tory voters in Scotland will be deserting the Tories in droves.

May we have a debate about Brexit? Remember that? They gave us extra time to try to resolve it, but they also told us to use that time wisely. We have not debated it in weeks, and there is no plan to debate it in the coming weeks. It is four weeks until the summer recess, and no progress has been made. Can the Leader of the House confirm that we will not be seeing the withdrawal agreement again? It must be dead and buried now. There is a new word that I want to introduce to the parliamentary lexicon, and that word is “unicornism”. That now seems to be the central policy of this Government in their approach to Brexit. They are doing nothing other than waste time and run down the clock. Halloween will soon be upon us, and the nightmare on Brexit Street will be set to haunt us all.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his weekly contribution. I have to say that it had a familiar ring to it, although I have to disagree with him about the summer recess. How could it possibly be a holiday from hell with him there? It would be nothing other than a great pleasure. He did give us the same old tunes, though. Last week I said he was using the Abba playbook, but this week I am going to elevate him to the Beatles. His meandering litany of woe was “The Long and Winding Road” that we had to endure, but as we know, it will all end up in the same place for the “Nowhere Man”. Anyway, They don’t get any better, do they?

The hon. Gentleman asks for a Brexit debate. The House has certainly debated Brexit at significant length over a very significant period—the best part of three years now. He could have chosen this very week to debate it in the half day allotted to the Scottish National party, although I have no doubt that, in the immigration debate that the SNP has chosen, he will be able to weave the European Union in somewhere.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the future of the BBC? There have already been concerns about taking away free TV licences from the over-75s, but frankly, after that dreadful debate on Monday between my parliamentary colleagues, the quality of public broadcasting needs to be looked at, and presumably, during the course of our debate, we could find out who the idiot was in central office who agreed to the format of that programme in the first place.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend tempts me. On the specific issue of the free TV licence, we are urging the BBC to rethink its position. I have to say that I agree with my hon. Friend’s observation on the televised hustings, which made the candidates look like some kind of boy band perched on their stools. The BBC should always be an institution that is debated, including in further debates in this House.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I was sad to see the demise of the Scottish ladies’ football team last night, when they snatched defeat from the jaws of victory late in the game after taking a 3-0 lead. I was reminded that it has been only 41 years since Ally MacLeod and his tartan army ventured forth to Buenos Aires and sadly came back undone.

The Backbench Business Committee had a dozen applications for estimates day debates, and the business for those days has now been determined as relating to the spending of the Department for Work and Pensions, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for International Development and the Department for Education. Will the Leader of the House confirm the dates for those debates? We had been led to believe that they would occur on 2 and 3 July, but I understand that there is now some doubt about that.

Despite the fact that the Backbench Business Committee has been getting an awful lot of business, I remind the Leader of the House that we still have unmet demand. He should also take note that, on Monday, the House went on to the Adjournment debate at 7.08 pm and adjourned at 7.47 pm. If the Leader of the House and the business team think that there is likely to be a shortfall in business—this was despite four urgent questions on Monday—could he think about making the Backbench Business Committee aware so that we could put something on at short notice?

Mel Stride: The dates for the estimates days are not currently available, but I will ensure that we get them to the hon. Gentleman as soon as possible. I take note of
his rather interesting observation about the possibility of a Backbench Business debate coming to the Floor of the House when other business is running short. There may be all sorts of technical issues around that, but I am happy to take his suggestion away and give it some thought.

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): A civilised society is defined by the way that it copes with and counters disadvantage. I was therefore alarmed to discover yesterday that 79% of assistance dog owners had been made to feel unwelcome or had received second-class service because they had their assistance dog with them, and in particular that 73% of those with guide dogs or assistance dogs had been turned away by a minicab or taxi driver. The Government commissioned a report on taxi licensing, and one of its recommendations was that we deal with this prejudice against people with guide dogs and other assistance dogs. It is time that the Government acted and joined you, Mr Speaker, and I, whose mission has always been to redistribute advantage.

**Mel Stride**: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question, and I agree with him that access for assistance dogs and their owners, especially in taxis and other modes of transport, is extremely important. I would be happy to facilitate on his behalf an appropriate meeting with a Minister in the Department for Transport.

I know that my right hon. Friend is rather fond of poetry and, having been forewarned of his question, I found a poem by Julian Stearns Cutler that I think is quite appropriate to him as well as to dogs:

“You’re only a dog, old fellow;
a dog, and you’ve had your day;
But never a friend of all my friends
has been truer than you alway”.

**Mr Speaker**: Well, what a beautiful reply from the Treasury Bench. I must say to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) that I have just received his most gracious, handwritten, borderline poetic letter in his illustrious capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Lebanon, and I intend to reply by hand—although probably not, as he would prefer, by the use of the quill pen—similarly graciously and within a very short timeframe. My response to his request will be in the affirmative, and I expect that he will wish to dance round a red telephone box, if he can find one, in appreciation of my reply.

**Valerie Vaz**: Is it in verse?

**Mr Speaker**: My letter is not in verse. I know my limitations. I cannot compete with the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings on that front.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) recently joined me as a trustee of the John Clare Trust.

I welcome the Leader of the House’s comments on Jo Cox. She was a Labour family friend, and her constituency was close to mine. I know we do not talk about these things, but I still worry about the safety and security of Members, particularly female Members, of this House, and I do not think we have yet come to terms with some of the vulnerabilities involved. That is not for major debate.

In most of our towns and cities, we are poisoning many women—pregnant women and older women—and men, too, with the dirty air they breathe every day. Can we have an urgent debate on a fast programme of activity, not the Government’s 2040 deadline, to cut down the poisonous air our people are breathing in every day?

**Mel Stride**: I echo the hon. Gentleman’s comments about Jo Cox and, more generally, about security. It would not be appropriate for me to discuss it on the Floor of the House, but I assure him that I have already met the Chairman of Ways and Means and others to discuss matters of security across the parliamentary estate, which I take extremely seriously.

We have a clean air strategy, of course, and the Government have done a great deal to cut many emissions substantially over the past several years. Given that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), is still looking for opportunities for yet further debates, clean air might be a good subject. The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) might like to approach him on that basis.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In eight recent Department for Work and Pensions appeal cases in my constituency the DWP has not submitted information to the court in time. That has led to the hearings being postponed, which is obviously distressing for the appellants. Will the Government make a statement on what they will do to make sure that the DWP adheres to proper timescales? Will the Leader of the House confirm that this is sheer incompetence from the DWP, and not a deliberate Government strategy?

**Mel Stride**: I have two answers for the hon. Gentleman. First, when it comes to specific DWP cases—he cited some cases in his question—I am happy to facilitate an approach to the relevant Minister to make sure those cases are specifically looked at. On his more general point about how these cases are handled, DWP questions on 1 July will be a good opportunity to raise the matter.

**Helen Jones** (Warrington North) (Lab): It has been revealed today that Warrington Hospital has published a list of charges for operations that used to be free on the NHS. These are not cosmetic procedures but things like hip and knee operations and cataract removals. Can we have a debate on the creeping privatisation of the NHS under this Government and the denial of essential treatment to people who cannot afford to pay?

**Mel Stride**: As a party and as a Government, we are entirely committed to healthcare being free at the point of delivery and on a universal basis. The Opposition often assert that wholesale privatisation of the NHS is occurring, which is simply not the case. The private sector has been involved in the NHS ever since its inception. Most of the drugs used by the NHS come from private companies, and general practitioners are effectively employed on a similar basis. As to the record of this Government, we have made the largest cash injection into the NHS in its history.
Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): The Leader of the House is well aware of the plight of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has already been mentioned in the House this morning. Richard Ratcliffe, her husband, is now on hunger strike outside the Iranian embassy here in London to show solidarity with his wife and to highlight the appalling conditions in which she is being held.

Mr Ratcliffe’s sister lives in my Newport West constituency, and she is extremely concerned about the physical and mental health of both Richard and Nazanin. Given that the previous Foreign Secretary made a bad situation worse with his comments on her detention, will the current Foreign Secretary come to the House to update us on the efforts being made to get Nazanin back home as quickly as possible to be reunited with her daughter and husband?

Mel Stride: I have already touched on the issue of Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe and repeat that it is totally unacceptable that she should be held. We are engaged with the Iranian Government. I also respect the fact that her husband has entered into a hunger strike, as she has at the same time. For that reason, and all the others of her detainment, we wish to see her released as quickly as possible. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has raised Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s case with President Rouhani, and we will continue to push diplomatically on this matter.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I am upset with the Leader of the House, as he did not invite me on his bus tour, but perhaps he will let me know what slogan he intended having on the side of the bus. I upset with the Leader of the House, as he did not invite me on his bus tour, but perhaps he will let me know what slogan he intended having on the side of the bus. I am also disappointed that the urgent question has been cancelled; I wonder whether the hon. Member for Stone and that is that he has had a relationship with the Whips characterised by trust and understanding—I do not think he has always trusted them and they most certainly have not always understood him.

Nick Smith (Blapenau Gwent) (Lab): New guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence says that employers should help their staff to take part in physical activity. This measure would improve mental and physical health, and support our NHS, so may we have a statement from the Government about promoting physical activity in the workplace?

Mel Stride: Before I answer that question, may I reply to you, Mr Speaker, about my hon. Friend the Member for Stone and reassure everybody I have invited on the holiday that he will not be there, and so there will be no sitting on him, be it on the holiday or otherwise? I say that just so we are absolutely clear what is going on in these important questions.

As for the issue of employers and physical health, there is clearly a link between physical activity and ensuring both physical and mental health. This might be an opportunity to speak to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee about another worthy possible contender for his attention.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): Yesterday, reports emerged that the Warrington and Halton Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust has been advertising a price list for operations that were once free on the NHS. Vital procedures such as hip and knee operations will cost more than £18,000, which is way outside most ordinary people’s budgets. Recently, we have been seeing the privatisation of our NHS advertised to my constituents, with sick and vulnerable people being exploited for profit. Will the Leader of the House give time for a ministerial statement or a debate on this important issue?

Mel Stride: I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that that question was in effect asked some moments ago. My answer remains the same.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The House will be aware that Ford has announced redundancies in my Bridgend constituency. Some 1,700 people are going to lose their and their families’ income, livelihoods and futures. May we have a debate about the Treasury’s benefitting from the misfortune of those who lose their job and face redundancy payments? At the moment, people will lose 40% of any redundancy payment over £30,000, and if those who will be able to access their pension once they are over 55 reach their 55th birthday after 2026, they will have to wait until 2027 to access it, thereby losing a further £40,000 to £60,000. It is wrong for the Government to benefit from the misfortune of those who are losing their jobs, and with a harsh Brexit ahead of us there will be many more to come. We need to resolve this situation now.

Mel Stride: I agree with the hon. Lady that it is most unfortunate that there are redundancies at the Bridgend plant. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial
Mel Stride: Strategy, the Secretary of State and his Ministers have been very much engaged in and closely connected to what is happening there.

The hon. Lady raised the specific issue of termination payments and rightly said that tax was due on payments over a £30,000 threshold, although there are some exceptions to that. I believe that is one of the most generous arrangements in the world and think I am right in saying—I stand to be corrected—that in Germany, for example, there is no threshold in play at all. However, she raised important points, particularly in respect of pensions, so I direct her to Treasury questions, which will be held on 2 July.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): May we please have a debate on the statutory requirements for changes to bus services and the consultation process? Stagecoach has announced that seven services in and around my constituency might change. It has not given any details on what the changes are, other than to say that people in Neston will no longer be able to go to Arrowe Park Hospital. It is all squirrelled away online and is very inaccessible. It really is not good enough. Can we have a proper consultation process on changes to important local services?

Mel Stride: That would make an excellent subject for an Adjournment debate, at which the hon. Gentleman would have an opportunity to ask the appropriate Minister specific questions about the specific routes and so on in his constituency.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On Sunday 16 June, the Quebec Government passed Bill 21, which prevents judges, police officers, teachers and other public servants from wearing religious symbols such as the kippah, the turban and the hijab while at work. The Bill clearly contravenes article 18 of the international covenant on civil and political rights, which says that the right to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the rights and freedoms of others. To say that a teacher who wears a cross or a hijab is somehow a threat to public safety and health is an assertion that is both offensive and groundless. It is important that the UK raises this issue with our Canadian friends. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement on the matter or, better still, refer it to a Minister from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and request that the FCO contacts the Quebec Government immediately?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his important question. Ultimately, it would not be appropriate for me to comment directly from the Dispatch Box on the position taken by the Canadian Government and their legislation—not least because I am not entirely familiar with the precise detail—other than to restate our position, which is that in this Parliament we are entirely committed to freedom of religious belief and the promotion of respect between people.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Today is Nystagmus Awareness Day. Nystagmus affects one in every 1,000 babies born in the UK and is a condition that I have. It means that my eyes wobble left and right and up and down, and I am registered severely sight-impaired. Today, it is estimated that nearly 2 million people are living with sight loss, but the number of people registered is significantly lower. Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating Nystagmus Awareness Day? May we have a debate on the importance of registering people who are living with sight loss?

Mel Stride: May I entirely associate myself with those remarks and welcome Nystagmus Day? I would be happy to meet with the hon. Lady to discuss making available appropriate time in some form or another to debate this matter.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): In 2018-19, people from Coventry spent 674 days delayed in hospital because no suitable housing was available. That is the highest number on record. It is a shocking indictment of the Government’s time in office that we now have the highest number of homeless people trapped in hospital. May we therefore have a debate on the homelessness crisis in our country, its impact on our NHS and how the Government plan to improve collaborative working between housing and health services to stop people being unnecessarily pushed into homelessness or stuck in hospital for extended periods?

Mel Stride: There are several important points to make about the important issue of homelessness which the hon. Lady has raised. The first is the Government’s commitment to ensuring that we build more homes. We have built 220,000 new homes, the highest number for any year other than one in the last 31 years. She will know that we have announced a substantial, multimillion-pound fund to address rough sleeping. We have seen a slight decline over the more recent period, but there is still a lot more to do. This is an important issue that will always be worthy of debate, and if the hon. Lady would like to apply for an Adjournment debate, that might be a useful approach to take.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I think this is the first chance that I have had to welcome the new Leader of the House to his place. We are grateful for the SNP Opposition day, and I hope that the three hours next Wednesday will be protected.

I echo the calls for a statement by the Foreign Secretary on the situation of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I had the huge privilege of meeting her husband outside the Iranian embassy this morning. He is showing huge determination and solidarity. I know that Members from across the House have been to visit, so perhaps the Leader of the House can encourage some of his colleagues on the Front Bench—perhaps the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Foreign Secretary—to show their solidarity with Richard and Nazanin’s family and finally get the justice that the family are so hungry for.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question; this matter has now been raised, quite rightly, for the third time in these business questions. I have set out the various actions that the Government continue to take to press the Iranian regime to do the right thing and release Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and I know that the hon. Gentleman’s comments about Richard’s hunger strike will have been heard throughout the House.
Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is 10 years since the Pontcysyllte aqueduct and canal became a UNESCO world heritage site, thereby joining sites such as the Taj Mahal, the Great Barrier Reef and the Great Wall of China—although Pontcysyllte is of course superior to all of them. It was built in 13 years by those great civil engineers Thomas Telford and William Jessop, and has a height of 126 feet. One can go on it on a boat; it is a most amazing place to travel. It is a masterpiece of waterworks engineering and a pioneering example of iron construction, and it was at the heart of the industrial revolution. I am a little worried that all Members will want to come on holiday at the same time, so perhaps they can promise not to do that. Will the Leader of the House explain how I can best promote the wonders of Pontcysyllte aqueduct and the canal across our nation and in this House?

Mel Stride: That was a wonderful question. I will not attempt to pronounce the name of the canal, on the basis that I will probably not do it as well as the hon. Lady, but it is a marvellous construction and was the work of Telford and Jessop, as she said. I am delighted that it has achieved world heritage status. She asked how she can promote the canal; I would suggest that she has done just that with her question, but if she wants another opportunity, we will have Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions on 4 July.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The Royal Mail Group and the Communication Workers Union have agreed a groundbreaking collective defined-contribution pension scheme for the group’s 141,000 UK employees. The trouble is that it needs to be enabled by legislation. Will the Leader of the House commit to introducing the necessary legislation prior to the summer recess?

Mel Stride: I am happy to look at the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised, particularly as he suggests that it may relate to a requirement for future legislation. I also point him to Work and Pensions questions on 4 July.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Change UK): A recent Smith Institute report confirms that Enfield has the third highest number of low-paid people of all London boroughs. Even more concerning is that, according to the report, the low pay rate is £8.33 an hour. The current London living wage is supposed to be £10.55 an hour. Ministers are often telling us about employment levels, but these can mask the growth in poverty and poverty pay. May we have an early debate in Government time on the record levels of low pay altogether since 2010 by increasing the personal allowance, and why we have worked hard to get the economy moving to the point at which real pay has been increasing for the last 19 months consecutively. It is also why this party brought in the national living wage and why we saw such an increase in the national living wage at the start of this financial year.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Leo Goodwin, the managing director of TransPennine Express, received a lot of publicity last year because he earns £360,000. He is well known in Hull because he is presiding over a complete shambles in the management of Hull Paragon station. There are botched toilet facilities that were supposed to be rebuilt, there is signage covered in duct tape, and there are empty retail units that TransPennine built but cannot actually fill. To make things worse, on Monday this week TransPennine decided, without consultation with key stakeholders, to close one of the main entrances to the station between half-past 9 and half-past 4 o’clock—really putting up the white flag to a very small number of people who commit antisocial behaviour. This has meant that passengers, particularly disabled passengers, are having trouble accessing the station. May we please have a debate about companies that run stations appallingly?

Mel Stride: The very specific points that the hon. Lady raises regarding TransPennine Express, the station and access issues would probably most appropriately be directed to an Adjournment debate, which would give the hon. Lady an opportunity to address them directly with the appropriate Minister at the Department for Transport.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): My constituent was given a 10-year personal independence payment award in 2018 because of her heart condition. Recently she had a heart attack and spent 24 days in hospital. Having informed the DWP, she was sent for a PIP reassessment, at which she lost her entitlement. I was able to get that decision reversed, but we can all imagine how distressing that was for my constituent. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out the widespread concerns about PIP assessments, and how urgently this system needs to be reviewed and improved so that such an appalling situation does not happen again?

Mel Stride: The situation that the hon. Lady describes sounds extremely unfortunate, to say the least. I commend her for the work that she appears to have undertaken to ensure that the original decision was overturned at appeal. I stress that there is the right of appeal in such cases, and that is an important check and balance in the system. If she has further cases of a similar nature and wishes me to facilitate an approach to Ministers at the Department for Work and Pensions, I would be very happy to do so.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Rebecca Parker from Newport was in the news recently calling out high street retailers for the huge disparity between clothes size labels and the actual size of the garment, with the detrimental effect on self-confidence, particularly for young people, that that brings. As body image was this year’s theme of Mental Health Awareness Week, could we have a debate on how the Government can work with retailers to address this?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises an extremely important point. I say that as a father of three daughters, actually. I know exactly the element around body image and so on that comes at young women, in particular, from a variety of angles, including the one that she has raised. If she would like to meet me, perhaps after these questions,
I would be very happy to talk further about how we could perhaps facilitate something in the way of a debate.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): May I say how much I am looking forward to debating the Second Reading of the Kew Gardens (Leases) (No. 3) Bill on Monday, when we will talk about 11 houses? However, I would be even happier if we were talking about the Report stage of the Agriculture Bill. Where is it, when is it coming back, and is it going to be fit for purpose when it does?

Mel Stride: The Agriculture Bill is there in draft. It is fit for purpose, and it will be coming back in due course.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The York Central development will see the wrong kind of housing built, which people in my community cannot afford. It will choke off economic opportunity and draw cars into the centre of our congested, gridlocked city. Can we have a debate on how public land must be used for the public good?

Mel Stride: I think that issue might be one for an Adjournment debate to give the hon. Lady an opportunity to discuss it with Ministers. She will know that, as I said earlier, we have made very significant progress in terms of house building. The number of homes built in the last year for which there are figures available is at the highest level for all but one of the past 31 years.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Chris Stephens.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Tails never fails, Mr Speaker—thank you.

On a more serious note, two of my constituents were in the House on Monday as part of a Red Cross event for Refugee Week. One of them has a letter from Serco telling them to leave their accommodation—written to them two weeks ago, not this week as Serco is publicly suggesting. So can I ask, for the second week in a row, for the Home Office to make a statement or hold a debate on asylum seeker evictions in the city of Glasgow by Home Office contractor Serco?

Mel Stride: Serco has not enforced eviction in Glasgow and continues, at its own expense, to house the group that the hon. Gentleman rightly refers to. It estimated that the number of people not leaving their properties had grown to over 300 and that was impacting on its capacity to house new asylum seekers. That is the background to this matter. It is a Home Office matter, as he indicated. I would be very happy to facilitate whatever discussions he feels that he needs with Ministers there.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Today is Clean Air Day. Leeds was due to implement the first clean air zone in the country. However, this week it was confirmed to Leeds and Birmingham Councils that the equipment for charging and for vehicle recognition would not be delivered on time by the end of the year. Given that the UK is due to host the UN climate change conference in 2020, can we expect a ministerial statement on this failure to deliver the clean air zones on time in 2019?

Mel Stride: I think the Government’s record on bringing down emissions—I mentioned, for example, the 25% reduction in emissions since 2010—has been a very good one. We have legislation coming on the Order Paper next week in relation to making sure that we set strong net zero carbon emissions targets up to 2050. We remain committed, through our actions on clear air, to keep moving strongly in that direction. It will not be quickly enough for the hon. Gentleman, perhaps, but there will no doubt be ample opportunities, through the Backbench Business Committee and other routes, to debate these matters very fully in the weeks ahead.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): There is growing concern that, despite all the assurances given to the contrary, as EU legislation—particularly, in this instance, pesticide policy—is being converted into British law, it is being weakened significantly. One example is the removal of a blanket ban on hormone-disrupting chemicals, which are known to cause cancer, birth defects and immune disorders. Can we have an urgent statement from a Minister on how we can ensure that the process of transferring over EU law is being done properly and with due scrutiny?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises an important point about pesticide use. I know that there have been lots of debates about, for example, the effects of neonicotinoids on the bee population and the fertilisation of plants. She will want to ask Ministers specific questions. We had Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions this morning, but if she wants to use me as a conduit to send some questions and suggestions to Ministers, I would be happy to serve that purpose.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, the ever smiling Drew Hendry.

Drew Hendry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is always a delight to be saved and savoured.

Can we have a debate in Government time on Ofgem’s handling of the renewable heat incentive scheme? Several of my constituents have been served with repayment notices of eye-watering proportions—for example, £17,000 and £20,000—to be paid within six months. That is despite them previously getting clean audits. They have been left carrying the can for the guilty companies that have simply vanished, and they are in desperate straits.

Mel Stride: That is an excellent opportunity for an Adjournment debate, and I recommend that the hon. Gentleman put in for one, so that he can grill the appropriate Minister accordingly.
Online Pornography: Age Verification

11.31 am

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement. As the House knows, the Government announced that age verification for online pornography, under the Digital Economy Act 2017, would come into force on 15 July 2019. It has come to my attention in recent days that an important notification process was not undertaken for an element of this policy, and I regret to say that that will delay the commencement date. I wanted to take the opportunity to come to the House as soon as possible to apologise for the mistake that has been made and to explain its implications.

In autumn last year, we laid three instruments before the House for approval. One of them—the guidance on age verification arrangements—sets out standards that companies need to comply with. That should have been notified to the European Commission, in line with the technical standards and regulations directive, and it was not. Upon learning of that administrative oversight, I instructed my Department to notify this guidance to the EU and re-lay the guidance in Parliament as soon as possible. However, I expect that will result in a delay in the region of six months.

As the House would expect, I want to understand how this occurred. I have therefore instructed my Department’s permanent secretary to conduct a thorough investigation. That investigation will have external elements to ensure that all necessary lessons are learned. Mechanisms will also be put in place to ensure that this cannot happen again. In the meantime, there is nothing to stop responsible providers of online pornography implementing age verification mechanisms on a voluntary basis, and I hope and expect that many will do so.

The House will also know that there are a number of other ways in which the Government are pursuing our objective of keeping young people safer online. The online harms White Paper sets out our plans for world-leading legislation to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online. Alongside the White Paper, we published the social media code of practice under the Digital Economy Act 2017, which gives guidance to providers of social media platforms on appropriate actions that they should take to prevent bullying, insulting, intimidating and humiliating behaviours on their sites. We will also publish interim codes of practice detailing the steps that we expect companies to take to tackle terrorist content, and online child sexual abuse and exploitation. These will pave the way for the new regulatory requirements.

We set out in the White Paper our expectation that companies should protect children from inappropriate content, and we will produce a draft code of practice on child online safety to set clear standards for companies to keep children safe online, ahead of the new regulatory framework. During the consultation on the White Paper, technical challenges associated with identifying the specific ages of users were raised, so I have commissioned new guidance, to be published in the autumn, about the use of technology to ensure that children are protected from inappropriate content online.

The new regulatory framework for online harms that was announced in the White Paper will be introduced as soon as possible, because it will make a significant difference to the action taken by companies to keep children safe online. I intend to publish the Government response to the consultation by the end of the year, and to introduce legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows after that.

I recognise that many Members of the House and many people beyond it have campaigned passionately for age verification to come into force as soon as possible to ensure that children are protected from pornographic material they should not see. I apologise to them all for the fact that a mistake has been made that means these measures will not be brought into force as soon as they and I would like. However, there are also those who do not want these measures to be brought in at all, so let me make it clear that my statement is an apology for delay, not a change of policy or a lessening of this Government’s determination to bring these changes about. Age verification for online pornography needs to happen. I believe that it is the clear will of the House and those we represent that it should happen, and that it is in the clear interests of our children that it must.

11.37 am

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and the sincerity with which he has made this apology today. However, the statement is proof that a serious and important policy has descended into an utter shambles under this Government. I would like to ask the Secretary of State one question that he did not answer in his statement: when did he find out about this? He says that it was in the last few days, but could he be a bit clearer about that?

Age verification was supposed to be introduced last April; it was delayed. Then it was going to be introduced next month, and today we hear it is going to be delayed again. The Secretary of State says he regrets this. We do too, very much, because it is not good enough—it is not acceptable and it is letting children down. Recent reports showed that 70% of eight to 17-year-olds have seen images and videos that are not suitable for their age in the past year. Given the rise in the use of mobile devices and tablets in the past decade, the case for appropriate online pornography enforcement has increased.

The Secretary of State says that an administrative error caused the failure to notify the European Commission of key details, but are there more fundamental problems with this policy? Can the Secretary of State give us a commitment about exactly when it will be introduced? Indeed, is he confident that it will ever be introduced? When the legislation was going through this place, Labour raised serious concerns about whether the verification process was viable, and whether the process could work if very personal data was given over to commercial pornography sites. This delay shows we were right to be concerned. Is he confident that such extremely sensitive personal data will be safe from leaks or hacks?

Media reports from earlier this year showed serious flaws in the system, with journalists able to create fake profiles that circumvented age checks in minutes. Is the Secretary of State sure that when—if—the policy is finally introduced, it will actually work? The ultimate sanction under the age verification regime was the power to block rogue sites, with internet service providers compelled to comply, but new encrypted browser software
is about to undermine this system fundamentally. The encryption will mean that ISPs are blind to the sites that users visit on the internet, and they will be unable to block rogue sites that compromise the safety of children. That system—DNS over HTTPS—undermines not only the age verification system, but the entire foundations of the regulation laid out by the Government in the online harms White Paper. Does the Secretary of State agree that online companies are outsmarting the Government plan to catch up?

Jeremy Wright: I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks. As she knows, I have spoken to the shadow Secretary of State about this issue—I accept that he cannot be here today and I am grateful to her for stepping in.

The hon. Lady raised a number of issues, starting with when I discovered the error. The answer to that is Friday last week, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries found out a couple of days before that. As the House would expect, we have spent the intervening time seeking to confirm that there is no alternative way of doing what I have described. We do not believe there is, hence the course of actions that I have set out to the House.

The hon. Lady rightly asked about personal data and privacy, which is an area of concern. As she knows, it was discussed during the passage of the Digital Economy Act 2017 and subsequently. I do not believe that it is impossible to reconcile the important requirement that people’s data and privacy are protected with the equally important requirement that children are protected from material they should not see. It is perfectly feasible to do those two things in parallel, which is what we seek through our approach. As she knows, the British Board of Film Classification, which will be the regulator for this, has taken steps to ensure that beyond the requirement on all relevant companies under the general data protection regulation parameters, an additional scheme will be available to those who wish to take advantage of it. That scheme will set out a higher gold standard for privacy, which I believe should be publicised to those who may wish to use these services.

The hon. Lady mentioned sanctions, but she will recognise that the issue under discussion is not sanctions for a breach of the requirements, but notification of them to the European Union. It is important to understand changes in technology and the additional challenges they throw up, and she is right to say that the so-called “D over H” changes will present additional challenges. We are working through those now and speaking to the browsers, which is where we must focus our attention. As the hon. Lady rightly says, the use of these protocols will make it more difficult, if not impossible, for ISPs to do what we ask, but it is possible for browsers to do that. We are therefore talking to browsers about how that might practically be done, and the Minister and I will continue those conversations to ensure that these provisions can continue to be effective.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware that this is not the first time that a DCMS measure has had to be reintroduced because of a failure to notify the EU Commission? I hope that that problem will soon be removed, but while it exists, will he use this extra time to ensure that we get the measure right? There are still concerns on the grounds of freedom of speech and privacy, and about the ease with which measures can be circumvented through the use of virtual private networks. Will he raise similar concerns with the Information Commissioner to ensure that the age appropriate design code is right? It is much more important that it is properly designed than that it is rushed into place.

Jeremy Wright: I suspect that my right hon. Friend knows from experience that this is not the first time that such a thing has happened, but I am doing my level best to ensure it is the last. It is important that we have new mechanisms to ensure that such oversights are not repeated, and that is exactly what I am doing at the moment. He is correct that we should use the time we now have to get this right and to work through some of the additional challenges that I described a moment ago—we will do that. It is important that we understand these technological changes and, if I may say so, that validates our approach in the online harms White Paper, which was not to be prescriptive about technology, but to ensure that we adapt our systems as technology moves. We will seek to do the same on this point.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the age appropriate design code which, as he rightly says, is produced by the Information Commissioner, not the Government. He is right that it is important that we do not to rush this and that the Information Commissioner takes full account of the responses to the consultation. Having spoken to the Information Commissioner, I know that she will take full account of all the comments before taking the matter any further.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I agree with the Secretary of State that age verification needs to happen. The delay announced today is one thing, but the delays actually stretch back to April. This latest delay does not inspire confidence, which is extremely serious, given that this is about protecting children from harmful content. Another six-month delay is not acceptable.

Can he guarantee that there will be no further slippage in the implementation of age verification? Does he agree that robust age verification must apply to social media companies, which may operate around the fringes of the law? Can he reassure us that he will do all that he can to prevent those who are unwilling to provide age verification from accessing pornography and other inappropriate material posted on a social media platform?

Does he agree that that needs to be dealt with robustly as a matter of huge concern, as further delays will start to look like a lack of commitment on the Government’s part?

Jeremy Wright: I can reassure the hon. Lady that there is no lack of commitment on the Government’s part, as I hope she would expect. When we discovered that the mistake had been made and realised there was no way to avoid its consequences, the right thing to do was to come and say so to the House of Commons, to apologise not just to the House but, as I said, to those beyond it who have campaigned on this matter, and to set out what we now believe needs to be done.

We will of course do everything we can to ensure there is no further slippage. Both my hon. Friend the Minister and I will spend a good deal of time making sure that we have the necessary measures in place to ensure that such mistakes do not happen again.
The hon. Lady is right to say that social media companies have a responsibility. She will know that in our White Paper on so-called online harms, one area of focus was making sure that young people are not exposed to material to which they should not be exposed. We believe that the duty of care that the White Paper will institute should apply to social media companies across the board. They should be responsible for making sure, where they reasonably can, that harms do not reach their users. Through that process, we expect to develop a regulatory framework that will make that happen. I do not believe that online companies should wait for the regulator to be in place before they change their behaviour, and a sensible company will not do so. When the regulator starts work, it will want to be persuaded not just that an online company is doing the right thing on the day of the beginning of that work, but that it has been doing so for some time.

I very much hope that that will make a difference—I believe it will. The hon. Lady has my commitment that we will continue to work on a whole range of measures to ensure that young people are as safe online as they can be.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for being so open and frank about this administrative mistake; if I may say so, that is absolutely the right approach. However, as has already been acknowledged, this is not the first time that such a thing has happened. I understand that measures are being put in place to ensure that it does not happen again, but when will that happen so that we can be confident that the Department is operating as it should?

Jeremy Wright: We will conduct that exercise as quickly as we can. As I indicated in my statement, it is important that there is an external element in the process so that people outside the Department can look at what has happened and give us appropriate advice on how that can be avoided in the future. I also think that we will need to look at the mechanisms that are applied to ensure that such an administrative error cannot be made again.

It is worth my saying that it is an important convention of this House—I know, Mr Speaker, that you resolutely defend it—that Ministers should take responsibility for mistakes made by their Department. I am not here to talk about an error of a particular official; I am here to talk about a departmental mistake for which I take responsibility as Secretary of State. It is only right, too, that I reinforce the commitment and dedication of my Department’s civil servants to keeping young people safe online. The measures that we have taken over the past 12 months have represented significant steps forward, and I am grateful to my Department for having achieved that. I do not in any way defend this mistake, but I think it would be wrong to give the impression that the hard-working civil servants of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport are not doing everything that they can to keep young people safe online.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Secretary of State is a very honourable man, and it is commendable that he has come to speak to the House today, but many people will be very disappointed by this delay. He said in his statement that he expected this to “result in a delay in the region of six months”, but often in this place we are able to expedite matters when they are urgent. Is there no opportunity to speed things up, rather than our having to wait for six months?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for what she says, and she asks a fair question. One reason why I did not come to the House before now was that I sought to explore exactly what we might be able to do either to avoid this delay altogether or to minimise it. Perhaps it would help if I explained why I think that six months is roughly the appropriate time. Let me set out what has to happen now: we need to go back to the European Commission, and the rules under the relevant directive say that there must be a three-month standstill period after we have properly notified the regulations to the Commission. If it wishes to look into this in more detail—I hope that it will not—there could be a further month of standstill before we can take matters further, so that is four months. We will then need to re-lay the regulations before the House. As she knows, under the negative procedure, which is what these will be subject to, there is a period during which they can be prayed against, which accounts for roughly another 40 days. If we add all that together, we come to roughly six months. As she will recognise, if we could proceed quicker than that, we would, but I do not believe that that will be feasible, so it is right that I am realistic at this stage.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The Secretary of State has made a sincere and frank statement to the House about the reasons for the delay, and I appreciate that this is a change of timescale, not policy. I understand that the technology to enable the changes required by this policy already exists and could be implemented. Will he therefore comment on whether the stakeholders responsible for this—the key internet players—are co-operating on the right scale and at the right speed? We know that they can co-operate, but are they doing so?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. It is important that we have the necessary co-operation. Of course, that will need to come with the regulator, the BBFC, and those discussions are continuing, as he would expect. I have been clear that the reason for the delay is an administrative error—it is not anything else. We expect compliance by the companies that provide online pornography and, as I say, I see no reason why, in most cases, they cannot begin to comply voluntarily. They had expected to be compelled to do this from 15 July, so they should be in a position to comply. There seems to be no reason why they should not, but we do not rely on voluntary compliance and we will therefore pursue—somewhat later than we hoped—the regulations that I have described.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and his honesty. The protection of our children is paramount for everyone in the Chamber. Does he agree that typing in a year of birth is not an acceptable form of security to protect children’s innocence? Parents, including my constituents, demand that there must be greater verification. What does his Department believe can be done to enhance the verification process?

Jeremy Wright: I know the hon. Gentleman’s long-standing commitment to and interest in this issue. He is right that we should not accept that someone simply
[Jeremy Wright]
ticking a box or saying, “I am 18,” is sufficient for the companies concerned. The regulations that we have laid once, and will now re-lay, make it clear that from the point of view of the BBFC, as the regulator, that will not be an acceptable way of complying with the regulations. Companies will need to do more than that. There will need to be a way of demonstrating that someone is over 18 before they have access to this material so that companies can be sure of that fact, with us as legislators being sure that we are taking every measure that we can to keep young people away from material that will be harmful to them.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is vital that our legislation is fit for purpose in a digital age, and it is very unfortunate that age verification for online porn is being delayed. I join my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), in calling for us to ensure that this time is used well. I urge the Secretary of State to keep up a relentless focus on making sure that children are safe online, particularly regarding content on social media sites—especially inappropriate content on Twitter—and action on online harassment and bullying. Fundamentally, if a teenage girl walks down the street and some male in a mac flashes his pieces at her, that is illegal. It should not be legal to send that teenage girl a photo via AirDrop in a public place.

Jeremy Wright: I entirely understand my hon. Friend’s point. She is right: the principle that what is unlawful offline should be unlawful online guides much of the legislative activity in which we have engaged. As she says, we must maintain our focus on keeping young people—indeed, people of all ages—safe from online harms. As she knows, in parallel with these regulations, we will pursue the course set out in the White Paper.

We believe that the White Paper, along with the social media code of practice—which, as I mentioned earlier, has been published in conjunction with it—will start to drive these improvements, but the era of self-regulation has come to an end. It is important for the Government and legislators in the House to take seriously their responsibilities to keep people safe online, so that we know that social media companies will be more responsible in the future.

Export Licences: High Court Judgment

11.55 am

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement about the High Court judgment on military export licences to Saudi Arabia.

Today, the Court of Appeal handed down its judgment following the appeal by Campaign Against Arms Trade against the divisional court’s decision in July 2017 to dismiss CAAT’s claim for a judicial review of licensing decisions about military exports to Saudi Arabia for possible use in the conflict in Yemen. The case was heard by the Court of Appeal between 9 and 11 April this year. The original judicial review and the appeal relate to decisions made between December 2015 and February 2017.

Since the divisional court’s judgment in July 2017, the Government have continued to apply the rigorous and robust multi-layered process of analysis in making our licensing decisions, as highlighted in that judgment. We have, in the words of the 2017 judgment, engaged in “anxious scrutiny—indeed...what seems like anguished scrutiny at some stages”.

The Government have always taken their export control obligations very seriously, and continue to do so.

There were three grounds of appeal. The judgment found in the Government’s favour on two of them, and against on the other, referred to as ground 1. We disagree with the judgment against the Government on ground 1, and will seek permission to appeal against it.

Today’s judgment is not about whether the Government have made the right or wrong decisions about granting export licences, but concerns the rationality of the process used to reach decisions. The process was upheld by the divisional court in July 2017. The central issue in relation to military exports to Saudi Arabia in the context of the conflict in Yemen is criterion 2c of the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria, which states that the Government will “not grant a licence if there is a clear risk that the items might be used in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law.”

The criteria provide the rules for assessing military exports. Among other things, they cover concerns about human rights and international humanitarian law, the development of weapons of mass destruction, international obligations including sanctions and treaty commitments and the risk of diversion. They provide a thorough and rigorous risk assessment framework for the reaching of licensing decisions.

As the judgment makes clear, the Secretary of State responsible for licensing decisions has to rely on advice from those with specialist, diplomatic and military knowledge. In relation to criterion 2c, that means advice from the Foreign Secretary. Before the establishment of the Department for International Trade in 2016, the decision maker was the then Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. In July 2016, the responsibility passed to me.

So how have decisions been made under criterion 2c? We have used six strands of information and analysis to inform decisions: analysis of all allegations of breaches of international humanitarian law that are known to us;
an understanding of Saudi military procedures; continuing engagement with the Saudis at the highest level; post-incident dialogue, including dialogue with respect to investigations; Saudi public commitments to IHL; and regular IHL assessments based on developments in the conflict in Yemen.

Each of these strands takes into account a wide range of sources and analysis, including those of a sensitive nature to which other parties, such as non-governmental organisations and the United Nations, do not have access. Taken together, these strands of analysis and information, which are reviewed regularly by the FCO in comprehensive reports to the Foreign Secretary and which engage continuously with the record of the Saudis in relation to IHL, form the basis of the Foreign Secretary’s advice to the Secretary of State making licensing decisions.

Given all this, why did CAAT appeal the 2017 judgment? The ground on which the Government lost in the Court of Appeal judgment concerned whether we were under an obligation to make some overall assessment of whether there had been historical violations of IHL, including whether a pattern of violations could be discerned. Our approach is in line with the EU common position; it is therefore focused on a predictive evaluation of risk as to the attitude and future conduct of the Saudi-led coalition and recognises the inherent difficulties of seeking to reach findings on IHL for specific incidents where we do not have access to the complete information. Indeed, the divisional court pointed to the “self-evident” impracticality of doing so.

Even so, we have fully and robustly engaged with incidents of concern and sought to test and understand the risk of future incidents. We have all along considered the historical record of Saudi Arabia in respect of IHL. Our whole assessment has been infused with IHL considerations; indeed, everything has been looked at through the prism of IHL.

Today’s judgment is clear that the context is not one in which the Government are sitting like a court adjudicating on alleged past violations, but rather the context is a prospective and predictive exercise as to whether there is a clear risk that exports might be used in the commission of a serious violation of IHL in the future. In this context, past incidents are only part of the picture. The judgment emphasises that Government advisers were keenly alive to the question of possible violation of IHL. It also acknowledges that the processes used to advise the Secretary of State responsible for licensing decisions were rigorous and robust, upon which a decision maker could rely and, indeed, had to rely.

Nevertheless, the judgment concludes that CAAT succeeded in the central argument advanced in relation to ground 1 of its appeal. In the Court’s judgment the question whether there was a historical pattern of breaches of IHL required to be faced; even if it could not be answered with reasonable confidence for every incident, at least the attempt had to be made. Because the Government have not reached findings on IHL for specific incidents as part of our assessment of clear risk under criterion 2c, the Court of Appeal concluded that the decision-making process was irrational and therefore unlawful. The consequence is that we are remitted by the Court of Appeal to reconsider our decisions in accordance with the correct legal approach. As I said earlier, we disagree with the judgment and will seek permission to appeal.

Alongside this, we are carefully considering the implications of the judgment for decision making. While we do this, we will not grant any new licences for exports to Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners that might be used in the conflict in Yemen. As the Court of Appeal makes clear, different people may or may not approve of the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia. The judicial review is not an appeal against the Government’s decisions on their merits.

Once again, I stress that this judgment is not about whether the Government made the right or wrong decisions, but is about whether the decision-making process was rational, and the judgment emphasises that there would not be only one answer on future risk if historical violations were found to have taken place; in other words, changing the process as set out by the Court does not necessarily mean any of the decisions would be different.

The context is a complex and ever changing conflict. The Court of Appeal judgment does not undermine the UK’s overall framework for export controls as set out in the consolidated criteria. These criteria have stood the test of time and are shared by EU member states. The Court’s judgment is about how decisions were made in relation to one element of one of those criteria in a specific context, and I commend this statement to the House.

12.4 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement. This week, the House marked in debate the 70th anniversary of the Geneva convention and the 20th anniversary of the United Nation’s Security Council first putting on its agenda the protection of civilians in armed conflict. The irony of today’s judgment by the Court of Appeal is that the United Kingdom is the penholder at the Security Council for that mandate. We are supposed to be guardians of international humanitarian law, not the people found in breach of it.

The Court of Appeal’s ruling is a damning indictment of the Government’s handling of export licences to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It finds that their handling has not been lawful. The Court found that the Government made no concluded assessments of whether the Saudi-led coalition had committed violations of international humanitarian law in the past, during the Yemen conflict, and made no attempt to do so. Does the Secretary of State accept that this constitutes a clear breach of the Government’s legal obligations to assess an export destination country’s respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and that under criterion 2c of the licensing criteria the Government should have carried out such an assessment and denied licences if there was “a clear risk that the items might be used in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law”?

The Secretary of State has tried to excuse himself by pleading that this judgment is not about whether the Government have made the right or wrong decision, but about whether the decision-making process was rational. Surely even he must understand that if the decision-making process was not rational, the Government could have had no confidence that it was correct and that it therefore follows that he could have had no confidence that there was no material risk of these exports being used contrary to international humanitarian law.
That the Government have failed to carry out such assessments is a matter of national shame. I am afraid that the Secretary of State’s suggestion that there has been anxious scrutiny of these decisions looks threadbare. I welcome his announcement that there will be a suspension of the granting of new licences to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, pending the Government’s appeal, but that is not enough. Given that the process itself is flawed, will he confirm whether the same process has been used for exports to Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, which are also involved in the Yemeni conflict? Will he confirm that he is also suspending all new licences to those countries?

The Opposition believe there should be an independent investigation into the Yemen conflict and that it is shameful that the Government should seek to appeal today’s judgment. We are also concerned that there should be no sudden upsurge in open licences to these countries as a way to bypass the suspension. Can the Secretary of State confirm that this will not be allowed?

During the legal proceedings in the case against the Government, it transpired that the Government had not been properly monitoring whether the Saudi-led coalition had been engaged in breaches of IHL and had refused to properly set out whether British exports or service personnel had been directly or indirectly involved in any breaches by the Saudi-led coalition, despite widespread evidence of airstrikes on non-military targets, double-tap bombing raids and the deaths of thousands of civilians. Can the Secretary of State tell the House categorically that there has been adequate monitoring of potential breaches of IHL such that no UK personnel could be implicated in any breach?

The Secretary of State is well aware that several other countries have suspended arms sales to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia over concerns about those breaches in Yemen, including our European counterparts Germany and Denmark. He has suggested that it is in his view that the Government approach is in line with the EU common position. What assessment has he made of international reports into possible breaches and what discussions has he had with his counterparts in Germany and Denmark about the evidence upon which they have decided to suspend arms sales?

The Secretary of State, in his response to the claims brought forward by the Campaign Against Arms Trade, has stated that the Government monitor potential breaches in a number of ways, including a Ministry of Defence recording tool, extensive on-the-ground military and diplomatic staff, positive close relations with Saudi Arabian officials, and the findings of the 14 investigations by the Saudi-led coalition into whether they themselves had committed any such breaches. It subsequently transpired during proceedings that the Ministry of Defence tracker may not have been recording such data, so the Secretary of State’s review of potential breaches of international humanitarian law seems to be entirely determined by what his Saudi Arabian counterparts have advised him. At what stage did he first become aware that the Ministry of Defence tracker programme was not recording such breaches? Can he confirm whether his Department was aware that such breaches were not being reviewed or recorded?

The Court of Appeal has determined that the Secretary of State must retrace the export licence decisions and must therefore conduct a conclusive review of past violations of international humanitarian law in advance. Can he confirm that he intends to adhere to the Court’s findings, and will he tell the House what steps he is taking to conduct such an investigation? Given the serious breach of this Government’s duty of care with regard to export licences, we believe that there are clear grounds for a thorough investigation into the Government’s handling of them, and that there must be a full parliamentary or public inquiry to find out how that was allowed to happen and which Ministers were responsible for those breaches.

I note that several times in his statement the Secretary of State was keen to finger the former Foreign Secretary as the one with the “specialist, diplomatic and military knowledge” whose advice he was obliged to take under criterion 2c of the consolidated criteria. The House may be surprised to learn of that official description of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). Can the Secretary of State explain, given that he has previously assured the House that he will personally lead on helping the defence and security industries to export and will be involved in the most significant global deals across all sectors”, why he does not take full responsibility himself?

Dr Fox: The House has grown accustomed to the outraged tone of the hon. Gentleman, but it does not actually reflect the balanced tone of the judgment. He said in his questions that this country had been found in breach of international humanitarian law. I find that outrageous, coming from the official Opposition of this country, and I hope that he will retract it. I think the record will show that that is completely untrue. It is an outrageous slur on this country.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of valid and important questions, and I shall try to take them in turn as best I can. He asked about open licences. They are subject to the same scrutiny, and sometimes take between two and five months to pass, so they are not a means of bypassing the scrutiny set out in the consolidated criteria. I think that the House will be clear on that. As to how we look at existing licences, and at licences elsewhere, I have made it clear that we will review all licences in the light of the Court’s judgment. It is worth noting, however, that the Campaign Against Arms Trade did not seek an order to suspend licences, and that the Court has not ordered that in its judgment.

The hon. Gentleman asked about how the UK monitors international humanitarian law allegations. The Ministry of Defence monitors incidents of alleged IHL violations arising from airstrikes conducted by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen using all information available. This in turn is used to determine an overall view on the approach and attitude of the coalition. It informs the risk assessment made under the licensing criteria, where there is a clear risk that the items to be exported might be used in the commission of a serious violation. We consider a range of information from Government sources, foreign Governments, the media and international non-governmental organisations. We are now carefully considering the detail of the Court of Appeal judgment and its implications for this risk assessment and for decision making.
Anxious scrutiny—indeed the decision making was rational. I also recognise the made the right or wrong decisions, but about whether the judgment is not about whether the Government of international humanitarian law. I also recognise that might be used in the commission of a serious violation of the consolidated criteria, the Government will not advance sight of it. I recognise that, under criterion 2c the Secretary of State for his statement and for giving me partner in that particular battle and has helped to keep important source of intelligence for this country in our here; rather, it is whether Saudi Arabia acts as an important source of intelligence for this country in our shared combat against a global terrorism. It is a valuable partner in that particular battle and has helped to keep numerous UK citizens safe.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Do the Government accept that, as the years have rolled by since the 9/11 atrocities, it has become harder and harder to justify the closeness of our relationship with Saudi Arabia, but in defence of what the Government are trying to do, would it not be sensible for my right hon. Friend to have conversations with the Foreign Secretary, perhaps with a view to publishing a digest of some of the representations that we make to the Saudis in trying to keep them from straying further away from acceptable standards of international behaviour?

Dr Fox: The Foreign Secretary and I have answered numerous questions on this issue in the House of Commons, and we have certainly cited some of those incidents and been questioned on specific incidents in the House. On my right hon. Friend’s key point, I do not think the proximity or otherwise to 9/11 is the key determinant here; rather, it is whether Saudi Arabia acts as an important source of intelligence for this country in our shared combat against a global terrorism. It is a valuable partner in that particular battle and has helped to keep numerous UK citizens safe.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for giving me advance sight of it. I recognise that, under criterion 2c of the consolidated criteria, the Government will not grant a licence if there is a clear risk that the items might be used in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law. I also recognise that the judgment is not about whether the Government made the right or wrong decisions, but about whether the decision making was rational. I also recognise the words from the 2017 ruling that there was “anxious scrutiny—indeed...what seems like anguished scrutiny at some stages” over the decision making process. However, that anxiety and anguish are as nothing compared to the civilians who have been on the receiving end of Saudi armaments since the war in Yemen began.

I also note that since that war started, the UK has licensed some £4.7 billion-worth of arms sales to Saudi Arabia in a conflict whose death toll is now approaching 100,000 people. So may I ask the Secretary of State two questions? The ruling means that the UK must retrace its decision on the correct legal basis, taking into account past possible human rights abuses from Saudi Arabia. Will this Government now take seriously the deep concern, anguish and anxiety that there are substantial human rights abuses emanating from Saudi Arabia? Secondly, I was disappointed to hear him say that it was the Government’s intention to appeal. I understand the legal costs so far are somewhere over £100,000. May I ask him to respect the ruling today, not to proceed with an appeal, and not to throw good money after bad?

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I have some sympathy with the position that my right hon. Friend has set out the Dispatch Box today. He will recall that I have had, to say the least, the most profound reservations over the past three or four years about the Government’s policy in respect of what is happening in Yemen. However, he will also know that I have never called for an arms embargo for the simple reason that it would have little humanitarian impact. Does he appreciate that the Master of the Rolls, Sir Terence Etherton, said in his judgment today that the Government “made no concluded assessments of whether the Saudi-led coalition had committed violations of international humanitarian law in the past, during the Yemen conflict, and made no attempt to do so”?

That is the crux of the matter that is before the House today.

I say to my right hon. Friend and to the other members of the Government Front Bench that they should listen more carefully to what Parliament has said consistently in almost every debate on this matter over the past three years. As recently as Tuesday, there was a Westminster Hall debate marking the 70th anniversary of the arrangements that were made in respect of international humanitarian law. After all these investigations of breaches of international humanitarian law, the argument has been that it is wrong for Britain and one side of the conflict to mark their own homework. It is essential that such breaches are looked at by an accepted and impartial international force, such as the UN. If the Government had heeded the warnings from the House of Commons, they would not be in the position that they are in today.

Dr Fox: I agree with my right hon. Friend about the humanitarian costs involved in the conflict, and I also agree that there can be no military solution to this particular conflict. There can only be a negotiated and political solution. However, we do monitor allegations of IHL breaches, and we do take that into account when making decisions. Of course, the predictive nature of this process means that we have to look at the past pattern of behaviour, the information we have available, and what mitigations may have been put in place to
ensure that any incidents are not repeated. We are unable to make absolute definitions about whether there has been a breach when we are not party to the full information, but we make those decisions based on the predictive element of criterion 2c and on the evidence that is available from both public and protected sources.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Government’s position is, frankly, inexplicable, because the Secretary of State referred to all the careful analysis that has been done, but anyone else undertaking an assessment of future risk—this goes to the heart of the point that the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) just raised—would look at the past behaviour of those using the weapons that we have sold to Saudi Arabia. As the Secretary of State well knows, others have done so, and the UN panel of experts found over three years ago that “the coalition had conducted airstrikes targeting civilians and civilian objects, in violation of international humanitarian law”. The Government cannot continue to say, “We’re sorry. We haven’t been able to make an assessment, but we are not sure that there is a risk about the future.” I will ask a direct question of the Secretary of State: is it the Government’s view that Saudi Arabia has engaged in activities that have breached international humanitarian law?

Dr Fox: I disagree with the premise of the question itself. The right hon. Gentleman says that the Government’s position is inexplicable, but it is not. We are following the EU and national criteria set out for arms exports, and we are following the EU common position. We look at all reports of potential breaches of international humanitarian law, but we must also take into account, by the nature of the predictive elements in criterion 2c, what we think the future risk will be based on, for example, any mitigations.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The Government have consistently maintained that this country has one of the strictest export control regimes of anywhere in the world, but on what grounds do they base those claims?

Dr Fox: The divisional court’s judgment set out in terms why we operate a robust system, and I explained in my statement that we have gone well beyond what I think is naturally expected under criterion 2c. We operate what I believe is the most robust arms export policy of anywhere in the world. We operate under the EU and national consolidated criteria and alongside the EU common position. I do not believe that anyone else operates a more robust policy.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has referred to the European common position several times. What is his assessment of the European countries that have decided to suspend arms exports to Saudi Arabia? Why does he disagree with their position?

Dr Fox: The hon. Lady asks a good question. We discuss matters with our European colleagues, including our German colleagues, at the highest level, and it is our policy to continue to apply the EU common position to licensing. We do not comment on the commercial arrangements that underpin the export of military equipment and services, which are, of course, confidential. Our European partners and others are entitled to deviate from the EU common position if they wish, but we intend to follow it.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): We all get emails from our constituents expressing concerns about the global arms trade. Will my right hon. Friend therefore assure me and my constituents that the UK does indeed have one of the most robust arms export regimes in the world? Does he share my wish that other countries had such robust regimes?

Dr Fox: I do wish that more countries shared the criteria that we and our European partners operate in this particular field. However, I also believe that countries are entitled to defend themselves. If we were to have no international rules around arms exports, the whole global arms industry would be a laissez-faire space in which many innocent citizens around the world would be denied the protections offered by our export licences.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is undeniable that the Government’s defiance in respect of the Court of Appeal ruling is disappointing. Given the public interest in the unfolding tragedy in Yemen, will the Secretary of State not at least acknowledge that there must be more transparency in how his Department deals with this issue? We understand the obvious sensitivities, but the public and the House deserve to understand how the Department is coming to its decisions.

Dr Fox: I have made it clear on a number of occasions how we come to decisions and the process of ministerial accountability in that. The Court of Appeal judged that the process needs to change in order to be lawful, but it also made the point that changing the process would not necessarily have led to different decisions from those arrived at by the Government.

I say to the hon. Lady that I took offence at the comments of the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), the Liberal Democrat spokesperson on this matter, when she said: “Saudi Arabia is an enemy of British values, including human rights and the rule of law.” Such sweeping generalisations show a lack of grasp of the detail and understanding of the complexities of international relations.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): On the one hand, the Court of Appeal is saying that the British Government must investigate allegations of previous international humanitarian law violations before granting export licences, but, on the other hand, the British Government are saying, “Look. That is very difficult for us to do, because some of these incidents take place in foreign countries thousands of miles away.” Does not the solution to this lie in the hands of the Saudi Arabian Government themselves? We must say to them, “If you want to buy our weapons, where allegations exist they must be properly and independently investigated, and those findings must be shared with us before licences are granted.”

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The joint incidents assessment team was set up by the Saudi Government in February 2016 to help with that. It examines military activity in civilian areas to minimise
possible civilian casualties and assesses the coalition's rules of engagement. We have had input into that to ensure that the coalition is operating in a way that we would find acceptable.

Of course, we simply would not take that as being the end of the matter when it comes to information. As I have said, we look at a range of information from foreign Government sources, from our own Government sources, both those in the public domain and those that are restricted, and from NGOs and the media. It is in taking that complete picture that we are able to assess what we believe the risks to be, but we are always looking to see whether further sources of information may help to improve our decision making, alongside the decision making of our allies.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I have just returned from the Court of Appeal, where I listened to the judgment. The judges, in paragraph 141, say there was a decision in 2016 no longer to apply criterion 2 on the checking of IHL. This resulted in 100,000 deaths. Who made that decision?

My Committees, the Committees on Arms Export Controls, have manifestly failed to hold the Government to account. We now need urgent reform of the Committees' powers, including creating a standalone Committee. Will the Minister confirm that he will not allow the use of any existing open licences to coalition partners during this review?

Finally, after the arms scandals of the 1980s and '90s we had the Scott inquiry, and we now need an independent judge-led or parliamentary inquiry not just on this particular issue but on the failings of our arms control system—taking it away from the political interference and political control of Ministers to a truly independent and world-class system, which we do not have at the moment.

Dr Fox: We are ultimately accountable in the courts, as we have been, and the divisional court was clear in its praise for how Government rigour was applied to this process. We are not in breach of the consolidated criteria, nor has the Court of Appeal said that. What the Court of Appeal said is that the process by which decisions are made needs to change, and needs to take into account the possibility of international humanitarian law having been breached. To compare that, for example, to the risk of terrorism and enhance the UK's reputation around the world, why not stop Brexit?

Dr Fox: I have heard some really quite idiotic questions in my time in the House, but that one takes the biscuit.

Backbench Business

Refugee Family Reunion

12.32 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House notes that 20 June is World Refugee Day; further notes that, with record levels of global displacement across the world, many refugee families have been separated by war and persecution; welcomes that in 2018 the UK granted 5,806 family reunion visas to partners and children of refugees in the UK; and calls on the Government to introduce reforms to family reunion rules to ensure that the close relatives of all refugees in the UK have safe and legal pathways to reunite with their families in the UK.

Much has been happening in and around the House of Commons, and in many other places, to mark World Refugee Day and Loneliness Awareness Week. There has been a lack of progress on the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill, which should have been passed by the House of Commons under this Government.

The idea of a “pull factor” was one of the hares set running on Second Reading on 16 March 2018, and the Bill has not progressed much further. Lord Kerr addressed that in the House of Lords:

“Is it really plausible that, say in Idlib—or, indeed, any city in the world— "if it is under siege in six weeks' time, the family sits around the dining table, pick a child and tell it that it must set off across the battlefield, the fronts in the Mediterranean, to try to get into England so that it can then pull the family into England? That is implausible. We are talking about refugee reunion and about children. We really must stop talking about this wildly implausible pull factor. They come here to escape being killed; they do not come here in order to become a magnet for the rest of the family.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 11 May 2018; Vol. 791, c. 372.]

If we bear that in mind in this debate, and in each and every other debate on refugees, we will do ourselves and, indeed, refugees a great service by showing them the respect they deserve for what they have been through.

It would be worth while, as I did on Second Reading, to begin by talking about the idea of refugees. I began that debate by talking about Yohannes, a young welder from Eritrea living in Canterbury. Last month, I came across an article in The Independent headlined, “Germany’s refugee intake begins to boost economy as settlers soothe country’s worker shortage”. I re-emphasise that today’s refugee is tomorrow’s worker contributing to the economy.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He has been a powerful champion and advocate, and I hope that, at the end, the Government will allow time for his Bill to proceed. Once families are reunited under his proposals, it is important that they contribute properly to the economy. Does he agree that the Government must move forward on extending the right to work to asylum seekers?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My hon. Friend makes the case well. We should treat asylum seekers as normally as possible. We often talk about spectrums nowadays, and there is perhaps an argument that we are all on a spectrum of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. A person who moves from one town to another for work is a person on the move. We have various words to grade that movement.
I have been cautioned about making the comparison because, in a way, it minimises or downplays the trauma some people have been through, but on the other hand it is a way of partially seeing ourselves in other people's shoes. We are not quite escaping war and the threat of being killed, but moving for economic circumstances is a normal thing to do. The more we treat the situation as normal, as my hon. Friend clearly said, the better.

Germany is fairly normal. The article in The Independent says:

“In his native Syria, Mohammed Kassim worked as an electrician. But having learned the trade informally, he lacked the credentials to show for it. Now, in his adopted homeland, the 30-year-old is receiving the training he never had and he is getting paid to do it by a company dangling the promise of a job that could vault him from struggling refugee to member of the German middle class.”

That is the sort of story we want to hear, four years after many people came to Germany. Of course, it is not all sweetness and light. A number of those people are still unemployed, but that is changing. The article continues:

“But after spending billions of euros to accommodate the newcomers, Germany is beginning to reap some gains.”

The German economy is benefiting from the presence of more people, who happen to be refugees.

I will set out the global context. There are about 24 million refugees worldwide, and every day some 44,000 people are forced to flee their home as a result of conflict and persecution. To give some idea, 44,000 people would probably fill Ibrox and Parkhead in the Scottish premier league, and would certainly fill the average stadium in the English premiership. That is a lot of people who are forced to move every day, and this movement of people within and across borders is creating significant policy challenges for Governments across the world and is linked to enormous humanitarian needs.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the definition. A person seeking asylum has normally left their own country due to war, persecution or violence and has requested sanctuary in another country, and their application to receive legal protection has yet to be processed. Importantly, refugees are at the next stage—this is where my Bill comes in. A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his country and has been recognised as having a well-founded fear of persecution. They are not only fleeing as an asylum seeker, but this has now been accepted by others. The reason for persecution could be race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group, as we recently saw in Myanmar. A refugee has been granted special legal protection on that basis. War and ethnic, tribal or religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their country. It is worth bearing that in mind.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): In previous debates, we have drawn attention to refugee children and the fact that they cannot sponsor a relative to come over—this is unlike what happens in other countries. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is deplorable and adds to the trauma these children are already facing?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Lady makes a point that is central to this speech and to the reason behind today's debate.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I agree with the hon. Lady on what she said. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the current situation has been exacerbated by the UK's decision to opt out of applying article 10 of the EU directive on family reunion, which would have allowed unaccompanied children to act as sponsors for their family members?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I am glad I have taken both interventions together, because they overlap neatly. This perhaps dovetails into something else, which is that the UK opted out of some EU directives; if only Scotland could opt out of some UK directives. We will park that one there, but it does show that the idea of Brexit—

[Interruption.] We had better park that one as well. The hon. Lady and hon. Gentleman got it right, as did the British Red Cross policy briefing for this debate.

The Red Cross recommendations are:

“Give adult refugees the right to sponsor their parents, siblings and children up to the age of 25 to join them in the UK under family reunification rules.”

That is normal in other places in Europe—places that have not opted out. It is the norm. The second recommendation is:

“Give child refugees the right to sponsor their parents as well as any siblings up to the age of 25 to join them in the UK under family reunification rules.”

The third recommendation is:

“Reintroduce legal aid for family reunion applications.”

Members will not be surprised to learn that those recommendations mirror closely, if not precisely, what my Bill set out to do. I refer to the Bill that has been chocked by the Government in this House of Commons, despite the fact that it has had laudable and welcome support from Members from Labour, the Liberal Democrats, Change UK, Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National party, and from luminaries among the Conservative Back Benches. All those voices from across the political spectrum were supporting the Bill.

I just want to say one thing to the Government and to colleagues across this House, as I know you want me to speak for only 12 to 15 minutes, Madam Deputy Speaker—

[Interruption.] I should have mentioned that the Democratic Unionist party is supporting my Bill. Indeed, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is here, so thank goodness I remembered before I was reminded; otherwise, we might have had an Adjournment debate on the issue.

The Bill has been supported across the House, and the plea I make to colleagues is that if the Government do not move on this now—there will be reshuffles, so there will be different personnel at the Home Office and things might move on a bit better—whoever else comes out at the beginning of the ballot in the next Parliament should be willing and open to move forward on this Bill, because it is shameful that the Government have not moved with this. Time in politics is short and time in government is even shorter, and things could have been done that have not happened. The Government could have looked back proudly had they reacted and done this, but I hope, and warn them, that this will not be the only time; I expect this to come forward again.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is commendably keeping to time, and I shall be brief. One thing that the Government could do, in advance of whatever attitude they take to his Bill,
is recognise that Syrians whom many of our communities have accepted are desperate to bring their families in. Does he agree that it would be right and proper if the Government were to encourage that, rather than put hurdles in these people's way?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Absolutely; people would be able to function far better. One thing that struck me from speaking to refugees—these things do not come through in briefing papers so clearly—is the difficulty they have sleeping at night because of worry. If someone is waking up at night worrying about family members, that must have an impact on the way they can conduct, advance and live the rest of their life. That must be a problem, so I absolutely agree with what the hon. Gentleman said, and I am glad he has raised that issue.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one other barrier the Government must address is the high cost of citizenship applications, particularly for child refugees, who might have been here for many years? It costs the Government £300 to process a citizenship application, but they charge children, refugees, more than £1,200 to process one. This is profiteering; the Government make more than £2 million a week on these applications. That is one area where the Government could make the process of welcoming people to our country much better.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman presents the point perfectly, and well done for that. It shows the feeling across the House on this, and I totally agree with what he said. There is so much the Government could do. There is so much the Home Office could do. It could be a facilitator. It could help, but for some reason it chooses not to be the great help it could be, and that is very disappointing.

At one of the events we held this week, we heard from Play for Progress, which helps with therapy, counselling and dealing with post-traumatic stress disorders through music, trust and knowing people. It is run by two doctors, Anna Macdonald and Sahiah Khan. I thank the Inter-Parliamentary Union for giving us the room on Tuesday. We heard how the idea of using X-rays, which are not certain in their outcomes, to prove that people are of a certain age was unethical. We are talking about the use of X-rays to determine this from people's bones, even when a paediatrician has said someone is a child and a number of medical experts have done the same. In some cases a social worker, but in most cases a bureaucrat will be saying that someone is not a child. The doctors pointed out that not only does one try to avoid using X-rays on children, but this is being done to try to prove an inconclusive point. It is being done for non-medical needs—for bureaucratic needs. That betrays a sad attitude within the Home Office and where it is leading this.

A constituent of mine from Lewis wants the Education Secretary to “increase funding for ESOL” so that people can learn English as a second language. She said that the money that would be spent on that would soon be recouped, through taxes during a person's “first eight months of employment at the national average wage.”

I will bring my remarks to an end, as otherwise you will start clearing your throat, Madam Deputy Speaker, as is the given signal. First, however, I wish to thank the number of organisations that have been helpful to me. I am sure that if I am not in the top seven in the ballot next time, they will help whoever is near the top. I wish to thank Lucy Wake at Amnesty International, Sam Nadel at Oxfam, James Bulman at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Seb Klier at the Refugee Council and Jon Featony at the British Red Cross for all the help they gave on the Bill. The great thing is that that shows that many people care about refugees. We are living in fairly stable circumstances, whereas in the past many people from the highlands and islands moved for economic reasons and due to highland clearances. It is not inconceivable that things will change and in the future our great grandchildren or those who come after might be in a situation that results in their becoming refugees.

I wish to end on a case study. People's stories and situations are better here than the facts that we can drily drag from any situation. The case is as follows:

“Muhammed and Amal are from Syria. They fled to Libya with their four children shortly after the conflict began. Life in Libya became increasingly dangerous while they were there and after two years Muhammed decided to make the journey to Europe. Muhammed was granted refugee status in the UK. Aware that his son, Kusai, was due to turn 18 very soon, making him ineligible for family reunion, Muhammed immediately began the process of applying to bring his family to the UK.

That application was rejected. Muhammed knew that his 20-year-old daughter, Athar, might not be accepted but also knew that, under family reunion law, he had the right to bring his wife and any children under the age of 18 to the UK. It turned out that the reason for the rejection was Kusai's passport expiring while the family was in Libya. While awaiting that decision Kusai turned 18 and became ineligible for family reunion. Muhammed appealed, and a judge ruled that while Muhammed's wife and two youngest children were eligible for family reunion and could come to the UK, Kusai and Athar were rejected on the basis of being over 18 years old.

While Athar has remained in the region, Kusai decided to take matters into his own hands and took the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean to a makeshift camp in unthinkable conditions in Calais.”

That was in the famous jungle. That is the story that people have and it forms part of the points I can raise in my 15 minutes on refugees. Many other Members will raise different and better points, and we will all learn today from Members in all parts of the House as they say what they have to say. I look forward to hearing it.

12.49 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), not least because I can congratulate him on having secured this debate on an important topic, and also because, as he knows, my great-grandfather left the Western Isles after the clearances and was himself someone who, for economic reasons, was driven first to Glasgow and eventually to England. Had it worked out otherwise, I might have been a constituent of the hon. Gentleman's, and in a rather small constituency who knows what could have happened.

I want to make a few points. First, let me leave that point to one side and move on to another personal matter.

Every day—today is as every day—I walk from home down to Chislehurst railway station. I go down a road called Old Hill, and on the junction with Lubbock Road there is a seat with a memorial plaque on it that is inscribed in these terms:

“Rev. & Mrs. I. E Davidson & Friends
Gratefully remembered by
All the BMJ Children
(68 of them rescued from Central Europe 1939).”
The BMJ referred to is the Barbican Mission to the Jews. Reverend Davidson and his wife were based at Christ church in Lubbock Road in Chislehurst, where they set up a home for children who had been rescued, predominantly from Czechoslovakia and neighbouring countries, during the Kindertransport. They found refuge and a welcome in my home community of Chislehurst and are remembered there to this day with fondness and affection. This is an appropriate opportunity for me to pay tribute to their memory, and to all the people in our community in Bromley and Chislehurst who to this day keep alive that memory and that work for those who have suffered through displacement.

I was a sponsor of the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill and hope the Government will reflect on the failure to allow that modest Bill to progress. In my judgment it is a shame, because the attitude embodied by the Davids and their friends and neighbours in Chislehurst before the second world war is the most genuine reflection of this country’s record and approach to refugees. The facts show that Britain has a very good track record on resettling the most vulnerable. It is worth observing that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has said that the UK maintains its standing as one of the most generous countries for refugee resettlement. The UNHCR judges the community sponsorship programme, which enables community groups to welcome and support refugees directly, to be a success, although it is still in its early phases, and hopes that it will continue. In a sense, community sponsorship of that sort builds on the work of the Davids and their friends in the Barbican Mission all those years ago. I very much hope that the Government will continue that work and build on it.

In a recent written statement, the Home Secretary observed:

“The UK has a long history of supporting refugees in need of protection.”

He noted that we have welcomed tens of thousands of people in recent years and, since 2016, have resettled “more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU member state”, and I am glad that my right hon. Friend also confirmed “the UK’s ongoing commitment to resettlement and set out our plans for after 2020.”—[Official Report, 17 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 1-2WS.]

Compared with that good track record and generous spirit, it seems to me a little jarring that we have a restriction that prevents children who have come here lawfully as refugees—whose refugee status has been accepted—from being able to bring their closest relatives to come and support them. We are not talking about a large number of people, nor are we talking about abuse of the asylum system. The key point to remember is that these people have been found and accepted to be genuinely in need and have proper refugee status.

As the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar said, it is shame that the policy seems currently to be driven on the basis of the frankly ill-informed and unsubstantiated fear of a pull factor. The hon. Gentleman referred to the speech of Lord Kerr in the other place, in which the noble Lord dismissed that fear, but I wish to take the matter one step further. This country’s upper tribunal recently considered a case in relation to this matter, and the judgement was critical of the Government’s position. Mr Justice McCloskey overturned a decision to refuse the application made by a 19-year-old boy, who was recognised as a refugee when he was 16, to be allowed to sponsor his mother and brother to join him in the UK. One of the arguments on which the Government had relied in the initial decision was that it was in the public interest not to allow the family reunion application. The Government argued that other would-be child refugees “would be at risk of trafficking and exploitation in their quest to reach the United Kingdom”—that is the suggestion of the pull factor. In his judgment, Mr Justice McCloskey was pretty damning of that suggestion, saying that “there is no evidence underlying” that argument. He went on to say—I agree with him on this—that allowing reunification “will promote, rather than undermine, the public interest in this respect.”

Mr Justice McCloskey is right, the Government are wrong, and they should think again in that regard.

Because we are talking about a small number of people and because the current system is based on what appears to be a policy premise that is unsubstantiated by evidence—that position is clearly borne out by the court, and I have seen no intrinsic or palpable evidence anywhere to suggest that a pull factor can be shown to exist—it seems to me that, although in many respects I am proud of what my Government have done, in this respect they let themselves down by taking a needlessly restrictive and, forgive me for saying so, a somewhat mean-spirited approach in relation to this comparatively small number of people. We have an opportunity to look at this again. By allowing refugee children to sponsor their immediate families, we would reduce the number of people who make irregular journeys to reach the UK. There is evidence of people sometimes making irregular journeys because they are unable to come through the proper channels.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman is making a great speech. One point to consider is that over the past 18 months the Home Office has said on several occasions that it is following the progress of the family reunion Bill and talking to stakeholders—a sort of indication of change—but what has really happened, change-wise? The Home Office cannot stall on this much longer, given the body and breadth of opinion stating that the rules should change and come into line with those elsewhere, and that we should be decent to this small number of people.

Robert Neill: The hon. Gentleman is right. Whenever I talk to people in my constituency, whatever their political association, their gut reaction to this issue is that it just seems only fair, decent and reasonable to allow reunification. That is right and I hope the Government will think again.

The hon. Gentleman observes correctly that this has been a matter of debate and consideration in a number of places. In 2016, the Home Affairs Committee said:

“It seems to us perverse that children who have been granted refugee status in the UK are not then allowed to bring their close
family to join them in the same way as an adult would be able to do. The right to live safely with family should apply to child refugees just as it does to adults.”

That must be right. If we want people who are genuine refugees to settle in this country, to integrate well with our society and to make a success of themselves, as so many of those children who were housed in Lubbock Road in Chislehurst were able to do—their stories are available in the archives of Christ church, Chislehurst—it seems to me to be only generous and decent to enable them to bring their close family, which is therefore a limited and concise number.

The Government have the opportunity to carry out a review, and I hope the Minister, who I know is a humane and caring person, will reflect on this matter. We need not put a needless stain on our reputation, which is otherwise good, by adopting such a restrictive approach in relation to this small number of children. In that spirit, I hope that the Government will think again about this matter. If this debate on World Refugee Day serves to do that, as it serves to honour the memory of the Davidsons and many others who helped people at that time, that will be a good thing and we will not have wasted our time today.

12.59 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for the Western Isles (Angus Brendan MacNeil)—I apologise for not trying to pronounce his constituency, but my linguistic skills are more akin to those of Del Boy. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on his speech. It takes great courage to speak truth to power and he always does it with such good grace.

I want to speak in favour of the motion. Today is World Refugee Day, and it is important to set out the issues in our history of supporting refugees following the second world war, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. In my experience, there is not a great deal of understanding about who refugees are, what their background is, why they have come, and so on, and a lot of confusion about refugees and migrants as a whole. Unfortunately, in some cases that has been exploited by some people, who have sought to portray refugees and migrants as a whole as different or “others” or tried to make people afraid of them. Who can forget Nigel Farage’s infamous poster in the 2016 EU referendum, which tried to demonise Syrian refugees who were fleeing for their lives and portray them all as terrorists?

Or who can forget the shameful front pages of too many of our tabloids in the run-up to the referendum, which tried to alienate refugees from the public, or at least their readers? King’s College London has published a report, which I recommend people read, analysing tabloid front pages. Immigration was the second most mentioned issue, with 99 front pages on immigration in the 10 weeks preceding the 2016 EU referendum, 76% of them negative. Hon. Members should please read some excerpts from the report. It is shameful and begs the question of what is happening not just to evidence-based journalism, but to ethical journalism. That is compounded by what we see on social media and the lack of regulation there.

It would be fair to say that some people have raised concerns about immigration. We will all have had issues raised with us on the doorsteps, particularly where there are housing pressures and when other public services such as the NHS and, increasingly, education are in crisis. However, immigration is also raised in areas where there is little diversity or fewer problems with services. That says a lot about how the media have portrayed the issue and how we have failed across the political spectrum to have a debate about immigration, migrants and refugees. We need to acknowledge that and step up to the plate, because we have created a vacuum and been replaced—I am not going to give a certain person the dignity of having his name mentioned in this place, but he was the leader of one party and became the leader of another.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend and many other Members, we have a high number of refugees in Coventry. We have experienced problems with people waiting a long time to find out their status. Very often they find out that a family member back home, in the country they are running away from, has been taken ill and do not know where they are. The other major problem is that some refugees spend months or maybe years without a status and unable to work, which creates a terrible situation.

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I will come to that issue in a moment.

As leader of his party, that person excelled at pointing the finger at migrants, intentionally misleading the British public about EU citizens, who include the 1.3 million British people exercising their freedom to live and work across the EU, and conflating them with refugees seeking sanctuary in fear for their lives. We must not forget why we had a UN convention, as the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst mentioned, following the second world war, when Jewish people had nowhere to go. We remember what happened there. That person and his kind—I include the current incumbent of the White House in that—repeatedly use inflammatory and demonising language about refugees and migrants that is meant to instil fear. I would argue that large swathes of the print media have enabled that, which is compounded by social media.

I am proud that, in the wake of the second world war, the UK helped to draft, and was one of the first signatories to, the UN convention on refugees, so that anyone, anywhere, could claim refuge from persecution. We believe—I am talking about the people speaking in today’s debate—that most people feel that way too. But for some people, superimposed on top of those feelings are fears about jobs and public services and about difference: “What about my job? Will employers want to pay me less or even replace me? What about my children’s education? Will there be enough school places? Where will they live? What about housing supply?”

We have failed to answer those questions, and we have an obligation to do so. We must respond by engaging in communities to understand the local impacts of migration. We must make sure that communities with migrant populations are appropriately resourced and supported, so that the pressure on services is mitigated, and indigenous communities get to know each other, and employers are prohibited from undercutting wages. Indeed, one issue uncovered prior to the EU referendum that got little coverage was the direct recruitment of people from abroad, which should not be allowed.

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend mentioned the ability of the immigration system to do the job it is designed to do. The Family Reunion review, and I hope the Minister, who I know is a humane and caring person, will reflect on this matter.
I would like to talk about a couple of refugees, Samia and Marzia, and say why they came to the UK and how I got to know them. Samia is a refugee from Syria. I first got to know her when she came to my Oldham office on a Friday night in 2015, saying that she was going to be made homeless. Although she had been granted refugee status fairly quickly, which is not everyone’s experience—I would like to raise that point with the Minister—she was no longer eligible for temporary accommodation because of issues with her residence permit. She could not get the accommodation that she needed and was going to be literally turned out on to the streets.

I pay tribute to my wonderful team. My office deals with a number of immigration and asylum claims, and I cannot speak highly enough of what they do. They sprang into action and managed to get a temporary stay for Samia while her new residence permit was sorted out. While all that was happening, we learned more about why and how Samia had arrived in the UK. She was an architect in Syria and fled her home, which she loves, leaving friends and family, after the bombing started in 2014. She described her fear for life. Unfortunately, she was separated from Samir, her husband. She arrived on her own in the UK and was sent to Oldham, where we met. The next step for us was to find Samir and reunite the family.

I am happy to say that there is a good ending to this story. We were able to find Samir, and this lovely couple, who are both architects, were reunited. They now live in Oxford and are contributing to our economy. We do not hear enough about those kinds of stories or how refugees are a net benefit to this country.

I first met Marzia at an International Women’s Day event in Oldham five years ago. She was a family court judge in the criminal justice system in Afghanistan. She had the temerity to set up education centres for girls, which unfortunately was not very popular with the Taliban. She was targeted by them, and after being run over and spending many weeks in hospital, she was told when finally released that she was going to be killed. She fled Afghanistan in fear for her life and arrived in the UK. Once in the UK, she moved to Oldham—I will say a little about that in a moment. As she told me, at the age of 43, having left her family, friends and career as a professional lawyer, she had to start all over again, learn a new language, which is increasingly difficult with cuts to English classes for speakers of other languages, and find a new identity and purpose.

Marzia said:

“The negative assumptions about me contributed to the deterioration of my mental health. The asylum system is harsh.”

Now Marzia is a British citizen, and I was delighted to be invited to her citizenship ceremony. She works in my office as a caseworker, helping people who were once in her position. Her views on the asylum system are scathing. She says:

“We have had some refugees who have waited 15 years for a decision about their status. Do you think this is right? 15 years in no man’s land… They are expected to learn English in spite of there being no free English classes, to pay for English when you’re not allowed to work and have £5.00 a day to live off.”

In addition to working for me, Marzia speaks about her experiences wherever she can. She has even written a book about not just her life in Afghanistan and the circumstances that led her to leave, but her experience of the asylum system. She wants people to understand the propaganda in the tabloids and increasingly online.

We must remember why the refugee convention exists and think about what we would want if our families were affected. That is why I am calling on the Government to ensure compassion, dignity and humanity in the asylum system; not to let people languish for years in no man’s land without determining their status; to ensure there are funded English classes to help people integrate in their new homes and communities; to enable people to work while they await their status; to support local authorities through a new migrant impact fund to ensure asylum seekers and refugees are properly supported and integrated into their new communities; and especially to fast-track the process of reuniting children with their families. As Marzia says, “I am a refugee but I am a human being, like you.”

1.11 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eilearn an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) on securing this debate and more specifically on his persistence in addressing this issue. To be honest, this could be quite a short debate, because it is on a narrow point, the issues are clear and we are going over the same ground that we have gone over many times before. What we actually need now is some action from the Government to comply with these points, not more long rhetorical speeches.

On Tuesday this week, I joined a demonstration in Parliament Square organised by Safe Passage, which is an excellent organisation that campaigns for refugee and migrant children. One of the key speakers—in the sheeting rain for some time—was the noble Lord Dubs, who I am proud to say is a near neighbour of mine in Hammersmith. As is well known, he was a refugee himself and secured the important Dubs amendment. It is still to the Government’s shame that, I think, less than 300 of the 3,000 children who should have come to the UK as part of the Dubs amendment are actually here. [Interruption. The Minister is mouthing from a sedentary position that the figure may be slightly more than that, but I suspect that whatever figure she comes up with will still be nugatory by comparison with not just what was required, but what was promised.

The same reasons that are given for the cases we are discussing today are given for the Dubs children—that we do not want to have pull factors or that local authorities will be overwhelmed by the numbers of children arriving. Those are very threadbare arguments. One of the other speakers at the demonstration was Stephen Cowan, who is the leader of my own council in Hammersmith and Fulham. He pointed out that that council alone, which is a small council, had agreed to take 200 unaccompanied children over a 10-year period. Other speakers at the event included a group of children from the London Borough of Islington who had got together a petition, gone to see the mayor of Islington and persuaded Islington Council to take in 100 children over 10 years. In other words, there was no shortage of compassion and practical remedies being offered, and every time it is the Government who are not stepping up to the plate.

Even if children reach the UK—often through dangerous and torturous means—they find that there are additional burdens to go through for their relatives to join them here.
I have visited Calais twice. Displaced people are seeking refuge every day, whether in Calais, Lesbos or in war zones themselves. Generally speaking, they seek refuge in other developing countries; 85% of refugees are in developing countries and 0.02% of the world’s displaced people are in the UK, so although we have a good record on this issue over the decades, we are not doing enough now.

As is addressed in the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, there are practical complexities, which are often deliberate. For example, there may be no access to a consular, or indeed any, process of registration at the place that migrants are actually coming from. Whether the issues are legal or financial, the process is very difficult. Then there is the matter of legal aid, which was withdrawn under the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. Only through enforcement by the courts—and reluctantly—have the Government agreed to any restoration of legal aid, although that has still not happened. We are still in the desultory territory of exceptional case funding, and we know how limited that is.

When will the Government ensure free access to legal aid for migrant children in these circumstances? These are simple points. When will there be good representation and assistance for unaccompanied children in the UK or families who want their adult children to come here? When will family reunions be permitted—when will the rules be changed, so that reunions come within the scope of the immigration rules? When will the promises that have been previously made, including to Lord Dubs, be honoured? If the Minister can answer those simple questions today, we can move on. Otherwise, I suspect will be back here having this debate again very shortly.

1.17 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, there are practical complexities, which are often deliberate. For example, there may be no access to a consular, or indeed any, process of registration at the place that migrants are actually coming from. Whether the issues are legal or financial, the process is very difficult. Then there is the matter of legal aid, which was withdrawn under the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. Only through enforcement by the courts—and reluctantly—have the Government agreed to any restoration of legal aid, although that has still not happened. We are still in the desultory territory of exceptional case funding, and we know how limited that is.

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Bambos Charalambous: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as this Parliament keeps limping on, there is certainly plenty of time for the Government to get the Bill in Committee and table a money resolution so that we can make progress?

Bambos Charalambous: It is frustrating that the Bill has stalled because the Government will not give it a money resolution, and it is very sad that we are in this situation after the Bill has passed its Second Reading. I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to see progress.

On 9 February, I visited some of the refugee camps just over the channel with Care4Calais—a charity that distributes clothes, sleeping bags, tents and other necessities. I cannot forget the harsh conditions in which the refugees there find themselves, with little electricity or hot food, no hot water, no heating, no privacy and the constant background of cold and damp. All this is coupled with the knowledge that their loved ones still face danger back in the country they have escaped.

I heard at first hand from refugees in Calais about the life-threatening situations they had fled. For some, it was religious persecution; for others, the stark realities of war and some others, torture. Many of the refugees were young—still in their early teens—but already they had experienced horrors in their lives that many of us would find difficult to imagine. The terrifying steps these refugees will take to escape torture and persecution are telling. I spoke to young boys who had clung to the underside of lorries, risking death for hours, and others who had been stowed in the boots of cars. I met a family who had crossed the sea in winter in a tiny dinghy the size of one of the rowing boats in St James’s Park.

We must ask ourselves what prompts people to take such extreme actions. These are not the actions of people who have the choice of a comfortable life back home, nor of people who have taken decisions lightly: no, they are the actions of desperate people who want to survive and build a better life; people who need and deserve the help of rich nations like our own.

It was clear in Calais how often it is the young men who will make the journey first in the hope that they can carve an escape route for their loved ones. One young man I spoke to in Calais told me that he often speaks to his mother on the phone. I asked him, “Does she know where you’re living now?” He smiled ruefully and answered, “She’ll cry if I tell her, so I say I’m in a hotel. I just want a good job so I can make her safe.” I asked him what brought him to the camp. Like so many others, he said that it was his family’s conversion to Christianity that effectively placed a death sentence on their heads.

We cannot sit back and ignore this kind of persecution or people’s death-defying attempts to escape, and should they make the journey safely here, we surely owe it to them to allow family reunion. Some argue that to reunite children with their families will mean taking in too many people. I am afraid that that argument is one of prejudice and selfishness. According to Oxfam, the UK has taken in substantially fewer people than would constitute its fair share. In 2018, the UK received five asylum applications for every 10,000 people living in the UK, while the European average is 14. Even at that number, over two thirds of applications are rejected. In this context, it seems nothing less than cruel to block the reunion of refugee children with their families. It is well known that doing so will condemn these children to greater likelihood of mental health problems and leave them less able to engage with society. This right already exists for adult refugees in the UK, who are able to bring their families over to join them having been successful in their asylum application. It is therefore perverse that the same right is not given to child refugees.

One of my own team in Parliament is part of a family who fled torture in Algeria in the 1960s. Her family are proud of their integration and achievements in this country: proud to be British, proud to contribute economically and socially, and proud to have done well in their chosen professions. They have thrived, but how many others are prevented from doing so because they are being cut off from their loved ones?

That brings me on to the subject of legal aid. It is now seven years since legal aid was made unavailable for family reunion cases. Although the need for family reunion has greatly increased, the Ministry of Justice has been prevented from bringing justice to refugee children.
The fact that £600 million has been taken from the legal aid budget in the name of austerity has meant more isolated children, left to fend for themselves. Refugee family reunion has been described by the Government as a straightforward immigration matter, but there is clear evidence to show that this is not the case.

In its report, “Not so straightforward”, the British Red Cross argues that a substantial percentage of refugee family reunion cases are highly complex. These cases are in fact anything but straightforward. Yet because of the removal of legal aid, refugees wishing to reunite with their families must apply without legal help or must themselves pay to hire legal advisers. Of course, refugees are rarely able to hire solicitors or legal advisers on their own due to financial insecurity. Instead, they are left to navigate a fiendishly complicated system that sometimes requires DNA evidence and documents that have been long since destroyed in the rush to escape war or torture.

If we are to be the open, civilised and tolerant country that we aspire to be, we urgently need to make refugee family reunion possible. Part of this would include the Ministry of Justice committing to a statutory funding regime for legal assistance for refugee family reunion cases. We cannot pass by on the other side. It is time as a nation that we behaved like the good Samaritan we have been long since destroyed in the rush to escape war or torture.

1.23 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Today marks World Refugee Day. I am proud to represent Brightside and Hillsborough in Sheffield. We have a proud legacy of welcoming and supporting refugees over many decades. My city was the first “city of sanctuary”, established more than a decade ago. We are home to a vulnerable person relocation scheme. I am pleased that our Labour council has recommitted to the scheme until 2020, and hopefully beyond. Yet the scale of the challenge is enormous. Globally, there are 25 million people who are refugees and 68.5 million forcibly displaced from their homes due to war, persecution or environmental catastrophe. Today we are reminded of their plight and suffering, but also recognise the enormous contribution that refugees make here in the UK and beyond.

In March 2018, I stood before the House to deliver a speech in favour of the Second Reading of the private Member’s Bill on family reunion introduced by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil). I explained that I supported the Bill for all the refugee and migrant constituents in Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough, and for their loved ones who were unable to join them in the UK. I talked about my constituent Abdul—a young man from Syria who had settled in Sheffield after completing his degree there. Abdul attempted to rejoin his family in Syria, facing many dangerous situations along the way. It quickly became apparent to him that a reunion in Syria would not be possible due to the ongoing war, so he returned to the UK. On his return, Abdul made every effort to ensure that his family would join him safely in the country he now called his home. He sought help from every agency and organisation available to him to be able to be reunited with his family as quickly as possible.

Despite his efforts, and compliance with the Home Office guidance and procedures, the process proved to be painfully slow and disappointing. It was an arduous journey for Abdul, separated from his elderly parents who had serious health problems for over 11 years while the request for reunion was dealt with.

I am very pleased that after that speech and following my plea to the Minister, Abdul and his family were finally reunited. I met the family a few weeks after they had arrived safely. It is fair to say that it was an emotional day for us all. Both I and his mother cried. I would like to place on record my sincere gratitude to the Immigration Minister, who responded swiftly to my request and was able to assist Abdul and his family.

However, while Home Office policy can be useful in exceptional scenarios like that of Abdul and his family, I am afraid it is not good enough that families are still suffering, proving that the system is not fit for purpose—and the cases continue to come forward.

Only recently I have been approached with another deeply worrying case. Ms Sermani is a Syrian refugee, too, who came to the UK through family reunion to join her husband. She was separated from her children, aged six and 10, while undertaking the extremely dangerous journey to safety. Four years have now passed, and we are aware that the children, now 10 and 14, are currently living in Turkey. Their biological father disappeared during the war, and his whereabouts are not known. It is quite possible that he will have lost his life during the conflict in Syria.

It has been four desperately sad years since Ms Sermani has seen her young children. I cannot begin to imagine what it must feel like to live with so much distance between them. Despite her numerous attempts to bring them to the UK, she has had no success. I have been informed by the Home Office that under current rules, as she came to the UK under her husband’s refugee status, she does not have refugee status in her own right. This means that she cannot bring her children to join her through a family reunion application. Her husband is unable to make the application for them to reunite under his status as he is not their biological father. It is beyond shocking that we are confronted with this situation. Due to Home Office rules, the children will remain in another country without either parent.

I raise Ms Sermani’s case, with her consent, to highlight her personal plight but also the real, practical problems we are facing when dealing with such cases. These arbitrary criteria leave people extremely vulnerable, falling through the cracks of the system. The current bureaucratic barriers are actively keeping parents separated from their children. This is not the Britain that I know and we must do better.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Lady highlights an interesting case. Surely there have to be guiding principles from which the Home Office’s rules stem. The rules have not been written from those principles in a way that allows that person to come here. In the absence of rules, the Home Office should fall back on principles, and the woman being able to be reunited with her children is a case in point.

Gill Furniss: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those remarks. I hope that my speech today will alleviate the process for this family. I hope the Minister is willing to help, and I ask her to reconsider the application of
Ms Sermani in my constituency. I also ask her to look at what more the Government can do to ensure that the guidance allows for greater flexibility in cases that do not fit the criteria directly.

Finally, as we mark World Refugee Day, I urge the Minister to allow the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill to come back to the House, so that we may move forward. It is vital that the House has the opportunity to debate the Bill in Committee as soon as possible. We owe it to the many people who will rely on the passing of the Bill to be reunited with their loved ones.

1.30 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) for bringing the important subject of refugee family reunion to the Chamber—I apologise for not being able to pronounce his constituency; I promise to rectify that.

I commend the Red Cross for the drop-in event it held earlier this week, with refugees from various areas. I was able to meet up with one of my constituents, a young man called Yusuf who is a refugee. He does not sit around waiting for his status—he is helping other refugees and ensuring that they are not isolated. He is a brilliant young man and a brilliant example of how refugees want to get stuck in and involved in this country.

It is important to remember that refugees do not willingly give up their home and community to move to another country. They have been forced to flee, whether by war, violence or persecution, and have had to leave all familiar people and places and deal with a completely new life, learn a new language and set up a new home. We need to understand how dislocated and alone they must be feeling, and we should do everything we can to welcome them and help them settle.

That should include refugees being able to work—a right that is currently denied them as they go through the complex and detailed process of seeking the right to reside here in the UK. I appreciate that we are dealing with family reunion matters, but I need to highlight the need for refugees to have the right to work while they wait the many months or even years that it takes to obtain legal status. Not being able to spend their time usefully employed can have a seriously detrimental effect on their mental health. Madam Deputy Speaker, if you were alone in a foreign country with no money and had to sit and stare at four walls all day, how would you feel? How would anyone here feel? Many refugees want to work. They have the skills that we desperately need here in the UK, so we should be helping them to use those skills to help themselves and the community they find themselves in.

To return to the motion under debate, I support the call for close relatives of all refugees in the UK to be able to reunite with their families. I note with concern that legal aid for family reunion applications was removed in 2013 because it was felt that those applications are straightforward and easy to prepare. In reality, they are far from straightforward—they are difficult for any refugee to deal with, especially in a language they are not familiar with. Legal aid for these applications is available in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and in the interests of fairness, I argue that it should be reinstated in England and Wales.

Currently children who have been granted refugee status in the UK are not allowed to bring their close family to join them in the same way that an adult can. That is an unfair and discriminatory practice on the grounds of age.

In Newport West, we have a diverse mix of people from all across the globe, and we have always welcomed the stranger. However, refugees who arrive in Newport are often disoriented and need help to navigate their way through bureaucratic processes and the practical business of settling down in a foreign land. We are fortunate to have an organisation called The Sanctuary, which provides a welcome and support for refugees in Newport. The project grew out of a desire to support a few Eritrean women who started attending Bethel Community Church in the centre of the city, but it now has its own property and staff, who provide a fantastic service to refugees and asylum seekers across Newport.

The Sanctuary provides practical help and support by providing English classes, advocacy support, mother and toddler groups and an after-school youth club, which provides a safe place for unaccompanied minors. I am so pleased that refugees in Newport West can access the services and support at The Sanctuary. The staff there play an important role in ensuring that refugees settle and integrate into our community and can play a full part in our city.

It is important that the Government act to ensure that close relatives of all refugees in the UK are able to reunite with their families in the UK, and I add my voice to the call for these reforms to be introduced swiftly and without delay.

1.34 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always good to have the opportunity to speak about these matters. I thank the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)—I hope that is the right pronunciation; I have been practising it for the last 15 minutes. The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) said she was challenged by it, and so was I. The hon. Gentleman has been a great advocate from the very beginning, and he deserves a lot of credit for his leadership on this matter. He has the support of a movement of MPs from all parties for what he is trying to secure.

I am pleased to see the Minister in her place. Just a few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to meet her in my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, and we discussed some of the things that her Department is doing. I thank her for the way she responded to the issues we brought to her attention and for what her Department is doing. I also thank her for giving me the opportunity to name some of the refugees whose cases are in the system. All MPs probably take advantage of the opportunity of meeting her to drop into conversation the name of someone whose case we feel should be looked at urgently.

I firmly believe that, as Members of Parliament, we have a solemn duty to be a voice for the voiceless and to speak out for all those who are oppressed, regardless of their nationality, race, colour or creed. For that reason, I am delighted that Members of this House have the
We are seeing record levels of displacement globally, with more than 70 million people displaced worldwide—70 million. Sometimes numbers are bandied around, and we do not know how to process them, so let me put it another way. We are dealing with a situation where the entire population of Ireland and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are forced out of their homes. Imagine driving down London's streets with nobody there—that is what it means.

Something must be done to tackle this situation, and to do that, we need to tackle all the root causes. That is why I would like to discuss one of the biggest drivers of displacement: the persecution of religious and belief minorities and systematic violations of the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief. I thank the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar for referring to the persecution of Christians. In a report entitled “The Persecution of Christians and Global Displacement”, Open Doors stated that religious persecution was a “dangerously underestimated” factor behind some people's decision to flee their home. The charity estimated that around half of Syria’s 1.7 million Christians have left their country due to a combination of conflict and religious persecution.

When the Minister and I met a few weeks ago, I mentioned that six Syrian families have been relocated to my constituency of Strangford, and particularly Newtownards. That is an excellent Government scheme, and I commend them for that, but it is only part of the success story. Those families are traumatised and under pressure. They have come to a strange town, and not all of them can speak the language; the children can learn it quickly, but their parents cannot. I met all the families through The Link charity and St Aiden's Presbyterian church in Newtownards. It was wonderful to see the community come together through their churches and their faith. These are Christian families who had to leave Syria—some of the 1.7 million people who were displaced—and come to Newtownards. The community got together, with the support of Government, to secure them housing, access to hospital care and education for their children and to try to get them employment. It always encourages me greatly as the Member for Strangford to see just how generous people are when it comes to making things happen.

We see a similar pattern in Iraq, where the numbers of Christians have fallen dramatically due to religious persecution. It is estimated that there were approximately 1.5 million Christians there in 2003, but now numbers are in the hundreds of thousands. The assessment is that there are now approximately 250,000 Christians.

As chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, I also speak out on behalf of many non-Christians who fled their homes because it was not possible to practise, change or give up their faith or belief without suffering discrimination or, in many cases, extreme violence. For example, there are an estimated 1.1 million Rohingya Muslims in Bangladesh due to displacement by the brutal onslaught of the Burmese military. We have spoken about that in this Chamber before, and it really hurts me—it hurts us all here—when we have to listen to horrific stories of brutality, violence, sexual abuse, physical abuse and the murder of loved ones.

Although there have inevitably been difficulties and tensions, it is deeply humbling to reflect on the kindness with which a country with extremely limited resources such as Bangladesh has welcomed those in desperate need. On this World Refugee Day, I think it is worth asking ourselves: would we have the same courage and would we have the same compassion to do the same? Bangladesh is a very poor country, but it has welcomed those people in—the 1.1 million Rohingya. It is also worth asking ourselves if the UK and the international community truly have done everything in our power to tackle this issue.

Apart from Myanmar and the middle east, there are many other parts of the world where huge numbers have been displaced due to religious persecution. For example, the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria has displaced over 2 million people. For this reason, promoting freedom of religious belief and encouraging peaceful co-existence between different religious communities is vital to any long-term solutions for the refugee crisis.

It is also why policy development for these two areas should not be totally separate; we have to marry those two together. On this point, I would like to congratulate the Home Office—I did it earlier, and I want to reiterate it—on its development of a new training module for asylum caseworkers to help them better assess applications made on the grounds of religion or belief-based persecution. I understand that all caseworkers will have received this training by the end of June—that was confirmed at the meeting—and I commend the Government for their efforts. Let us give credit where credit is due, which I think it is important to do in any debate we have in this House. This is an important step, which I hope will go some way to addressing the disproportionately low numbers of religious or belief minority refugees who have been granted asylum by the United Kingdom.

Figures obtained by the Barnabas Fund under a freedom of information request show that out of some 4,850 Syrian refugees accepted for resettlement by the Home Office in 2017, only 11 were Christian. Again, I would just say that we have over half of them in Newtownards. This is only 0.2% of all the Syrian refugees accepted by the UK. I know that the Government have been very generous, but may I very gently say that I would have liked to see a wee bit more focus on Christian refugees so that they get an equal opportunity of being accepted?

In January, the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins)—he was in earlier on, but is away just now—and the hon. Members for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) visited Lebanon, with the support of Aid to the Church in Need, to investigate why so few religious minority refugees were being referred by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Can the Minister give us some response to that, although it is not her responsibility directly, so that we can hear what discussions have taken place?

Several issues were discussed during the trip, but one of the principal concerns was that there seem to be communication issues between the UNHCR and religious minority refugees. We know that through the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, as well as through the Barnabas Fund, Open Doors and...
Release International, which are all coming back with the same thing. Nearly all the refugees whom the delegation met were unclear about their rights and UNHCR’s available support, leading to a feeling that the UNHCR was not for them—that is very worrying—and that they should seek support elsewhere. The UNHCR has to realise that it is for everyone, and let us make sure that this is rammed home today.

It is important to note that the UNHCR is under enormous pressure, which I understand and respect, and that it is underfunded, which I understand as well, and overworked, so this is not intended as a criticism. I am trying to highlight areas where the United Kingdom and the UNHCR might be able to work together to improve the situation.

I congratulate the Home Office on the 5,806 family reunion visas granted in 2018, and I add my name to the call for the Government to introduce reforms to family reunion rules to ensure that the close relatives of all refugees in the UK have safe and legal pathways to unite with their families in the UK.

The six families that have been integrated among the communities in Newtownards and have done extremely well also have other relatives, as the Minister knows, who are still detained in and unable to get out of Syria. These are family members, so when it comes to the title of this debate—“Refugee family reunion” is what it says up there on the Annunciator and on the Order Papers in front of us—this is about making sure that the families who have also sought asylum can get asylum alongside their families. Every one of us has families, and knows how important it is to have family. Almost the only thing that keeps us sane is our family and it is really good to have that, but much more so for those refugees to have their families and to have them close.

1.45 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP) I, too, start by paying a massive tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), first, for securing this debate, but secondly, for his relentless pursuit of reform of the family reunion rules in the face of what hon. Members have rightly described as pretty shabby Government behaviour in relation to his private Member’s Bill. I dare say there were other topics he could have picked for his Bill that would have made him even more popular among the citizens of the Outer Hebrides, if that was possible, but he chose this one because he believes passionately in it. He has thrown himself into this cause heart and soul, and I thank him for doing so. More generally, we have had some incredibly powerful and measured speeches from across the Chamber, so I thank all hon. Members for their contributions.

This debate and the motion tabled about many of those who apply to come to the UK under the expanded rules that we seek through this debate. Many of these organisations have been in Parliament this week, either hosting or attending Refugee Week events. We have had Play for Progress, which my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) hosted. I was lucky enough to host René Cassin, and we have had the International Red Cross, the International Observatory of Human Rights and many more. I would like to take this chance to pay particular tribute to the Scottish Refugee Council, which does tremendous work day in, day out. It is a source of lots of information and ideas for me, and I wish it well as it launches its own refugee festival today.

Finally on the subject of Refugee Week, like the hon. Member for Strangford, I am pleased to see the Minister for Immigration here today because—and this may cause shockwaves in the Chamber—I also want to commend her and the Home Office for what they have announced this week about refugee resettlement. As the hon. Gentleman has said, the Syrian vulnerable persons scheme has been a tremendous success, and it is excellent that the experience and expertise gained in operating that system, offering safety to 20,000 vulnerable Syrians by 2020, will not suddenly become redundant, but instead be put to greater use in a broader resettlement scheme thereafter. As an Opposition spokesperson, it would be remiss of me not to suggest that the Government might go further both on numbers and in giving a longer-term commitment, but it is a very welcome step in the right direction, and I thank the Minister and her Department for that.

The reason why resettlement is more important than ever is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar and the hon. Member for Strangford have said, that the global displacement of people has reached record levels. Just yesterday, the UNHCR reported that the population of displaced citizens has now reached 70.8 million people, and 25.9 million of them are refugees, which is almost double the number from a decade ago. The UNHCR estimates that 1.4 million refugees need to be resettled, but last year only 81,300 places were offered by 29 states—a gap of 90% that is getting bigger rather than smaller. Every place we can offer truly counts.

It is often said in this Chamber, and it has been said again today, that we have a strong track record of offering sanctuary to refugees, and I agree, although the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) was quite right to point out some of the challenges posed by certain political and tabloid voices, and the need for all of us to be leaders in defending the rights of refugees. However, we should not see this simply as an act of charity, because this country does benefit too. We must also say thank you to our refugee community for the massive contribution they make in all walks of life.

World Refugee Day is also a good time to thank all the organisations and individuals up and down the UK that work relentlessly to support refugees and campaign on their behalf. As we have heard, many of these organisations have been in Parliament this week, either hosting or attending Refugee Week events. We have had Play for Progress, which my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar hosted. I was lucky enough to host René Cassin, and we have had the International Red Cross, the International Observatory of Human Rights and many more. I would like to take this chance to pay particular tribute to the Scottish Refugee Council, which does tremendous work day in, day out. It is a source of lots of information and ideas for me, and I wish it well as it launches its own refugee festival today.

Thank you.
the Bill—are themselves refugees, and it makes sense for them to be alongside their refugee families in the UK, rather than isolated in refugee camps. More fundamentally, however, family reunion is about the rights of those refugees who are already here. Refugee status will never be fully effective unless it comes with all those rights that are essential to allow a person to rebuild their life. The convention relating to the status of refugees ensures that refugees can work, study, and access housing and social security on the same basis as the host country’s citizens.

What could be more essential for someone trying to rebuild their life than the presence of their family? As the hon. Member for Strangford said, the Government do allow family reunion, and last year there were 5,806 cases of partners and children who were able to join refugees here. We welcome that, but our refugee family reunion rules remain more restrictive than international best practice, and more restrictive than leading refugee organisations would wish.

As the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) rightly said, the reforms in my hon. Friend’s Bill are modest, and they are also reasonable for all the reasons that have been set out today and in numerous debates beforehand. How can it ever be right that someone’s 18-year-old daughter cannot join her refugee parents here, but her 17 and 15-year-old siblings can? How can we say to refugee children living among us in the UK that even though they know where their parents are, we will not allow them to come here?

In response to such questions, the Government generally point to alternative routes in the immigration rules, but as everyone knows, those alternatives are more complicated, much more restrictive, and they come with far fewer rights than refugee family reunion. As the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) said, it is great that now and again there are exceptional cases and exceptional results are granted, but we want all refugees in the circumstances set out in the Bill to be able to access refugee family reunion rules in a straightforward manner.

In response to what the Home Affairs Committee called the “perverse” rule that stops children sponsoring their parents to come in under family reunion rules, the Home Office plays the “pull factor” card—an argument I hate. As the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said, that argument is not founded on evidence, and it runs contrary to everything that leading international refugee organisations tell us. To my mind, it is also totally immoral because when looked at from a different angle, it essentially makes an example of refugee children who are already here. It says to refugee children, “We must ensure that you live separately from your parents so as to discourage others from coming here”, which is a brutal way for any Department to operate.

Such reasoning is also deeply flawed. If I had fled my country of origin and discovered that my child had ended up as a refugee in a third country, I would move heaven and earth to join them there. If I could not do it through family reunion rules, I would pay people smugglers or buy a dinghy to do it myself. Refusing to recognise the right of child refugees to sponsor their parents does not and can’t stop people using unsafe illegal routes—on the contrary, it forces more people to use them—and my hon. Friend’s Bill is about creating safe, legal alternatives.

The hon. Members for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), and for Newport West (Ruth Jones) raised the issue of legal aid, which is also covered by my hon. Friend’s Bill. I know from my experience as an immigration solicitor how complicated those applications can sometimes be. The issue is set out in an excellent report entitled “Not so straightforward” by the British Red Cross, which notes “the need for qualified legal support in refugee family reunion”.

People can still get that support in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and they should have it in England and Wales as well.

My hon. Friend has won this argument and he won the vote last year, and it is disgraceful that the Government are not honouring and implementing the will of the House. It is not clear whether the Bill is being blocked by the Home Office or the Treasury or—more likely—by the Whips and business managers.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Is it particularly frustrating that the Government are not willing to provide time for our hon. Friend’s Bill to progress, given how much time is available? Nothing else of any substance is happening, and with the greatest of respect to the next Backbench Business debate, if Members keep that going until 5 o’clock we will be quite impressed. Time and capacity is available, and many other private Member’s Bills are also not getting the light of day that they deserve.

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. There is enough time for a five-day debate on the Bill.

Andy Slaughter: I fully intend to keep the next debate going until 5 o’clock, and I hope that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will join me in that ambition.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): That is also subject to the Chair’s agreement.

Stuart C. McDonald: I certainly do not doubt their ability to do that. Mr Deputy Speaker. In conclusion, the continued blocking of this Bill is disrespectful to Parliament, but more importantly it is disrespectful and damaging to our refugee community. A fitting conclusion to Refugee Week would be for the Government to listen and to reunite more families, which is exactly the instruction that Parliament has given.

1.55 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) on securing this debate on World Refugee Day and on his excellent speech, and I thank all those who have contributed to this excellent debate. On this special day I thank and acknowledge the many charities that work with refugees, including Amnesty International, Oxfam, the Refugee Council, the Red Cross and the many other groups, including in my city, that have worked for decades to help refugees. The hon. Gentleman has been a consistent campaigner for refugee family reunion. I was extremely happy to speak on Second Reading of his private Member’s Bill, and in his debate during Refugee Week last year. The Government’s paralysis makes this feel like groundhog day.
I believe a better life for themselves, which must include being surrounded by their family.

The Labour party believes in the right to a family life. As long as there exist the “push factors” of war, conflict and violence, children will be forced to leave their homes and become separated from their families. It is our humanitarian duty to ensure that any child who makes it to our shores has the best shot at making a better life for themselves, which must include being surrounded by their family.

I was very happy to hear Members’ emphasis on the importance of legal aid in refugee family reunion cases. We recently had a major victory of unaccompanied and separated children coming back into the scope of legal aid. The fact that they were ever excluded is a testament to how far the Government went with their swingeing cuts to legal aid and the punitive hostile environment. I congratulate the Children’s Society on its significant victory.

During the passage of the Immigration Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill, Labour has called for legal aid to be reinstated for early legal advice for all immigration matters. The Home Office often claims that legal aid is not necessary to complete an immigration application, but that is simply not the case, especially for children, those who do not speak the language, or people who are otherwise very vulnerable. Recent figures show that over half of all immigration appeals are now successful. That is shockingly high and shows how important court cases are in holding the Government to account on immigration. Justice is meaningless if people do not have the means to claim it, and legal aid is a fundamental part of enabling people to access justice.

We know that early access to legal aid helps to save money in the long run, as people are less likely to end up in needless court hearings and appeals.

In conclusion, the Minister has been saying for over a year that she will take a close look at family reunion rules, but we have yet to see any concrete progress. The Government do not even need legislation to get these changes passed. It is in the Home Secretary’s gift, under the immigration rules, to change the eligibility for family reunion and ensure refugees do not spend another birthday, Christmas or Eid separated from their relatives. I hope the Minister will commit to that today.

2.2 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Mr Deputy Speaker, I may crave your indulgence for a bit more time than was originally anticipated, because there has been a lot of content in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) on securing this important debate on refugee family reunion. I welcome his ongoing dedication to the issue, and his insight and passionate contribution this afternoon. Indeed, we saw that from Members across the House during the debate.

It is of course apposite that we are discussing this issue on World Refugee Day and during Refugee week, as we celebrate the important contribution refugees make as they rebuild their lives in the UK. We have a proud history of providing protection to those who need it, honouring our international commitments under the refugee convention and the European convention on human rights. In the year ending March 2019, we granted refugee status or another form of protection to over 17,000 people, an increase of over 20% on the previous 12 months. Over that same period, we also issued about 5,700 visas to family members of refugees in the UK.

As many will be aware, earlier this week the Government reaffirmed their ongoing commitment to refugee resettlement. We are on track to deliver our current commitments to 2020 and have now resettled nearly 40,000 people around the world forced from their homes and about 25 million refugees. The UK’s resettlement schemes are an integral component of our humanitarian response to that challenge, addressing the needs of some of the most vulnerable refugees, and providing safe and legal routes for tens of thousands of people to start new lives here. In every year since 2016, the UK resettled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU member state.

As many will be aware, earlier this week the Government reaffirmed their ongoing commitment to refugee resettlement. We are on track to deliver our current commitments to 2020 and have now resettled nearly
16,000 refugees under our vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. Importantly, from 2020—I have been particularly keen on this—we will consolidate our biggest resettlement routes in a single new global scheme, under which we will aim to resettle in the region of 5,000 of the world’s most vulnerable refugees in the first year of operation. More than half of those resettled under our existing programmes are children, the majority of whom have been resettled with their families. I expect that to continue.

A key part of the new resettlement offer will be that those resettled through our community sponsorship and mandate routes will be in addition to our yearly, global commitment. While numbers have historically been small, we intend to explore ways to maximise the contributions of both these routes. The mandate resettlement scheme resettles recognised refugees who have a close family member in the UK who is willing to accommodate them. Going forward, I will look at options to adjust the scope of those eligible to allow for a higher uptake in referrals for resettlement from UNHCR.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) made reference to being the parent of grown-up children who are now independent of him. I can honestly say I have made reference to being the parent of grown-up children in Bradford. It focuses determinedly on giving people interview experience and finding them appropriate clothing to wear to interviews, help with English, help with CVs and help into work.

I will now turn to the comments made by Back-Bench Members, because they have been insightful and useful to this debate. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar spoke about his encounter with Yohannes and the importance of work in giving them a route to integration. I have met employers who have played their part, too.

It is important to draw a distinction between those who are here seeking asylum and those who are here as refugees already with status. I will freely admit that the proportion of those who have status and are in work is still woefully low. We are at a time of incredibly high immigration. It has been an interesting and challenging debate over the past 18 months, but we need to move away from speaking in tabloid headlines.

The Minister is making some very powerful points. As I was trying to hint at, or perhaps more than hint at, does she believe that all leaders, including us—as MPs, we are leaders—and particularly, leaders of parties need to demonstrate in their language and behaviour that such language is unacceptable?

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) gave a very wide-ranging speech and I agreed with much of it. She spoke of the dreadful language use in 2016. I am always reminded of a poster I used to drive past on the A3. I am quite ashamed to repeat the words, but I will do so. It simply said, “The Turks are coming”. I have always sought in this role to be careful and measured about the language I use, and to bring a very human tone to the debate around immigration. It has been an interesting and challenging debate over the past 18 months, but we need to move away from speaking in tabloid headlines.

The Minister is making some very powerful points. As I was trying to hint at, or perhaps more than hint at, does she believe that all leaders, including us—as MPs, we are leaders—and particularly, leaders of parties need to demonstrate in their language and behaviour that such language is unacceptable?

I absolutely agree and that applies not just here, but in other Parliaments around the globe, and this is about not just language, but tone.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) spoke about the Reverend Davidson and the children brought here as part of the Kindertransport. Several months ago, I met Vera Schaufeld, who was a Kindertransport child. She had an immense impact on me and I am very much aware of the incredible work of the noble Lord Dubs in the other House, who has been an inspiration to many of us.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) spoke about the Dubs amendment, and I remind him of one point. While we were discussing that amendment, he cited the figure of 3,000, but the Government were always clear that we would discuss the matter with local authorities and find common ground about the number of places that they had available. The final figure that was settled on was 480. We have always refused to give a running commentary on how we are doing on numbers, but it is important to reflect that at the start of 2018 we changed the qualifying date so that more transfers would be possible. At the end of last year, we removed the date altogether, so that we could continue our work with France, Greece and Italy to meet that commitment.

Of course, there is still the challenge of best interests tests, where children must go through the process with the UNHCR. Sometimes that is not as swift as either I or the UNHCR would like.
The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) spoke about Abdul, who had settled in her constituency, and the heartwarming story that he had been reunited with his family. She said some very kind words about me, as did various other Members. It almost felt like this was some sort of swansong at the Dispatch Box, but I reassure hon. Members that the Scottish National party has called an Opposition day debate on immigration next week and some other Scottish colleagues will see me return to Westminster Hall the week after—I am not quite gone yet.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned resettlement in Strangford and the important role of faith communities. I am always struck by that, and it is not simply Christian communities. In Lambeth this week, I saw a number of resettled refugees, including one young Muslim woman from Syria who had been resettled in an apartment in the synagogue. It was an absolutely brilliant example of how faiths are working together. I am absolutely delighted to hear tales such as that, and what has really been impressed on me over the last year is the very important role of the faith communities, and indeed, of all those involved in community sponsorship, which has been such an important part of our schemes.

Let me turn briefly to the policy background, because I am sure that I am about to run out of time. I reassure hon. Members that we recognise the importance of family reunion, and our policy provides safe and legal routes to bring families together. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough cited a particular case, but over the past five years we have granted over 26,000 family reunion visas to family members of refugees in the UK. There are also separate provisions in the rules that allow extended family to sponsor children to come here. Where there are serious and compelling circumstances, refugees can sponsor adult dependent relatives living overseas to join them when, owing to age, illness or disability, that person requires long-term personal care that can be provided only by relatives in the UK.

Child sponsors is an incredibly controversial issue and I am sure that it will provoke Members into seeking to intervene on me. It is important that we maintain the safety of children. Over the last six months or so, I have been really struck by the numbers of perilous journeys that have been made across the channel. In very many instances, children have been on board wholly unsuitable craft in the busiest shipping lane in the world. We know that those people have fallen prey to organised crime gangs and people smugglers and that they have paid enormous sums of money to have their lives put at risk. I am sympathetic to the view that we should carefully consider how we might expand our family reunion schemes, but I do not wish to do anything that sees yet more people and yet more children put in those terrible situations. We know that they are exploited by organised crime, and while we work hard with our colleagues here and abroad to ensure that there are arrests and convictions, it is an incredibly dreadful situation that we must seek to contend with.

Stuart C. McDonald: Everybody across the House wants to avoid people having to turn to people smugglers to get anywhere around the globe, but the point made by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) was that the rules, as they stand, force parents to turn to people smugglers if they are going to be able to join their family in the United Kingdom. It is having the opposite impact to what the Minister would like.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention—the Whip is smiling at me. I just want to make the point, in slight defence of myself, that I am not blocking the Bill. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar knows that he must continue to persist with business managers, as I am sure he will.

In conclusion, I thank Members for their insightful and thought-provoking contributions. I will—I hope—continue to reflect on them in considering the Government’s approach on this going forward. I look forward to further debate on these points and others with hon. Members and stakeholders, who have made such an important contribution.

2.15 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I welcome the tone of this debate; it has been absolutely fantastic. By comparison with the debate on 16 March last year, there have been no voices speaking against or running up false flags. We are trying to do something that is very unambitious—we are only trying to catch up with 25 other European countries that have no difficulty operating the modest change that we are trying to bring in. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) said, people are using dinghies and so on to cross the channel because they cannot get here legally, and we are just trying to open up the legal avenues.

I thank the many Members who have contributed, including the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill); I thank him for his knowledge, what he added to the debate and what he told us about Chislehurst and his honourable past. The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) gave a great, wide-ranging speech. The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) pointed out that we should not have any need for this debate. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) related the story of his trip to the jungle. I mentioned in my speech that when we meet people, it opens up another avenue of thought. People are in the jungle because they have changed their religion—in the instance he raised, they had become Christian—and have to escape for the protection of their own lives.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) made a very interesting point about the case that she is dealing with involving the woman who cannot bring her children over, and I hope that the Home Office will have been listening. I do not think I have interacted with the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) before, but she is certainly following in the footsteps of the great Paul Flynn, who was a friend of mine in the House, and I welcome the humanitarian note that she struck. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who demonstrated his excellent Gaelic pronunciation, gave a speech, again, driven by his humanity.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East for making very good points, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for his intervention, in which he said that we have the time in this Parliament
for a lot of things to happen. I take the Minister’s point about an instruction to the business managers, who are just a few yards outside the door, to enable this to happen. I hope that the business managers in the Conservative Whips Office are listening to this microphone and making sure that that happens.

I want to mention Jalal from Afghanistan, who spoke at our event on Tuesday about what it is like being a young refugee. He spoke very well. I think, his third or fourth language, including about the difficulties that young men, in particular, face and how they can fall through the gaps. There is a lot to be done and yet to do, but we are only trying to do something very little at the moment.

Finally, I appreciate Members’ very good efforts to say the name of my constituency. I sometimes do not find it easy to say the name of Welsh constituencies, but that gives us a little reminder, by serendipity, of the language challenge that is presented to many refugees. We only have to learn two or three words to say “Na h-Eileanan an Iar” but most Members here did it very well, albeit with concentration. I thank them for that and for their contributions, and I will let you move on, Mr Deputy Speaker, as I see that you are very anxious to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): That was the longest two minutes I have ever seen.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House notes that 20 June is World Refugee Day; further notes that, with record levels of global displacement across the world, many refugee families have been separated by war and persecution; welcomes that in 2018 the UK granted 5,806 family reunion visas to partners and children of refugees in the UK; and calls on the Government to introduce reforms to family reunion rules to ensure that the close relatives of all refugees in the UK have safe and legal pathways to reunite with their families in the UK.
**Bambos Charalambous**: That is an excellent point. It typifies the piecemeal way in which the closures have been implemented. The process has not been joined up. I believe that it has been driven by cost-cutting measures rather than an overarching view. I shall say more about that later.

According to the Law Society, there are now no youth courts in the boroughs of Southwark, Lewisham or Greenwich. All the cases from those boroughs now go to Bromley youth court. The four boroughs have a higher total population than the cities of Leeds and Manchester combined, yet they have to make do with one youth court for all their needs.

The closure of 258 courts over the past nine years has been nothing less than shambolic. It is not part of any master plan, but is rather a slavish knee-jerk response to the Treasury’s demands for more cuts from the Ministry of Justice. Worse still, it has taken no account of the impact on disadvantaged people and people on low incomes, who are disproportionately affected by the closures. That brings me to my second point. According to the Magistrates Association, since 2010 more than half the 323 magistrates courts—a total of 162—have closed. In some cases, defendants, witnesses, police, lawyers and magistrates are now travelling 50 miles to obtain local justice. I do not believe for one minute that the cost of making all those court users travel such distances has been factored into any court closure programme.

When the closure programmes began in 2010, the initial proposal behind the closures was that 90% of all court users would be able to reach the court within one hour. Since then, the goalsposts have moved, and the overwhelming majority of court users are expected to reach the court by public transport between the hours of 7.30 am and 7.30 pm.

The Government have completed no equality assessment of the impact on those with protected characteristics, the disadvantaged and people with low incomes. In its evidence to the Justice Committee in March 2019, the Equality and Human Rights Commission stated that it had been told by Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service that it did not hold comprehensive data on court users on which to assess the impact of court closures, but that instead it compared the local population with the regional population to establish whether certain groups were over-represented. No account has been taken of the cost of travelling by public transport at peak times, or the need for additional childcare costs to accommodate longer journey times.

The only data that has been produced on this issue is from the University of Suffolk, suggesting that another impact of long travel times could be the non-attendance of defendants. In February this year, the *Grimsby Telegraph* ran a story about the failure of a staggering 79 defendants to attend Grimsby magistrates court in the month of January 2019. One explanation given by the paper was that since the closure of Scunthorpe magistrates court, 27.5 miles away, many of the defendants had been unable to afford the train fare. If they were travelling today before 9 am, it would cost them £15.80 one way—a huge amount for someone on universal credit to pay to go to court. In cases of non-attendance at a hearing, the magistrates must issue a warrant for the defendants’ arrest and they will be brought to court by the police, who will have used valuable time and resources as a result.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): Will the defendant give way? [Laughter.] I am so sorry for calling the hon. Gentleman a defendant. He is not a defendant at all; he is an honourable and upstanding Member of the House.

The hon. Gentleman has made an important point about defendants attending court, and he has made an important point about travel costs. However, we must keep our feet on the ground. If acquitted, the defendant will ordinarily be entitled to the reimbursement of his travel costs. Only guilty defendants will be required to pay. Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that that, too, is an important point?

**Bambos Charalambous**: I plead not guilty to being a defendant.

While what the hon. Gentleman has said may be the case, the fact remains that those costs are incurred initially by the person making the journey, which causes hardship in the short term.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Is it not also true that people often do not know exactly what the procedures are and are deterred by uncertainty about the costs that they will face?

**Bambos Charalambous**: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Many people do not obtain the legal advice that they need to make such informed decisions, and that, too, is part of the problem.

**Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The hon. Gentleman made a wrong career move at some point. [Laughter.] At the risk of attempting to cross-examine him, may I suggest that the answer to that point might be that, while it is perfectly true that the acquitted defendants will be entitled to apply for the return of their costs, there is a broader public interest in bringing the guilty defendants to court so that they can be convicted and justice can thereby be done?

**Bambos Charalambous**: The hon. Gentleman has made an excellent point. He is quite right: that is indeed the case.

Women’s Aid has highlighted that fact that, in rural areas in particular, survivors of domestic abuse must travel long distances to reach family courts. Apart from the question of childcare arrangements and the cost of travel, there is a serious safety concern, as the perpetrators of the abuse may be travelling on the same route at the same time, owing to the infrequency of public transport services in those areas. That has the potential to make an already stressful and harrowing experience even worse. I note that Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service has confirmed that it is considering whether to pay for taxis to ferry defendants and witnesses from the most remote parts of the country to hearings. This just goes to demonstrate that little or no consideration has been given to the impact of court closures on court users.

As alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), there is a court modernisation programme and most people are broadly supportive of this £1.2 billion programme and making best use of technology to help alleviate the pressures on courts and tribunals, but this is not the panacea for court closures. There are those who will be digitally excluded due to difficulty in reading or writing, but even those who can navigate their way through the technology will still need proper advice.
[Bambos Charalambous]

Many litigants in person do not understand the legalities in their case. This can lead to unintended consequences such as pleading guilty to something they have a defence to, or choosing a path that may lead to them being penalised with costs. The cuts to legal aid funding and the lack of access to legal advice leads to a raw deal for some. They should be getting justice. The Public Accounts Committee said in its report “Transforming courts and tribunals” that “without sufficient access to legal advice, people could make uninformed and inappropriate decisions about how to plead, and that the roll-out of virtual hearings could introduce bias and lead to unfair outcomes.”

Video hearings are not suitable for all cases because the informality of giving evidence by video could result in adverse inferences being taken about a person’s demeanour, which would not be the case if that evidence was being given face to face.

Some courts are not even ready to deal with court modernisation. Court No. 1 in Taunton only has one plug socket on the lawyers’ bench, making it impossible for all lawyers present to charge their laptops. Wi-fi is also poor or non-existent in some courts.

The reality is that HMCTS has no overarching vision of what it expects courts and tribunals to look like in the future. Unless it provides data to make it possible to make a robust assessment of the equality impacts of current court closures, it should cease closing courts.

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend is talking about the impact of court closures on access to justice. If we look in a cumulative way at all the different cuts—for example, to legal aid—as well as what he is describing now, we see that the lack of access to justice that many of our constituents are facing is profound. Does he agree that this is a real indictment and shows the impact of this Government’s policies on the justice system?

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. She is certainly right about the cumulative effect of cuts to legal aid and court closures making it harder for the most disadvantaged to access justice as they should be able to.

Local justice and fairness and equality before the law need to apply to everyone equally. The court closures programme has fundamentally failed and skewed things against those on low incomes and the disadvantaged. This has to stop and has to stop now: justice must be for everyone, not just those who can afford it.

2.33 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), my fellow Justice Committee member, and I congratulate him on securing this debate on a very important topic. I was happy to have been a supporter of his application for the debate, and I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for giving us this opportunity.

Access to justice is a fundamental issue. It is not just a transaction issue between the parties to a case; it is fundamental to the running of a civilised society. It ought to be regarded as not just a transactional matter between individuals either, but as something that is the warp and woof of the checks and balances that make our society work. Therefore, the right to have access to justice is a fundamental civic right of every individual and it is important that we aim to produce a system that achieves that without unreasonable obstacles.

Of course, we are obliged to garner public funds with care and make sure they are spent wisely, but it is equally important that the state has an obligation to provide an accessible justice system as part of its duties to protect its citizens. Therefore, we perhaps need to take a step back and look at what we do in relation to courts and other justice issues in the context of that overarching principle.

The issue of court closures has been of real concern to Members in all parts of the House, and for legitimate reasons. I do not say that every court closure is an unreasonable step, and I do not say that every court that was in existence when I started at the Bar is viable now. I appeared in some pretty unsatisfactory old magistrates courts and county courts up and down the country, where there was no means of separating witnesses from defendants for example. In some cases there might have been victims of crime present, and the facilities for having a conference with a client in any sort of confidentiality were non-existent. I actually had a conference in a lavatory once in an old magistrates court in East Anglia because there was nowhere else where we could not be heard by either the prosecutor or prosecution witnesses. It was pouring with rain outside so that seemed to be the easiest way to do it—I did not charge any extra, not even a penny. Courts like that should not be in use.

So there are good examples of where it was right to have got rid of old and inappropriate stock, because people who go to court as witnesses and as parties to civil proceedings are entitled to a basic level of service. Therefore, some rationalisation is legitimate and sensible but it must be balanced against the need for proper accessibility and to maintain, particularly in criminal, but also in family and civil, proceedings, a sense of local justice. I will return to that.

The courts rationalisation programme is often seen as part of a broader programme of court modernisation and rationalisation. As I have said, I do not have a problem with the overall thrust of that programme, which was endorsed by the Lord Chancellor, the Lord Chief Justice and the Senior President of Tribunals. It is based upon sound principles. It stems from two significant reports by distinguished judges: Lord Briggs’s report into civil procedure, and the report of Lord Justice Leveson—Sir Brian Leveson—in relation to criminal procedure. May I say in passing that both of those judges have given very great service to our judiciary? Lord Briggs later went to the Supreme Court and Sir Brian Leveson retires tomorrow as president of the Queen’s Bench Division. I pay tribute to the work he did; he has been one of the exceptional criminal jurists and criminal judges and practitioners of our generation, and the country as a whole owes Sir Brian a very great debt for his public service.

So these were well-founded principles and they had good judicial input into their design. The problem is that, as many witnesses have told the Justice Committee in the course of inquiries into the programme and related topics, there is concern that the outworking of that programme places more emphasis than it should on costs and savings rather than on improving services for parties to the hearing and the court user.
The chairman of the Magistrates Association, Mr John Bache, gave evidence to our Committee only a few weeks ago to the effect that, of course, there is always a balance to be struck—we want both fairness and efficiency in a justice system; nobody wants only one or the other. However, he and his members are concerned that in some cases at present the balance tips too far towards efficiency at the cost of fairness, and that cannot be the right way around.

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. In the course of this debate we have talked about convenience for defendants and witnesses, but we ought not also to consider convenience for magistrates? Magistrates give of their time to help in the community and perform an invaluable role, but if they have to travel huge distances that will inevitably provide a disincentive. The Government should be very alive to that in making these changes.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and as he will know the Committee, of which he was for a time a distinguished member and for whose work I am very grateful, recently published a report into the magistracy that deals with a number of challenges facing the magistracy. It is convenient that I refer to this point, given that 90-odd% of criminal cases are dealt with by magistrates, who, as he says, are unpaid—they are volunteers; they are the bedrock of the criminal justice system. The point of a magistrates system is that they are lay people—mini juries, in effect—delivering local justice. Defendants are thereby judged by one’s peers, not only in the sense of one’s status in society, but in the sense that they come broadly from the community from which they themselves come.

That has always been fundamental to our system in criminal work. The difficulty has been the number of pressures on the recruitment of magistrates, and one, which was identified to us by the Magistrates Association and other witnesses, is the effect of court closures. Where they become as drastic as they have in some cases, they act as a disincentive to magistrates to continue on the bench, as travel times are much longer than they were. They can also skewer recruitment patterns for new magistrates. A number of studies indicate that the drop-out rate for magistrates in rural areas, where courts often sit only in the county town, is more marked and that there is a tendency in areas where the court has moved to an urban centre for magistrates to be recruited predominantly from the surrounding town areas rather than the rural areas.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I wonder if my hon. Friend remembers, as I do, the very powerful evidence we heard from Welsh magistrates in our work on the Justice Select Committee about the difficulties they are having recruiting magistrates in rural parts of Wales.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The evidence from the Welsh magistrates was particularly marked. They have the additional issue that they often need to recruit magistrates who are bilingual, since the Welsh language is usable in court proceedings. Rural areas of Wales suffer greatly from the dearth of magistrates, we are told, as well as from the difficulty of defendants, witnesses, police officers and lawyers having to travel long distances to get to court. The balance there has to be kept permanently under review.

There are other challenges as well. I know that the Minister will respond in full to a magistrates report, and I hope he will take that on board. One of the things we say is that we should have a holistic approach to the recruitment of magistrates—a workforce strategy—and that must include looking at what is reasonable in terms of the travel times that they are expected to undergo.

Other unintended consequences can stem from that. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate referred to the closure of four youth courts in London and the amalgamation in Bromley magistrates court, which, as he says, creates difficulties. Even though the geographic distances within London—some of us here are London MPs—might not be great, travel is not necessarily easy, particularly if one is using public transport, and even more so if defendants or other parties to proceedings have chaotic lifestyles. In civil and family cases, they may be people undergoing real stress—because of relationship breakdown, debt problems in civil proceedings, and so on—and the greater the travel burden put on them, the greater the risk that they do not attend and the hearing is ineffective or that those with a legitimate claim in such proceedings are deterred from taking their case forward.

Much progress has been made to make it easier to initiate things such as money claims and divorce proceedings online, which is welcome, but as the former Lord Chief Justice, Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, observed wisely in the other place recently, there is a difference between an online process to deal with transactional matters and online proceedings. As the president of the family division, Sir Andrew McFarlane, observed that video or virtual evidence is unlikely to be as appropriate in family cases as in other cases. For example, it can be easier to resolve things such as straightforward claims for damages—money claims—online. It seems important to us that we find that balance and ensure greater nuance and sensitivity in where we reduce our court facilities.

There is also the issue of travel times. The suggestion seems to be that it is reasonable for someone to leave home at 7.30 am to get to a court hearing and then to get home two hours after it finishes, which might be at 5.30 pm. I did a lot of that when I was practising at the Bar, but I understood that, having chosen that job. It is not the same for someone who is a witness in proceedings or who has been summoned to assist the public good by giving evidence about an incident they witnessed. It does not seem reasonable to expect those people to put up with long journey times. Legal aid lawyers are not well remunerated, and their having to travel long hours on modest fees while also preparing their cases properly does not always ensure that justice is fully served.

I hope that we will be cautious in how far we go. It is perfectly fair to point out that the volume of work going through courts—magistrates, Crown and county—has declined and that that fact will obviously be reflected in the court estate to some extent, but I would be happier if I thought that the money being saved was being immediately spent on the upkeep of the retained estate. I regret to say, however, that that is manifestly not the case. The Criminal Bar Association recently posted online a photograph of the wall in the robing room at Southwark Crown court. As well as various stains and cracks—it is a 1970s building—a number of phone numbers had been written on the wall next to the telephone. The phone numbers were so old they predated...
the 0207 and 0208 numbers, which shows how long it has been since the place was painted. In Snarebrook Crown court, I have seen buckets in the judge’s corridor and so on. We are not recycling the money even to maintain the estate we have. We have to get that right somehow.

Victoria Prentis: I wonder if I could draw my hon. Friend’s attention, and perhaps by proxy the Minister’s attention, to the excellent and important evidence given by Ian Burnett to the House of Lords Constitution Committee about the quality of repairs to court buildings and the effect it has on judicial morale.

Robert Neill: The evidence of Lord Burnett of Maldon, the Lord Chief Justice, was most compelling, and I know that the Minister, who is a diligent Minister and who I welcome to his place in the Ministry of Justice, will want to take that heavily on board. We pride ourselves on having a Rolls-Royce system of justice in this country, and in terms of the intellect and integrity of our judiciary, that is absolutely right, but sometimes the buildings in which they operate—

Victoria Prentis: They are more like a Škoda.

Robert Neill: As my hon. Friend says, they are much more like a Škoda.

Having drawn those matters to the House’s attention, as well as my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, which I should have done at the beginning, I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity to reflect on the voluminous evidence that our Committee and others have amassed not about how we should abandon the reform program—absolutely not—but about how we can take it forward efficiently and effectively. We must strike that balance. We must achieve efficiency but never at the expense of justice and fairness in what is a fundamental civic right.

2.47 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) on securing it. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee. The £1 billion pound modernisation programme undertaken by Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service was designed to move cases online and to increase the use of digital methods to improve the speed and efficiency of our court system. However, as the Public Accounts Committee’s report into transforming courts and tribunals made clear, the pressure to deliver quickly and make savings is limiting HMCTS’s ability to consult meaningfully with stakeholders and risks it driving forward changes before it fully understands their impact on users and on the justice system more widely, particularly in regard to access to justice.

As a member of the Justice Committee, I am pleased that we are currently undertaking an inquiry into the courts and tribunal reforms. It is clear that the implications are going to be significant. As we have seen in countless other examples from welfare to healthcare, the digitisation and modernisation of Government systems invariably leads to delays and operational issues. Sufficient time is never committed for proper testing and evaluation to ensure that the technology and methods implemented are actually fit for purpose.

On current predictions, HMCTS expects 2.4 million cases a year to be dealt with outside physical courtrooms by 2023, leading it to employ 5,000 fewer staff. While many organisations, including the Law Society and the Magistrates Association, have welcomed the increased use of technology, they continue to express concern that the Government’s desire to increase efficiency is coming at the cost of accessibility. I have concerns that by switching to a “digital by default” approach, we are in danger of excluding many people from being able to fully interact with the justice system, given that vulnerable people such as those with learning difficulties, mental health conditions, addictions, disabilities and English as a second language are often disproportionately represented among court users. By assuming that everyone is able to adjust to digital-only platforms, we risk denying people the ability to seek and access justice. The Government’s desire to save money by moving to digital solutions while failing to recognise the impact of their introduction may cost more in the long run, not just financially but by reducing access to justice for many.

While the Government have accelerated the roll-out of digital portals, they have also presided over the dismantling of our court system. Between 2010 and 2019, we have seen 295 court facilities close their doors for good, including more than 50% of the magistrates courts in England and Wales. The combination of this and increased digital-only processes is another example of trying to do too much too quickly, and the results will always have negative consequences on access to justice.

Resolution, the family law group, recently ran a survey of its members following the roll-out of some of the reforms. On access to justice, 57% strongly disagree or disagree that a more accessible service is being delivered, and 94% disagree or strongly disagree that faster processing times are being delivered. Not only is access to justice being denied but the reform agenda is making an already difficult process harder still. Many cases that end up going through the court system will involve vulnerable people in difficult circumstances, such as cases involving children going into care. By limiting the processes by which people interact with the court system, along with the continued closure of the estate, we are setting up barriers that will in turn prevent full access to justice, and particularly the ability of many to access their nearest court.

Following the Lord Chancellor’s recent response to the “Fit for the future: transforming the court and tribunal estate” consultation, I share the concerns of groups such as the Law Society that have drawn specific attention to the accessibility of our future court system. I am disappointed that the response categorised a reasonable journey as one that allowed court attendees to leave home no earlier than 7.30 am to attend a hearing and return home by 7.30 pm the same day, using public transport where necessary. For those who have caring responsibilities, family or childcare arrangements and for disabled people and the elderly, a 12-hour window is far from accessible. Some may have access to a car, but those who rely on public transport could have numerous legs to their journey and, given that thousands of bus
routes have faced being cut under this Government, it is inevitable that there will be a detrimental impact on the ability of many to get to court in a reasonable time. This could affect their ability to access justice.

Robert Neill: The hon. Lady is making a powerful case. Does she agree that there is another issue that can arise as a result of court closures? She and I know that the four youth courts that have been amalgamated now sit at Bromley, and that many of the youngsters who appear in front of those courts are involved in gang culture. This creates real listing difficulties for the court staff, who have to try to ensure that they do not list cases involving rival gangs from different areas of that part of south London at the same time, given the potential for disorder that can genuinely occur. This is a matter of concern for the police in our shared borough.

Ellie Reeves: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. I, too, know the difficulties that this is creating for the police and the court service locally. These complex considerations have to be taken into account, but they are sometimes not thought about when introducing these sorts of reforms.

The current outline for a reasonable journey assumes that everything in court that day runs to time and to plan. Court listings are usually oversubscribed under the current set-up, so many people often make their way to court, which often takes several hours, in anticipation of a hearing that never takes place. Not only does this have negative consequences for victims, witnesses and defendants and inevitably cost more, given that solicitors’ fees must still be paid, but it is quite possible that the combination of more difficult journeys and the continued floating or warned-list system will lead to the unintended consequence of people just not turning up at all. Research has shown that those effects, combined with court closures, have led to an increase in no-shows and an increase in warrants of arrest for defendants in locations where magistrates courts have closed.

Victoria Prentis: Does the hon. Lady share my concern that the Department has done no real research on the number of no-shows?

Ellie Reeves: That is a good point. The reforms are being pushed through without a proper look at what they mean in practice.

A survey of Resolution members by the Family Law Group showed that nearly 50% of respondents said that the courts that they had historically used had been closed and that, as a result, many clients’ travel time to court had increased to two hours each way. There were also over 200 examples of clients suffering financially or emotionally as the result of a court closure or a failure in court administration.

I am also concerned that court closures are leading to a wider reduction in facilities and services available to those who interact with the justice system. Previously, people in court could attend a counter for assistance or advice, particularly when having to fill out the relevant paperwork for their hearings. Resolution’s evidence went on to detail the struggle that many of their clients experience due to the need to phone ahead to arrange things that were previously done in court at a counter. The evidence described clients calling a centre only to find that up to 100 people were ahead of them in the queue and finding that support staff, while not unhelpful, had only limited information, making it difficult to progress any queries. In addition, the fact that individuals now have to book an appointment before being able to attend the court counter creates another barrier to getting stuff done, both for professionals and for members of the public. As I stated earlier, given that vulnerable people are disproportionately represented among court users, reducing the availability of services and switching them to online or telephone-based solutions instead risks excluding many from full interaction with our justice system.

The overarching message from stakeholders is that, while reform can improve the workings of the court system, the pace at which courts have closed, combined with the inaccessible roll-out of the digitalisation reforms, has left behind a gulf in access to justice. Cuts to staffing will see those who have to use our courts system finding the whole process even more difficult to navigate. The courts and staff who are left have to deal with increasing caseloads. The Government’s reforms have a facade of ease of use and straightforwardness, but the cuts that have hit the courts have left us with a system in disarray.

In evidence to the Justice Committee, the Criminal Bar Association succinctly stated that “many of the reforms already implemented and those proposed are framed too much around efficiency at the expense of ensuring a fair process for all.”

I urge the Minister to look at the speed at which the reforms are rolled out and to consider the evidence that too much is happening too quickly. He should also listen to the recommendations of the Public and Commercial Services Union and many other bodies involved in our courts and justice system and prevent any further court closures until it can be proven that they are not having a detrimental impact on access to justice.

2.58 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and all my learned friends from the Justice Committee. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee and the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), whose application I was proud to sponsor. The Justice Committee has been looking at this area for some time, and the poor Minister is being inundated with the statistics and evidence that we have gathered during the course of our inquiries over the past few years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) gave an important speech about access to justice, and Opposition Members also made important contributions, so I make no apology for going from the sublime to the very local. I am going to talk about Banbury and Bicester, because we are an interesting example of what happens when courts close.

In July 2015—remember those days?—I was a new MP and the world was rosy. Soon after I was elected, and not entirely to my distaste, it was proposed that Bicester magistrates court would be closed. At the time, along with Banbury and Oxford, it was one of three magistrates courts in Oxfordshire.
I was not too distressed about the news, even as a new, keen MP, because I was told that Bicester magistrates court was operating at 11% capacity. On both sides of the House, we can probably all agree that 11% capacity is not ideal for a court to operate at; it was employing people and taking up a large building on a prime site. I did not resist the proposal, but I made strong representations on the need for Banbury magistrates court to remain open and for the Department to keep an open mind about mobile justice and the real effect on access to justice. I am trying to show that I am not anti-court closure per se, but that what matters is that people can access justice.

The closure went ahead, and the building has since been transferred to Homes England for development. Work has not yet started on the building, which irritates me every time I drive home. At the time, my general support for the proposed closure of Bicester magistrates, as the Department knows well because I told it very clearly, was predicated on Banbury still being open and having the capacity to absorb a possible surge in demand.

I also suggested, to the delight of the Daily Mail, that alternative venues for justice, such as pubs and town halls, be explored as part of a wider discussion about the future of the courts estate. As a Government lawyer for 17 years, I have experience of organising secret hearings in unusual locations, and I am convinced that justice is not about place but about what is done in that place. I am happy to continue making that case both to the new Minister and to the House.

North Oxfordshire is an area facing unprecedented growth, with approximately three houses being finished each day. Cherwell District Council is leading the way and, as the Minister knows only too well, the route for the Oxford to Cambridge expressway, which has yet to be announced, will almost certainly come very close to us. The local population is therefore projected to grow by 25% in the coming years.

We hope that all those people will be law-abiding and will never need recourse to either a criminal court or a family court, but the reality is that some of them will. In our daily lives, many of us do not come across the type of person who uses the courts—although, as MPs, we often do. I am talking about those who are really difficult to reach.

The Minister has done a great deal of work on hidden disabilities and authored the fantastic Maynard review. He fully understands this matter, but I implore him, when thinking about court users in the round, to really think about the type of people we are trying to get to court buildings early in the day. They often have hidden disabilities, they are often not very literate and they have difficulties with ready cash to pay for train fares and bus fares. They are genuinely one of the hardest sections of society to reach, let alone to get to a court building by 9 o’clock in the morning.

The closure of Banbury magistrates court has to be explored against the backdrop of a febrile local atmosphere caused by the removal of some services, notably obstetrics at the local Horton General Hospital. There is considerable local disquiet about services being taken from Banbury to Oxford, with our area being used merely as a dormitory. I noticed—the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge also mentioned this—that, snuck into the recent “Fit for the Future” consultation document, is a measure that has moved the goalposts; it is suggested that any time between 7.30 am to 7.30 pm is acceptable for travelling to court.

For the consultation that we filled in on the closure of Banbury magistrates court—one that provoked many responses, none of which were taken any notice of as far as I am aware—the document stated that a journey from Banbury to Oxford takes approximately an hour and 10 minutes by car. I would suggest that that is a very optimistic estimate. I conducted my own travel survey in January 2017, as a result of worries locally about closing local health services. It was clear from the 450 responses I received to my survey that the average journey time to Oxford from Banbury or the surrounding villages is approximately 90 minutes.

It is not clear from the consultation document we received at the time we were consulted about the Banbury court whether consideration was given to the lack of parking facilities at the receiving site in Oxford. Court users will have to allow enormous amounts of additional time to find a parking space. Once that is taken into account, it is possible that a one-way journey from Banbury to Oxford could easily take more than two hours. If I were travelling to court in Oxford, as I did from time to time in my working life before I entered this place, I would allow two hours at least.

The other thing we have to remember is that the vulnerable group of users I mentioned do not necessarily have access to cars. As the consultation document suggests, Banbury is also served by a regular train to Oxford. Although the train provides a realistic alternative mode of transport—for those who live in Banbury itself—the 36-minute journey time suggested in the consultation does not take into account travel times to Banbury station. We have extremely limited bus services locally, and many villages are not served by public transport at all.

I am also concerned about whether real evidence was collected on the absorbing court to determine whether it could cope with the extra work. The Justice Committee had some disturbing evidence given to us last week, unprompted by me, about the shortage of judges in Oxford and therefore the inability of the court to absorb this extra work. We know that in 2016–17 Banbury magistrates sat for a total of 2,211 hours, which we think works out at about 58% usage, with 2,009 hours being spent on criminal work and 202 hours being spent on family work. During the same period, Oxford magistrates had 1,184 spare sitting hours. Even my maths can tell me that there is a shortfall in capacity of about 1,000 sitting hours, and that does not take into account any increase in crime locally which we may get because of the vast increase in the local population.

I was brushed off by representatives of the Department, who suggested that the court could absorb the gap by regular Saturday sessions or sittings beyond the usual five-hour day. I gently remind the Department, which is extremely keen to increase diversity in the professions, that sitting at irregular times does not go with increasing diversity. I hope that the Ministry of Justice will undertake specific engagement with the relevant magistrates associations to ensure all options are fully scoped before decisions are taken in the future.

I am keen, as I have said many times in this House and almost weekly before the Justice Committee, on exploring alternative venues for justice. I am therefore...
very pleased to welcome the new Minister to his place, because I believe he shares my desire to do this. I met the previous Minister along with two of my favourite local magistrates, who came to help me make our case for piloting alternative venues locally. Given the limited capacity at the receiving site in Oxford, and the risk of over-centralisation and the effect that has on my vulnerable constituents, we have suggested that real consideration be given to using Bodicote House, which is the home of Cherwell District Council, as an alternative venue for justice. The Department has done some scoping work on the suggestion, and I would really like to press forward by having Banbury be one of the pilot sites for this new idea. Every time I mention the idea to certain officials, I am met with the response, “Security is a problem,” but it is a problem that we will be able to overcome if we work together in a constructive fashion.

In welcoming the new Minister to this debate and to his new position, I politely encourage him to help me in my mission to bring justice to local people, and to join me by agreeing that justice is not a place but a precious concept—but only if people can access it.

3.10 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I declare my interests as a non-practising barrister and the fifth member of the Justice Committee to speak in the debate, albeit the most junior and recently elevated to that position.

I am sure it is a coincidence, but like me other Members will have found in their inboxes this morning a press release from the Ministry of Justice telling them that £15 million of extra Government funding will be spent to improve more than 200 courts. I am sure the fact that that came out on the morning of this debate is just happenstance. When I read it in more detail and found that revolutionary things are being done such as a new roof on Chester Crown court, a new lift at Swansea civil justice centre and plumbing upgrades in Newton Abbot, I wondered whether it was really something that needs to feature in the popular press at the moment. Is it really so revolutionary that these things are happening? It is £15 million for what is actually basic maintenance.

Perhaps I can contrast all that with the £43 million that the Department made from the sale of Hammersmith magistrates court last year—that is three times the entire budget that the Department has committed to the repairs. If the tales of toilets and buckets from the Chair of the Justice Committee are to be believed, it may be that even that £15 million will be inadequate to meet the task. The sad thing is that at the time Hammersmith court was closed, it was a fully functioning, well-used, fully accessible building in a convenient location. It had the first ever domestic violence court in the country. Sadly, as nothing has yet happened to it, it is now used only for the filming of crime dramas. The most recent time I was there, I was down in a cell with an entire film crew.

I do not want to share private grief, but I shall briefly outline our experience in west London, because it is emblematic of what is happening across the board. The modern court in Hammersmith was built around 20 years ago, and our old, lovely but ageing Victorian magistrates court later moved into it, followed later by our lovely but ageing Edwardian county court. So be it. Over the past 10 years, the county court work was moved over to Wandsworth to allow work from other closed magistrates courts in London to move into the building. We were then told that all the magistrates court work would go to places as convenient to my constituents as Hengelo. Then, last year, we were told that Wandsworth county court was to close and that the county court work would go across London to Clerkenwell. It is difficult to keep up with this: there have been four changes in respect of county court work over a period of around 10 years.

The farce then turns to tragedy. This information has been given to me by court users, and not just users of our own courts. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) referred to what is happening at Clerkenwell and Shoreditch county court. I am told that files are being lost there, hearings have not taken place more than a year after work was transferred, telephones are not answered, paperwork has been lost, and bailiffs warrants are being executed despite warrants being suspended. My source says:

“The court is essentially in chaos”, with 70% of staff being agency workers. This is the court, right on the other side of London, that my constituents are being directed to.

Possession work now forms a substantial part of county courts’ work, because without early legal advice people can often end up homeless when they should have received it at an earlier stage. Most cases relate to benefit problems and defects in the benefits system and therefore involve very poor people. Lots of people now walk to court. My excellent law centre, under director Sue James, co-locates its advice services with food banks and will now have to travel across London to provide those emergency services. This is a very unsatisfactory state of affairs, particularly as nearby Brentford county court has five courtrooms, only two of which are used because only two judges sit there. That in turn makes me suspicious about the utilisation figures that we are given.

Robert Neill: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. He will have heard, as I have, the concerning reports on a number of occasions from the Criminal Bar Association about under-utilisation sometimes being caused by courtrooms left sitting empty while recorders—part-time judges who classically could be used to fill out the slack—are not offered enough slots in which to sit by the Ministry of Justice. It seems a completely false economy.

Andy Slaughter: That is absolutely right. It is the combination of cuts in service that is causing the problems, and one problem is being referenced to another. Under-utilisation is a problem of not having judges to sit in court rather than a problem of not having the cases to refer to that court, as in the example that I have given. That makes me suspicious about the longer hours—the 7.30 to 7.30 window and the flexibility, with warned lists, that means that advocates and clients could be there all day. If there are not enough judges to sit in the courts in the first place, what is the point of courts sitting from early in the morning until late at night? To put it mildly, this has not been very well thought through.

To turn from the particular to the general, it has been mentioned that half the magistrates courts in the country have closed since 2010. One of the first things I did when I was appointed shadow Justice Minister back in 2010 was to respond to that first statement. Little did I
know where we were going—that there would be perhaps one cull a year of courts across the country from then onwards. There must come a point when matters have gone too far. One reason for the wholesale, untrammelled closure of courts was obviously austerity. We are not just talking about capital receipts for closed buildings; we are also talking about thousands of staff going—I think another 5,000 staff are due to go over the next two years.

There is no denying that, but the justification given was the now more than £1 billion digitisation programme that was being introduced. The Association of Her Majesty’s District Judges says that half the money has been spent but only a limited benefit has yet been seen or realised. We have seen the sale and closure of courts and the restriction of access to justice before any of the benefits. We are taking a leap in the dark and being asked to trust that the Government have got it right. Frankly, judging by most Governments’ IT programmes and success, I think another 5,000 staff are due to go over the next two years.

Some people will say that we can get too attached to our local courts, but local justice is important. It is a cumulative process. The cuts to legal aid, the introduction of fees and the closure of courts are having a detrimental effect on people’s rights to access justice, and to do so speedily, conveniently and fairly. It therefore seems entirely reasonable to ask, as the Labour party does, for a moratorium on closures. It is also reasonable to ask for more evidence of the justifications for any closures and of the benefits that are allegedly going to be gained from the money released by those closures. There is a new Minister in post, who I am sure is looking at the issue with a fresh pair of eyes. I hope we are going to hear very shortly that he will look at these matters again and perhaps come to some different conclusions from those of his predecessors.

3.20 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I am keenly aware that I am probably the only person here who is not a member of the illustrious group of MPs on the Justice Committee. I hope that colleagues will forgive me for the fact that I am going to talk not about the intricacies of court closures, but more generally about access to justice. I am here today to share stories about justice and about what being unable to access to justice looks like. As we have already heard, these stories are all too common and an example of the Government’s refusal to accept that cuts have gone too far and that we need to change direction. Our justice system is in crisis and the time has come for the Government to roll up their sleeves and do something about it.

The city of Bath has been lucky. Despite murmurs a few years ago that Bath county court might close, it remains open and is a location for people across our city to seek justice and settle disputes. However, access to justice is about far more than just a courtroom; I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) saying that we could actually be quite creative about where justice takes place.

My constituency of Bath has been rated by the Law Society as a legal aid desert. In all of Bath and North East Somerset, there is only one law firm that is authorised to provide legal aid advice for housing, including to cases of unlawful eviction, where families are faced with homelessness. This is not unusual. More than half of all local authority areas in England and Wales do not have a single housing legal aid provider. Legal aid deserts have emerged across the country in key areas of law such as immigration and mental health because normal firms can no longer afford to offer these services at a reduced price. Constituents come to my office all the time concerned about financial or civil court cases where they cannot afford representation and hope that my caseworkers can help. We do what we can, but all too often these situations are desperate, and without legal training, there is a limit to what my team and I can do.

Our justice system punishes individuals who try to represent themselves. This is very unfair in a context where ways to access legal aid are few and far between. A 19-year-old girl from Bath recently represented herself in a right to remain case that determined her right to stay in the UK. She had been brought to the UK as a child and did not know she should apply for asylum until she studied at university, that she had far outstayed the requirements of the visitor visa that she was brought here on. Not having the money to pay for representation, she represented herself and ended up giving the wrong information to the immigration authorities. As a result, she was put at risk of deportation back to a country where she did not know anyone and did not speak the language. She was lucky that we were able to build a local campaign and crowd fund money to pay for her to get a lawyer, who eventually won back her right to live in this country on human rights grounds, but our system must not rely on luck to determine who can and cannot pursue justice.

Many more constituents have come to me with stories that cannot be resolved because they simply are not able to prepare for the justice they deserve. The context varies—from abusive partners who have ignored court orders and continued the abuse, to a financial settlement from a divorce that has not been honoured, leaving a pensioner in financial crisis. The common thread behind the stories is the hardship that my constituents endure after being unable to access justice.

The Government must restore early legal aid advice in cases of welfare, debt, employment, immigration, housing and family law. Although these are considered aspects of civil law, the impact on individuals in these areas cannot be overstated. Family, employment, welfare and the right to stay in one’s country are basic building blocks for a settled life. When access to justice suffers, so does our society. Issues such as discrimination in the workplace go unchecked and can further perpetuate a culture of discrimination and bullying for years to come. Currently, in accusations of work-based discrimination, only one in 200 cases receive funding for representation in court. Exceptional case funding, which was supposed to fund cases involving serious human rights violations, has proven to be very ineffective. There have been 10 applications in the past year concerning work-based discrimination, and all have been rejected. This emergency funding should be reformed as soon as possible in a way that makes it accessible and useful to those who need it.

Without access, our justice system loses its authority, becoming a luxury only afforded to the wealthiest members of our communities. It is no longer simply a case of
reducing the cuts; instead, we must seriously reinvest in a fair and effective justice system that is accessible to everyone.

3.25 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) and for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill)—the Chair of the Justice Committee—for securing this debate. It is a pleasure to hear from so many members of the Justice Committee, as a former member myself.

This ought to be one of the many debates that we are having in this House about an unprecedented shift in how justice is delivered in this country. The scale of the change is enormous, with hundreds of courts closed and thousands of staff lost, millions fewer cases heard in the courts over the coming years, a £1 billion-plus reform programme and plans for annual savings of £200 million. That is a tremendous change.

Whether for good or for bad, it is undemocratic and deeply concerning that these changes are not properly debated in this Chamber in Government time before being implemented. However, in the spirit of cross-Bench co-operation that Backbench Business debates encourage, I want to acknowledge that the former Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss)—someone also from Leeds originally but with whom I have strong political disagreements, it will not surprise people to know—did present a prisons and courts Bill before the last general election, with proposals in black and white to be discussed and amended had it not fallen with that general election.

By contrast, another former Justice Secretary, now the Transport Secretary, rushed through a major justice shake-up in probation in a way that was forced through ignoring the words of the experts, with vast cost to the public and to public safety. I warn the current Justice Secretary that emulating the Transport Secretary’s approach to major justice reforms will come back to haunt him. This risks being his own probation crisis.

Of course, no Labour Member is against technology. Undoubtedly, technology can, with genuine investment and backed by rigorous evidence, aid access to justice. Likewise, no one doubts that our courts need modernisation—that needs to happen—but Labour is concerned that the court closures are a smokescreen for austerity and will cause long-term damage to access to justice. The Public Accounts Committee says that “the planned changes to the courts and tribunal system are on a scale never before attempted anywhere in the world.”

As one former judge recently asked, why have court buildings been sold before the changes that are part of the reform programme had been put in place, tested, evaluated and shown to work? Why is there not a substantial pilot? Why has sufficient research not been done into the impacts of digital courts? Why has there not been proper public or parliamentary scrutiny?

Labour is calling for a moratorium on further cuts and closures until these reforms can be subjected to full parliamentary and public scrutiny. It is a demand that we share with the Association of Her Majesty’s District Judges. While stating that it “could not be more supportive of modernisation”, the ADJ has called for “a pause in the court closure programme until a proper stock take of the present position has been carried out”.

That seems eminently sensible.

We are looking at the impact on access to justice of court closures, but as many Members have said, courts cannot be seen in isolation, especially when the Ministry of Justice has faced the deepest cuts of any Department—cuts totalling 40%. Those cuts are driving a justice crisis. Cuts to police and Crown Prosecution Service budgets compound the problem, and with fewer people charged, fewer prosecutions and fewer people pursuing cases due to a lack of legal aid, justice is denied time and again. It is simply not credible to suggest that investment in technology is the answer to this crisis in access to justice.

Such austerity is the context in which half of all magistrates courts have been closed and a third of county courts have been shut. Selling off local courts piles yet more pressure on the remaining courts and risks hearings being further delayed and rescheduled. That can have a distressing impact on victims and witnesses and creates a justice system that is less accessible for local people, forcing them to travel vast distances, as we have heard today.

The Law Society notes how Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service’s definition of a day’s travel to court impacts on those with caring responsibilities, the elderly and disabled people. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) has told me about the devastating impact of the closure of Buxton court on her constituents facing eviction. Now facing a journey to Derby without any direct train, many of her constituents are simply unable to defend themselves. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) contacted me in advance of the debate to tell me how the closure of Halifax family court left victims of domestic violence facing a 12-month wait for their day in court.

The first commissioned academic study into the impact of the court closures, by the University of Suffolk, found that costs for some defendants, witnesses and advocates to attend magistrates court had doubled. New research by Dr Daniel Newman and Dr Roxanna Deaghani found that the high cost of transport in Wales can be prohibitive. For those who think that that is far-fetched, here is an example from the Law Society: a young person in the Greater Manchester area would have to spend almost all their universal credit daily allowance of £8.30 on a £7 tram fare from Bury to central Manchester.

While the Government flog off the family silver by selling off our courts, they are also hollowing out the service, with deep cuts to staff since 2013. Thousands more staff are set to be cut from the Courts and Tribunals Service by 2023. The number of magistrates has fallen by a third since 2012, and the number of judges by almost a fifth. At the same time, the overall case load of HMCTS is not down, but up. It is worth highlighting that around two thirds of the savings so far have come from not replacing staff who have left. Who pays the price? Victims, witnesses and innocent defendants all face a much more difficult court experience.

As judges themselves warned, there has been a “haemorrhaging of experienced staff, a serious decline in staff and judicial morale, delays in all aspects of process and court systems that are even more broken.”
HMCTS’s staff survey found that 81% of staff say that cuts are interfering with their ability to give legal advice and ensure a fair hearing. It is so symbolic of the ideological “cut first, plan later” approach of this Government that their own figures show an increase in reliance on agency staff in our courts. I recently exposed how tens of thousands of years of vital prison officer experience have been lost due to Government cuts, which has contributed to the epidemic of violence in our prisons. I fear that the court staff cuts will be a similar ticking time bomb.

We are now told that every penny is being redirected into courts reforms, but courts were initially closed as part of the Government’s austerity programme. Only the more recent court closures have been justified by investment in the courts reform programme, and most of those cannot be justified even on that basis. Labour’s analysis of the sale of 126 court premises in England and Wales between 2010 and 2018 showed that 80% went for little more than the average UK house price, with some disposed of for as little as £1. Of course, tens of millions of pounds is being given to consultants to carry out the courts reforms. PricewaterhouseCoopers has done especially well, according to the Government’s own figures, having received over £30 million of public money so far. Let us be clear: not every penny is being reinvested in our justice system.

To conclude, in its damning report on the courts reform programme last year, the Public Accounts Committee said:

“Government has cut corners in its rush to push through these reforms. The timetable was unrealistic, consultation has been inadequate and, even now, HMCTS has not clearly explained what the changes will mean in practice.”

I, Labour and so many others share those concerns. Our fear is that this is being rushed through regardless of the consequences is a fear shared across the justice sector. It is not a concern with technology; it is a concern that technology is being used as a smokescreen for cuts—an attempt to disguise austerity. It is time for a moratorium on further closures and further cuts until the impact has been properly assessed. Surely, if the Minister is confident about these reforms, he has nothing whatsoever to fear from such scrutiny.

3.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, or should I call it a Justice Committee reunion? I feel rather inadequate in never having been part of this fantastic Committee, with such wonderful people. However, this debate also brings together at least three people in the Chamber who have seen their courts close in the last round of cuts: my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis); you, Mr Deputy Speaker, have seen Chorley go; and me. I have seen Fleetwood close, which was just outside my boundary but served many of my constituents, so I have seen this issue from both sides of the fence.

The ability to access justice is a fundamental right in our society. That is why the Government are investing £1 billion in the most ambitious programme of its kind in the world. It will create a system that works better for those who need it. It will be easier to run and it will provide better value for taxpayers. Access to justice matters because everyone should have a stake in our legal system. None of our plans replaces the need for traditional courts or for people to travel to those buildings. It will not exclude people who do not have access to a computer or the internet. However, it will transform the way people use our courts and tribunals, opening up new ways to access justice.

To undertake a radical modernisation of the operation of our courts and tribunals with the same estate that was in place in the era of carbon paper, manual typewriters and fax machines—yes, there are still some fax machines left in our court estate—would be wasteful and dilute the benefits of reform. As we modernise, it would be inappropriate to define access to justice merely in terms of proximity to our nearest court building.

However, no one should deny the challenges we have in our court estate. Many of our buildings have been underused. In the financial year ending in 2017, 41% of courts and tribunals were used for less than half their available time. Keeping these buildings open costs us money that we could spend on making justice more accessible in other ways. As it stands, the court and tribunal estate is a patchwork that has developed over time and a legacy from many predecessor organisations. This has meant a concentration of buildings in some locations. Of the 337 operational court and tribunal buildings, 245 are within five miles of another court or tribunal, so this should be kept under review. We should test whether buildings are really needed or suitable for the uses to which we put them.

The closure of a court is not a decision taken lightly, and we consult widely and think carefully about the responses we receive before making a final decision. We have changed our minds following a consultation, and retained courts because of the responses received—Northallerton magistrates court being one example. Only when convinced that effective access to justice can be maintained has the Lord Chancellor agreed to the closure of a court. In some cases, we have moderated the impact of a closure by continuing to provide local access through a supplementary provision, such as a video link, or by holding hearings in a different public building.

I take great interest in the potential that so-called “supplementary provision” can offer, although I have a certain nervousness about pubs. I know that inquests were once held in pubs, and witnesses gathered in them back in the Victorian era. I am not sure, however, that current concern for the dignity and gravitas of the court can be met by our local Wetherspoons, but I look forward to hearing what my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury proposes for her home town.

I do not accept the characterisation of this programme as being just about cutting costs without any regard for those who use our courts, and neither do I recognise the stories of inconsistency and chaos set out by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous). At the start of last year we engaged widely on our future strategy, and many Members have referred to the document, “Fit for the future: transforming the court and tribunal estate”, which underpins much of our decision making. I urge a further reading of paragraph 2.5, which lists the issues that must be considered. Those include the length of a journey, and the timeframe of between 7.30 am and 7.30 pm,
“the difficulty of the journey, including frequency of public transport and the number of changes required; the cost of potential journeys; the type of cases heard at the court or tribunal; the opening hours of the court or tribunal; the needs of vulnerable users; and whether there are available mitigations to reduce the impact on users with longer journey times, if the numbers of such users are small.”

We also consider supplementary provision where that is appropriate to the nature of the case, the court’s workload, and the agreement of the judiciary. Our assessment therefore goes much deeper than whether to tick off two particular times of the day.

I heard about the study that has taken place in Suffolk, and I look forward to meeting my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who has been particularly affected by that issue. We have set out a clearer definition of what we consider to be a reasonable journey, but in my view the issue has not affected the failure to attend rate. Indeed, since about 2013, studies show the numbers of those affected by this issue to be in the low to mid 90,000s, which has declined since 2010. We wish to take into account a range of factors. Compared with December 2010, the proportion of the population now within the stated distance for reaching a magistrates’ court has declined by just 1.6%, so people are not being affected to the extent that many are concerned about.

I urge anyone with an interest in the future of our courts and tribunals to read our response to the consultation, and our new “Court and Tribunal Design guide”, which I fear has not received the same level of attention, despite being just as interesting. It sets out how we will make our courtrooms more flexible, enhance security standards, and provide for the needs of vulnerable victims and witnesses. Those things are just as important for access to justice as the other issues raised today.

As a former Minister for transport accessibility, who is also sitting next to the current Minister responsible for that, I am all too aware of the importance of inclusive public transport. I tried to introduce the idea of the inclusive court to my Department, and the work done by my hon. Friend and I focuses particularly on the needs of those with hidden disabilities. Accessibility is not just about the wheelchair ramp into court; it is about understanding those who have speech, language and communication difficulties, so that when they are in court they understand what is occurring.

I referred to the “Fit for the Future” document, but there is no Government document that cannot be refreshed when evidence changes. We are working hard to improve the quality of the court and tribunal estate. Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service was formed from a diverse range of earlier organisations. No one wants to see buckets in the court, or ripped seats, soggy walls, and chipped paintwork. Since 2016 we have invested more than £148 million in capital improvements, including the £15 million from the Treasury that so underwhelmed the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) at the start of his speech. I agree that that would not solve every problem in the estate, but I think of it as a down payment in our initial efforts to make a difference. If anyone wishes to visit Blackpool court just outside my constituency boundary they will see another court that is in serious need of investment, although we are hoping to move site very shortly. I am all too familiar with the need to ensure that we have a dignified court network and I recognise the role it plays in maintaining judicial morale.

The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) mentioned digital services. The principal aim is not to close off routes to justice, but to open new ones. We will continue to support paper processes for those who need them. For some, that will still be the best route into our courts and tribunals, but for those who want to use digital services but have trouble doing so, we are providing a range of support to help to ensure the process is accessible to all through telephone support, webchat, or, when required, face-to-face support. We have seen an improvement with online applications for divorce. When it was paper-based, 40% of forms were being returned and that is now down to 2%. That makes life easier for those engaging with the process. Online pleas are possible for traffic offences and a significant number of online civil money claims are now taking place with significant support for those participating in them. However, as she mentioned, evaluation does matter. Merely because we can do something online does not mean that we should do it in each and every case, so it is right to interrogate the overall reform programme.

Court reform is just one way to deliver the inclusive court that I personally want to see. There is no location in the public realm where the vulnerability of the individual can place their liberty at greater risk than in our justice system. If justice is truly to be done, it is vital that all sides, whether as a defendant or as someone bringing a case, understand how justice is being done to them.

Robert Neill: Will the Minister give way?

Paul Maynard: I will always give way to the Chairman of the Select Committee.

Robert Neill: I am grateful to the Minister and I appreciate what he says. He raises a specific point about the justice system being seen to be available. One concern arising in evidence given to the Justice Committee about the use of online procedure is that we must be careful that it does not develop into a situation where justice is not done in public and is therefore not seen to be done. This is another case where it could be a good idea, but we have to be careful to get the balance right.

Paul Maynard: I have heard many of those concerns, not least from judges themselves, about the role of video hearings. I recognise that there is a particular sensitivity here, which I am exploring carefully.

I was going to mention the Select Committee’s report on magistracy—that is a complicated word for me to get out—which I thought was fantastic and chimed with much I have encountered already in my short time in the role. I met a young magistrate called Luke Rigg a couple of weeks ago. He is a shining example of those in them. However, as she mentioned, evaluation does not done in public and is therefore not seen to be. This is another case where it could be a good idea, but we have to be careful to get the balance right.

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Paul Maynard: I have heard many of those concerns, not least from judges themselves, about the role of video hearings. I recognise that there is a particular sensitivity here, which I am exploring carefully.
3.48 pm

**Bambos Charalambous**: I thank all members of the Justice Committee for their excellent contributions. I also thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for her contribution on legal advice. She is welcome to join the Justice Committee.

I am pleased to hear that the Minister wants inclusive courts, but he needs to take note of the lack of data on the impact of court closures. Any future court closures will have a cumulative effect due to the closures that have already taken place. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) said, we need to consider having a pause before any further court closures take place, because they will have an impact on the disadvantaged.

This has been an excellent debate and some excellent points have been made. I hope the Minister takes them on board and that we see a proper consultation process in the future where a difference is made; voices are heard and justice is the winner at the end of the day.

**Question put and agreed to.**

Resolved.

That this House has considered court closures and access to justice.

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**PETITION**

_**UK Bid to Host UN Climate Conference 2020**_

3.49 pm

**Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): I rise to present a petition from 125 pupils of Western Road School in Lewes, in addition to the 624 signatures presented to this place earlier this week from constituents in Lewes. The petitioners declare that “climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world”, and further, that the UK has leading role to play in tackling climate change in the future.

**Following is the full text of the petition:**

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Lewes,
Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002475]
troponin tests and categorically confirmed that Gordon had not had a heart attack. Troponin is an enzyme that the heart emits. A higher level of troponin is the indication of myocardial infarction, or a heart attack. Despite the high blood pressure and the left bundle branch block, because Gordon’s troponin tests were negative, there was not sufficient evidence to suggest that Gordon had had a heart attack or was at risk of having a heart attack. This is a very significant point, in relation to the actions that happened next when Gordon and Jackie were disembarked in Barbados and where they consequently were sent for medical treatment.

Bridgetown is the capital of Barbados and is home to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, which is the island’s primary acute medical care facility and provides extensive care in a wide array of medical specialties. A report in 2013 entitled “Caring for Non-residents in Barbados” by the Medical Tourism Research Group outlined the medical arrangements in Barbados. It states:

“Within the Caribbean, Barbados is regarded as a favoured destination for regional patients, particularly for those from smaller islands lacking advanced diagnostic and treatment facilities and the capacity to offer to treat high-risk patients... BFC, the Sparman Clinic, Island Dialysis, and Bayview Hospital all attract private regional patients; however, according to our interviewees, the public Queen Elizabeth Hospital is the primary health care destination for regional patients.

The Queen Elizabeth Hospital serves as the main referral hospital for the entire Eastern Caribbean... Consultants at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital... have the ability to admit private patients such as ill vacationers not covered by the island’s public system.”

On Friday 18 January, with a major hospital available just two miles from the port for an 86-year-old man with double pneumonia—who, according to the ship’s doctor, was improving at the point of medical disembarkation—the port agent in Bridgetown decided to send Gordon to the privately run Sparman clinic, some three miles from the port. The clinic is owned and operated by Dr Alfred Sparman, and is advertised as a heart specialist clinic. The ship’s doctor’s notes and lab results, which clearly stated that Gordon had not had a heart attack, were given to the Sparman clinic on Gordon’s arrival. However, the medical notes made by Dr Sparman afterwards state that Gordon was admitted to the clinic with double pneumonia and having had a heart attack, which was not the case.

On arrival at the clinic, Jackie was asked to pay US$10,000 before the clinic would admit or treat Gordon. Jackie maxed out her credit cards to pay the up-front costs, which left her without funds to find accommodation while in Barbados. On Monday 21 January—I emphasise that I am speaking about this year—Gordon’s children arrived in Barbados to assist their parents. At that point, Gordon was on a nasal cannula and an antibiotic drip, but had received no further treatment during the three days since being admitted to the clinic. He appeared to be weak and short of breath, but was able to sit up in bed, was eating, and was fully coherent.

Jackie had been sleeping on the couch in the observation room, because she did not have the funds to procure other accommodation. The Sparman clinic is actually a doctor’s surgery with a waiting area, one small operating theatre where cardiovascular surgeries are performed, and an observation room which doubles as a patient bedroom and intensive care unit and contains mostly wooden and soft furniture.

Dr Sparman met the family to discuss Gordon’s prognosis in the clinic’s conference room, which contained a cracked board table held together with gaffer tape and several broken and cracked leather chairs. In addition, client records were strewn across the floor and piled high in boxes. I mention the dilapidated state of the entire clinic because, given that a state-of-the-art hospital was less than half a mile away in Bridgetown, it is difficult to understand how this clinic was deemed appropriate to offer any level of suitable healthcare to a critically ill patient with double pneumonia.

During the meeting, Dr Sparman advised the family that Gordon was very ill and had suffered a heart attack as a result of the strain that the pneumonia had put on his heart. He suspected that Gordon also had a blockage in one of his arteries, and therefore needed an angioplasty and an angiogram. He ended the meeting by stating that once the surgery was completed, Gordon would feel much better—better than he had felt for years—and that the family would be able to fly him home via a commercial airline by the end of the week. However, the medical report received from the clinic after Gordon was released clearly shows that at the time of the meeting with Dr Sparman, Gordon’s troponin levels, while now showing positive for the enzyme, were still well outside the parameters that would indicate that a heart attack had occurred or was likely to occur.

In the days leading up to the operation, Gordon’s condition began to deteriorate. He was in a highly agitated state. He lacked the strength to move his position in the bed, and was offered little assistance from the nurses, which led to great discomfort for him. Moreover, the air conditioning in the observation room, where Gordon was staying, was not working, which resulted in uncomfortable temperatures in a Caribbean hospital—so much so that Gordon had struggled to sleep since his arrival at the clinic, and was now exhausted. Despite several requests from the family for the unit to be mended, the clinic never repaired it. Gordon was clearly weakening.

By the day of the operation he had been refusing food for more than 24 hours, had developed spasms that wracked his entire body, and had begun vomiting.

The operation finally took place six days after Gordon arrived at the clinic. This was a man who had been able to walk, talk and eat just a few days earlier, but who was now visibly declining in front of everyone. This was due to a combination of lack of sleep because of the broken air-conditioning unit, lack of nutrition because Gordon was not placed on a protein drip until several days after he had stopped eating, considerable discomfort from his lack of strength to move position, and no aid offered and an overall general lack of proper nursing care.

Yet there were still more delays, not least when the family were then presented with a bill for $45,000 and advised that Dr Sparman would not perform the surgery without the money first. The family came up with the money and, despite Gordon’s severely weakened state, Dr Sparman proceeded with the surgery.

If Gordon had been admitted to the general hospital in the first place it is highly likely that he would have received pre-emptive treatment much earlier and would not have had to wait six days for a corrective procedure that he had needed it. He most likely would have been making a full recovery, but at the Sparman Clinic there were continuous delays and a general lack of care.
According to the lab results, half an hour before the operation a troponin test was conducted. At this point, Gordon’s troponin levels had elevated to a point that showed that a heart attack was imminent. The family was not aware of this, but Dr Sparman would have been. Within half an hour of the operation commencing Dr Sparman returned to the family and said he had been unable to perform the procedure as Gordon had started going into cardiac arrest, so the operation was aborted.

After the operation Gordon began to deteriorate rapidly and within 24 hours he was under sedation and had been placed on tracheal intubation. A ventilator did the breathing for him, which was strapped to Gordon’s face using string. His blood pressure was now dangerously low, his body was still racked with spasms and he now also had kidney failure.

Gordon was initially sedated using Valium, but after he came round twice and tried to pull the tube from his mouth Dr Sparman changed the sedation to diazepam and tied Gordon’s hands to the bedframe. The diazepam worked in terms of ensuring that Gordon did not come round again and it also stopped the spasms; however, Gordon never fully regained consciousness after the drug was administered. For the remaining three days that Gordon spent at the clinic under sedation and intubated his body position was never moved once by the nursing staff and his family were not permitted to move him.

At this point, a member of staff at the clinic—who would prefer to remain anonymous—advised that Gordon should be airlifted out of the clinic as soon as possible. It was implied that he was not going to get better at the Sparman Clinic. The family immediately started to arrange a medical airlift back to the UK. At this very stressful time, the family were presented with another bill, for $11,000.

I hope I have managed to describe to the House the utter lack of care that Gordon received, and that the primary motivation appeared to be to delay the correct and proper treatment that Gordon needed in order to extract more money from the family.

The family were now working fastidiously with a medical flight team to repatriate Gordon to the UK. However, after speaking with consultants in the UK it was deemed that Gordon was too ill to endure the flight and needed to have an angioplasty and angiogram prior to repatriation, but it was also advised that in Gordon’s present condition this operation was high risk. Gordon was critically ill, and the risk factors associated with either the operation or the flight carried great life-threatening consequences.

Dr Sparman made it clear that the decision to have the surgery was entirely up to the family. I must reiterate this point: Dr Sparman placed life-threatening medical decisions in the hands of Gordon’s family, who had no medical training whatever. At a loss to know what choice to make, the family consulted the head cardiologist at the Queen Elizabeth hospital, who advised them to remove Gordon from the Sparman Clinic immediately and bring him to the hospital as soon as possible, and not to go ahead with the surgery. The family began making plans to move Gordon, but Dr Sparman advised them that he was too ill and would not make the journey and now began pressuring them to go ahead with the surgery.

In desperation, the family sought further advice from a relative in England who is a doctor. Based on the information that Sparman provided to the relative, it was advised that the surgery should go ahead. So the family had no choice but to put their faith in Dr Sparman.

At this point, the family were presented with another bill, for a total of $70,000, of which the family had already paid $56,000. The family were advised that the surgery would not go ahead without the balance being paid, so they had no choice but to once again come up with the money. It would appear that, in response to the threat to move Gordon out of the clinic, Dr Sparman was determined to now go ahead with the surgery, putting immense emotional pressure on my family and presenting more bills, in case he lost “the business.”

Gordon came out of surgery with only a 10% chance of survival according to Dr Sparman and two days later he was deemed stable enough for the medical evacuation. Dr Sparman arranged the medication to be administered during the medical flight, and this was given to the flight team—in a fast food bag. The sedative he provided for Gordon for the flight was once again diazepam. The air medical team queried the use of the drug as a sedative, saying that such a high quantity as had been prescribed to Gordon was not administered in the USA because it took far too long to disperse through the system in patients with that level of critical illness and especially patients with kidney failure. The absolute failure to care for Gordon’s wellbeing, coupled with a wholly inappropriate drug for his age and state of illness and in a quantity that was beyond irresponsible, placed a constant strain on his heart.

I must emphasise that we would never have been in this position had Gordon been sent to the main hospital and properly treated for the pneumonia the moment he arrived.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I interrupt my good friend to ask something I have been waiting to hear. Who made the decision to send Gordon to Sparman rather than the hospital? Was the decision taken on board the ship? Was there some kind of cosy arrangement or deal? Does he know?

Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to my hon. and gallant Friend. I will come to that in my speech, but it was not the decision of the cruise liner; it was the decision of the port agent.

In the 11 days Gordon spent at the Sparman clinic, he received limited nutritional care and substandard nursing that gave rise to horrific first-degree bed sores that visibly shocked the medical staff at the Leeds General Infirmary and was placed in a poorly air-conditioned room, which led to his exhaustion. This all led Gordon to have much higher levels of anxiety, fear, pain and rapid health deterioration, which put increased pressure on his heart, at a time when he should have been able to rest, be properly hydrated and nutritionally fed, and so continue the recovery from his pneumonia that the ship’s doctor said he was comfortably making without any heart issues at that time.
Gordon was repatriated to the UK and admitted to the Leeds General Infirmary early on Tuesday 28 January. On inspecting the report from Dr Sparman, the consultants could not understand why Gordon was still so critically ill. The medical reports implied that he was and should be in recovery. They were also very concerned at the gravity of Gordon's bed sores, which were first degree and had resulted from his position not being changed whilst he was in the Sparman clinic. I re-emphasise that not only did the nursing staff refuse to move Gordon, but Dr Sparman had tied his hands to the bed and prevented the family from moving him. These are basic nursing practices. Anybody in the medical profession knows that patients left in the same position will develop bed sores. I emphasise again that the staff at the Leeds General Infirmary audibly gasped when they saw the state of my father-in-law. They also questioned the prolonged use and high dosage of the drug diazepam that was administered.

Sadly, after the consultants at the LGI had performed their tests on Gordon, it was determined that his heart had greatly deteriorated and was in a much worse condition than had been reflected in Dr Sparman's notes. In fact, the prognosis was not good. In addition to chronic heart failure, Gordon had kidney failure and brain damage from lack of oxygen. Despite his being taken off the diazepam sedation on arrival at the LGI, Gordon's kidneys were not able to dispel the drug, and that, coupled with his now having multiple organ failure and brain damage, meant that Gordon never properly regained consciousness. Thirteen days after being admitted to the LGI, the family, with very heavy hearts, had to admit defeat and Gordon's life support was stopped. He died on 13 February, leaving behind a devastated and traumatised family.

Owing to the circumstances around Gordon's death the post mortem is still ongoing as the Coroner's Office considers it to be a very complex case, which means we have been unable to get the final pathology report and still await his final death certificate.

My family paid approximately $200,000 in total for the barbaric treatment my father-in-law received in Barbados and the subsequent medical repatriation to the UK, and they have nothing to show for that money other than traumatic memories of the tragic and painful death of Gordon. After the horrific treatment and trauma my father-in-law had been through, we did not think we could be hit with anything else, but we were. It was only after returning to the UK that the family started doing simple Google searches on Dr Alfred Sparman, and they highlighted a horrifying picture.

In 1986, Sparman was convicted of the offence of disorderly conduct, to which he pleaded guilty. In 1991, he was convicted of the crimes of sexual abuse in the first degree and unlawful imprisonment in New York and sentenced to five years' probation. In January 1996, Sparman was registered as a sex offender in Florida, but in June he applied for licensure to practise medicine in Tennessee, and the register also contains a list of Sparman's aliases: John W. Freeman and Alfred W. Eversley.

It was in 2001 that Sparman went to Barbados and opened his clinic. In 2004, he had his board certification in internal medicine suspended by the American Board of Internal Medicine, but he continues to this day to advertise himself as an “American Board-Certified Physician”. In 2005, he was re registrado as a sexual predator and offender in the state of Florida. In 2010, he was re registered as a sex offender in the state of Tennessee, and the register also contains a list of Sparman's aliases: John W. Freeman and Alfred W. Eversley.

On top of the crimes for which he has been convicted, Sparman has advertised himself as a “Board-Certified Cardiologist” but never passed the board certification cardiology exams in the USA. He has also advertised himself as a Fellow of the American College of Cardiology but the FACC has no record of his being a fellow. He was reprimanded by the Medical Council of Barbados and asked to remove “FACC” from his letterhead. He advertises himself as an interventional cardiologist but has no specialist training in interventional cardiology. He has had a number of complaints made against him to the Medical Council of Barbados. He has also tried to poach paying cardiology patients—that is, tourists—from the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. All this information can be found in a simple online due diligence check. In addition, there are countless stories online of other people who have suffered at the hands of Dr Sparman.

So why was Gordon sent to the clinic of a supposed doctor who was stripped of his licence to practise medicine in the US, who is a registered sex offender, who has numerous speculations surrounding him regarding his conduct and who has blatantly lied about his accreditations? Why was Gordon sent to a heart clinic in the first place when he was diagnosed with double pneumonia, rather than being sent to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital? We will never know the answers to those questions.

A representative of Cruise & Maritime Voyages has confirmed that it was the port agent who determined where my father-in-law was taken for his medical care once he was disembarked. The port agent is governed by maritime law. A port agent is the designated person or agency held responsible for handling shipments and cargo and the general interest of its customers at ports and harbours worldwide, on behalf of ship owners, managers and charterers. Quite frankly, the decision that the port agent made to send Gordon to the Sparman clinic, instead of to the main hospital, killed him. And to add a final insult to all the injury, instead of Gordon visiting his “bucket list” destination, the Taj Mahal, with his beloved wife, Jackie instead laid his ashes there.

I ask the Minister and her Department today to seek a change to international maritime law, by lobbying the International Maritime Organisation, regarding the duty of care and due diligence, through a fit and proper persons test, that a port agent must carry out when identifying and commissioning onshore medical facilities and practitioners for those who are disembarked for medical emergencies. The international conventions for the safety of life at sea of 1974 and 1988 have been used to bring in the highest standards of health and safety for those at sea, whether they be crew or passengers. These provisions were amended in 2004 through the international ship and port facility security code after the security concerns raised after 9/11 and I would argue that this shows that the wellbeing of seafarers carries on within the port, not just on the vessel.
Gordon was always proud of the work he did in bringing about changes to landlord law to achieve the protection and standards required, especially for tenants, and although this will never bring him back, it would be a final fitting tribute to his life to know that, even in death, he was able to try to make the world a better place, to ensure that this never happens to anybody else.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I must start by passing on my deepest condolences to my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) and his family on the tragic death of Gordon Hoyland Spencer. I had the privilege of meeting Mr Spencer’s family earlier today and saw their grief and despair. My hon. Friend gave a powerful, brave, emotional speech, and it was incredibly difficult to digest such a long list of tragic incidents that should just not have happened. What makes Mr Spencer’s death all the more heartbreaking is that it could so easily have been prevented by prompt and correct treatment and good quality care. Quite understandably, my hon. Friend wants action to prevent any other families going through a similar agony.

Under the International Labour Organization’s maritime labour convention, ships carrying 100 or more persons and ordinarily engaged on international voyages of more than three days’ duration shall carry a qualified medical doctor who is responsible for providing medical care. Ships’ doctors, like any other doctor, have a duty of care to their patients governed by ethical responsibilities. That would usually include discharging sick patients into what they consider appropriate medical care facilities ashore, in compliance with the code of medical ethics in their country of registration or licence. In doing so, a ship’s doctor may liaise with an assistance company appointed by the passenger’s insurer, which should be able to advise on appropriate care providers ashore.

According to my hon. Friend’s account, it would appear that Mr Spencer received appropriate care and treatment while on board the vessel and was recovering—we must note that. However, the facilities available on board were not sufficient to further Mr Spencer’s recovery and a decision was made that he should be medically discharged in Barbados. I understand that the port agent facilitated the transfer of Mr Spencer to a cardiology clinic rather than to the general hospital.

The port agent’s role is primarily to help facilitate the ship’s transit through the port, and the engagement and choice of an agent is at the shipping company’s discretion. A ship’s agent may, if asked, provide the details of local medical facilities, but the responsibility remains with the ship’s doctor to discharge sick passengers into what they consider to be an appropriate medical facility ashore, in compliance with the code of medical ethics in their country of registration or licence. In doing so, a ship’s doctor may liaise with an assistance company appointed by the passenger’s insurer, which should be able to advise on appropriate care providers ashore.

Port agents are required to comply with relevant domestic law and the port statute, but they are not regulated by international maritime law. However, considering the case that my hon. Friend has presented today, I will ask the officials at the Department for Transport and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to consider whether such regulation would fall within the remit of the International Maritime Organisation or whether it would be appropriate for another international body. I will also write to the Cruise Lines International Association, the international trade association for the industry, to highlight the issues that this incident has raised in order to highlight its duty of care and responsibilities with regard to port agents.

Furthermore, I will raise the case directly with the IMO, and, considering how personal the case is for my hon. Friend, I wonder whether he could bear to share his experiences again. I know that this will be emotional and difficult for him, but I respectfully ask him to join me for a meeting that I will convene directly with the IMO’s secretary-general so that my hon. Friend can share his experiences and make representations to see whether we can lobby and obtain a change in the law.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for that offer. I wonder whether the invitation could be extended to my family, who were in Barbados at the time and experienced what happened at first hand.

Ms Ghani: That would be absolutely fit and proper. I accept it, and we will do what we can as soon as we can.

We have heard this afternoon of the tragic and preventable death of Gordon Hoyland Spencer. I share my hon. Friend’s commitment that, although nothing can be done to reverse what happened, Gordon’s death should act as a call for action to the maritime industry. Passengers should be cared for to the highest possible standard, particularly when they are most in need, and the Government will play their part in helping to ensure that no one has to repeat the painful experiences of Gordon and his family.

Bob Stewart: I believe the Minister is shortly to finish, but I wonder what the heck is going to happen to this so-called Dr Sparman. How can we allow this man to continue his work in Barbados? What can the British Government do to stop it? Are we going to report the man to the Barbadian Government? And are we going to complain about how the port agent dealt with this case? I believe that practical step might prevent another family from going through the hell that the Shelbrooke family have been through.

Ms Ghani: Absolutely. The fact this has been raised on the Floor of the House will be reflected by all Government agencies, and I do not doubt for a moment that this message will reach Barbados, especially once the meeting takes place with the IMO.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell for bringing this debate to the House. Once again, I express my profound sympathies to him, to Gordon’s widow Jackie and to the entire family. I look forward, if I can use that word, to working with my hon. Friend to campaign on this incredibly important issue and to ensuring that we do all we can to prevent another incident like this one.

Question put and agreed to.

4.21 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Monday 24 June 2019

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I must advise the House that last Friday I received notification from the petition officer for the constituency of Brecon and Radnorshire, in respect of the recall petition for Chris Davies. The recall petition process for the constituency of Brecon and Radnorshire, established under the Recall of MPs Act 2015, closed on Thursday last at 5 pm. In total, 10,005 people signed the petition for the removal of Chris Davies as Member of Parliament for Brecon and Radnorshire. As this number was greater than 10% of those eligible to sign the petition, the petition was successful. Chris Davies has therefore ceased to be the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire, and the seat is accordingly vacant. He can no longer participate in any parliamentary proceedings as a Member of Parliament. I shall cause the text of the notification to be published in the Votes and Proceedings and in the Official Report.

[The notification will appear at the end of today's proceedings.]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

1. David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What steps is he taking to ensure his Department's policies are compliant with the UN convention on the rights of the child.

[911504]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I am sure colleagues have enjoyed the bevy of sport over the weekend, especially the tennis, but I think we would all want to congratulate the Lionesses on winning 3-0 against the Cameroon and, of course, on reaching the quarter-finals, where I hope they will quickly dispose of the Norway option to get to the semi-finals.

The use of children's rights impact assessments is widely promoted across the Department and wider Government, and our assessment template is designed to help staff give due consideration to the UNCRC when making new policy and legislation.

David Hanson: May I first take a moment to congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on serving 10 years in the Chair? That is worthy of recognition.

Will the Minister give some indication of when the results of the consultation on the restraint of children will be published? The consultation closed in January 2018, having commenced in 2017. When is it going to happen?

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman very warmly for what he has said.

Nadhim Zahawi: May I add my congratulations, Mr Speaker, on your 10 years in the Chair?

The consultation will be published very, very shortly.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): When do the Government expect to announce a national free school dinner scheme for poorer children during the holidays, based on the successful pilots the Department has been running over the past two years?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who helped to make sure those pilots happened. We are investing £9 million in holiday activities and food programmes. This summer, children in 11 local authorities will receive healthy meals, learn about the importance of healthy eating and enjoy enriching physical activities during the summer holiday. Decisions on the programme beyond March 2020 will be taken as part of the spending review, but I certainly think it has been a great success.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I also congratulate you on 10 years, Mr Speaker. What is quite scary is that we have been here for four of them now.

On Friday I had the pleasure of meeting Hillhead High School S3. They are taking part in the “Send my Friend to School” campaign, which talks about the right of children all over the world to access education under the convention. What steps is the Department taking to work with the Department for International Development on ensuring that the right to education we enjoy in this country is accessed all around the world?

Nadhim Zahawi: We work closely with other Departments. In fact, the permanent secretary of the Department for Education has written to all other permanent secretaries to make sure that we deliver on our promise. Of course, we are making that commitment across Government.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): All I can say on your 10th anniversary, Mr Speaker, is that you do not look old enough.

Article 23 of the convention guarantees the right to education for children with disabilities, yet just this weekend we heard how that basic right has become a privilege, with parents forced to go to the courts to get support for their children. Years since the Prime Minister promised to tackle the burning injustices, and just weeks before she is due to leave office, they burn brighter than ever before. Can the Minister tell us when the Prime Minister and the Chancellor will stop haggling over our children’s future in the press and come back to this House with a statement announcing the funding they so desperately need?
Nadhim Zahawi: As the hon. Lady knows, we have increased funding for children with special educational needs and disabilities by £250 million, taking it to £6.3 billion. We have also introduced a system that covers the ages from zero all the way up to 25, through the 2014 reforms, and so many more children and young people are eligible for education, health and care plans, with rights of appeal. Inevitably, this leads to an increase in the number of appeals, but the vast majority of cases are handled without going to appeal—only 1.6% of them go to an appeal decision. As she will know, many local authorities have almost no appeals whatsoever and we are attempting to learn from best practice and spread it throughout the system.

Free Childcare

2. Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the provision of 30 hours' free childcare on the financial viability of childcare settings.

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his supplementary. We do keep a close eye on monitoring the provider, the market and of course the cost base. Under the early years national funding formula, our average rates to local authorities are higher than the average hourly costs of providing childcare to three and four-year-olds, but he makes an important contribution, in the sense that we have to keep an eye on the costs. Ofsted has essentially done the work; the number of childcare places has remained broadly stable since the introduction of the 30 hours’ programme.

Christian Matheson: Nursery schools in Chester are closing and parents are being charged for extras just so that the nursery schools can make ends meet. Will the Minister not accept that there are real problems with the funding of this programme, and will he agree to review it?

Nadhim Zahawi: I meet regularly tell me that it has made an enormous difference. Parents who hardly saw each other are able to work and to see each other and their child. One lady said movingly that her child came out of his shell because he was able to spend more time with children his age, too.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): The cost of childcare is prohibitive for many families and can dissuade women from returning to the workplace, but those financial pressures are doubled and sometimes tripled for parents of multiples. What work is the Minister doing to assist those families to deal with the special financial challenges of childcare provision for twins and triplets, particularly those families on middle incomes, who may not qualify for the child allowance or other benefits?

Nadhim Zahawi: Clearly, the programme aims to make sure that parents who are working are able to receive the entitlements. Of course, we deliver entitlements for two-year-olds for the most disadvantaged families in this country, but I will happily look at the question of parents with twins or triplets as well.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) sports an admirable tie, about which my only reservation is that it is a tad understated.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, this is the limited edition Beatles “Magical Mystery Tour” tie, which is very appropriate at this stage in our parliamentary life.

May I say to the Minister that I do not want statistics? The National Day Nurseries Association is based in my constituency and a Prime Minister many years ago prioritised “Education. Education. Education.” What he knows, and I know, is that early years stimulation is the most important priority of any Government, so why is early years care so expensive for young couples and young women in this country, and why has the Minister not done something about it?

Nadhim Zahawi: The numbers are important in this case and the 600,000 children benefiting from the 30 hours in the first two years means 600,000 families who have been able to go out to work. Of course, 700,000 of the most disadvantaged families with two-year-olds have also benefited. We are spending £3.5 billion on entitlements, which is a record to be proud of. I should also mention the hon. Gentleman’s tie, which is very beautiful.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that this Government’s reforms, such as the 30 hours’ free childcare for three and four-year-olds, are helping more children to grow up to develop their full potential, regardless of their background?

Nadhim Zahawi: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. The parents whom I have met and with whom I meet regularly tell me that it has made an enormous difference. Parents who hardly saw each other are able to work and to see each other and their child. One lady said movingly that her child came out of his shell because he was able to spend more time with children his age, too.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): On many occasions, the Minister has told us that what he really cares about is quality and sustainability. Will he explain how he is improving quality when the National Day Nurseries Association’s most recent data shows that 55% of childcare settings plan to spend less on training; that one in five settings are lowering the quality of food served to children to make ends meet; and that more than 40% of settings have cut back on learning resources? On sustainability, 17% of nurseries in deprived areas anticipate closure in the next year. How is that sustainable? Given that the Minister’s priorities are not being met, will he at least acknowledge that some nurseries are struggling and take action to ensure that deprived areas are not disproportionately affected?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am sure the hon. Lady will agree with me and the whole House that the organisation that should be responsible for quality should be independent from Government, and that organisation is Ofsted, which states clearly that the overall quality in the sector remains high. Ofsted says that 95% of the providers in the early years register that have been inspected were judged to be good or outstanding. That is a good track record. We can always do better and the hon. Lady is right to say that we have to keep a close eye on funding, because some providers are challenged, but that does not mean that we do down the whole sector. It is wrong to talk down the sector in that way.
School Budgets

3. **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the financial sustainability of school budgets.

8. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of funding for schools.

20. **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the financial sustainability of school budgets.

**The Minister for School Standards** (Nick Gibb): Congratulations on your 10 years in office, Mr Speaker.

We are spending £43.5 billion on schools this year, but we recognise the budgeting challenges that schools face and will continue to listen to teachers, to help us to inform decisions about future funding. As we prepare for the spending review, the Government are determined to ensure that schools have the resources they need to deliver high-quality education and that our reforms continue to drive up education standards.

**Bambos Charalambous**: I thank the Minister for meeting me and local headteachers from my Enfield, Southgate constituency last week. I know that he gets the problems with school funding, but I do not believe that the Chancellor does. Will the Minister join me in demanding more funding for schools from the Chancellor?

**Nick Gibb**: It was a real pleasure to meet all the headteachers to whom the hon. Gentleman introduced me on Wednesday, including Kate Baptiste, the headteacher at St Monica’s Primary School, where 78% of pupils achieve at least the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. That is way above the national average of 64%. In fact, all the headteachers were from schools with high standards. We had a constructive discussion about the challenges that those heads face in respect of school funding, and we will take all those challenges on board, as the hon. Gentleman suggests, as we prepare for the spending review and our discussions with the Treasury.

**Wera Hobhouse**: The funding crisis for schools in Bath is getting worse and worse. For example, one school has not employed a new teaching assistant in three years and another has only one teaching assistant for every 102 pupils. Only two weeks ago, teachers and parents went on a huge march in Bath to express their alarm about the threat to their children’s education. What can the Minister say to them?

**Nick Gibb**: The hon. Lady will be aware that schools in her Bath constituency have attracted 6.3% more funding per pupil this year, compared with 2017-18. There are now 10,000 more teachers in our system and 40,000 more teaching assistants are employed today, compared with 2010. As I said to the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), we will make the strongest possible case to secure the right deal for education in the spending review.

**Lilian Greenwood**: In March, I surveyed Nottingham South schools about the effects of funding cuts, and their responses were frankly disturbing. They revealed concerns not only about their inability to buy books and equipment but about pupils being unable to attend school full time because a lack of special educational needs provision. One headteacher even told me that their school may have to close the hall and dining room because it cannot afford to undertake the urgent repairs that are needed. Will the Minister tell parents in my constituency what he is doing to secure extra funding for Nottingham schools in the forthcoming spending review?

**Nick Gibb**: The hon. Lady will be aware that, since 2017, every local authority has been given more money for every five to 16-year-old pupil in every school, with the biggest increases being allocated to schools that have been most underfunded. As for special educational needs funding, that has increased from £5 billion a year in 2013 to £6.3 billion this year, but as I have said to other hon. Members we will be making a strong case to the Treasury as part of the spending review process.

**Tracey Crouch** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the report by the Children’s Commissioner and the Institute for Fiscal Studies stating that education spending per pupil at primary schools is up 80% under this Government? Across my constituency, schools are receiving a very welcome above national average uplift in funding, including schools in my most deprived areas, which will go to support pupils of all abilities to perform better and close the gap between them and their peers?

**Nick Gibb**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I pay tribute to her for her interest and passion for educational standards in her constituency. She will be aware that, compared with 2017-18, per pupil funding in Medway is going up by 3.4% and in Kent by 6%. On top of the national funding formula, Medway will receive £12 million and Kent £57.7 million in pupil premium funding.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I add my congratulations to you, Mr Speaker. I hope that you get your testimonial.

Broad Oak School in my constituency is under threat of closure. It is heavily dependent on its pupil ratio, but the number of pupils it has is down by about 60%. The wider area is down by 20%. What more can the Department do to encourage local authorities to make sure that we build the homes in the areas where we have falling rolls at schools?

**Nick Gibb**: Of course, we have a presumption against the closure of small rural schools. Closing a school is a very difficult decision to take, but my hon. Friend is right. This is a Government who are committed to ensuring that young people can get on to the housing ladder and, because we have a strong economy and a determination to build those houses, we hope that young people will have the homes that they need.

**James Gray** (North Wiltshire) (Con): The Minister knows very well that, while I broadly welcome the increase in funding in Wiltshire, schools that are funded under the
private finance initiative have particular difficulties. Abbeyfield in my constituency has historic debt and therefore cannot become an academy. Royal Wootton Bassett has had a very big cut in its budget overall, and Malmesbury has some detailed problems with regard to IT under the PFI contract. If I were to convene such a thing, would the Minister agree to meet with the three heads from the three secondary schools I have mentioned, either here or, even better, in Wiltshire?

Nick Gibb: I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and the headteachers of the schools concerned. We do specifically, in most cases, fund PFI costs that relate to schools through the national funding formula, but I do understand the pressures and problems that PFI can cause during the process of academy conversion. Our officials are becoming increasingly experienced at handling those challenges, but I will meet my hon. Friend with those headteachers.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): The Minister talks about the funding going into schools, but the fact that he admits that those schools have increased costs shows that there are real-terms cuts to those schools. Members across the House have told him that many times, and he would be advised to take that on board. Let me see whether he will be more open about another report, which suggests that the national funding formula will be delayed by the Treasury in order to reserve money for a no-deal contingency fund. Can he give us any guarantee today on the timetable for that much-needed formula?

Nick Gibb: We are having discussions across Government on these issues of school funding and as we lead up to the spending review. We understand the need for schools to have clarity about their level of school funding and we are committed to the national funding formula, which is a much fairer way of distributing funding to our schools.

Angela Rayner: I am not sure we are any wiser about the outgoing Prime Minister’s plans, so let me turn to the future. The leading candidate—the blond one, not the bland one—promises minimum funding of £5,000 per pupil, but can the Minister confirm that this is under £50 million a year, an increase of just 0.1% in the total schools budget? Does he accept that this amount is less than the increase promised in his party’s manifesto, less than the amount that the outgoing Prime Minister apparently accepts is needed and, I hope, less than the amount that he will ask for at the spending review?

Nick Gibb: It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the specific proposals of the contenders, although I am very pleased that all the contenders in the leadership contest have made education a focus of their platforms. We are committed to ensuring that schools are properly funded, and that work is happening now as we prepare for the spending review.

Early Literacy: Phonics

4. Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What recent assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of teaching early literacy through phonics.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): There is significant evidence that systematic phonics is a highly effective method for teaching early reading. In 2018, 82% of six-year-olds met the expected standard in the phonics check, compared with just 58% when we introduced the check in 2012. Furthermore, 88% of pupils meeting the phonics standard in 2013 went on to meet the year 6 reading test standard in 2018.

Dr Johnson: I agree with the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), who said earlier that early intervention is very important. I am pleased to see that, as a result of these phonics changes, England has risen to joint eighth place in the progress in international reading literacy study—up from joint 10th in 2011, and well up from the low of 19th position under a Labour Government.

My son Wilfred has just started learning his phonics—something he enjoys and that I know he will do well at, given the good base that the Government are offering. Will my right hon. Friend agree with me that boosting pupil literacy is key to getting our children the best possible start in life?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is, of course, absolutely right. Reading is a fundamental building block for a successful education, and the fact that more children are now reading more effectively will help them develop a habit and love of reading and prepare them for the higher demands on their reading ability when they start secondary school.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The literacy rates of primary school children dramatically improve when they are read to in class on a daily basis. What is the Minister for School Standards doing to encourage that?

Nick Gibb: As my hon. Friend will know, we had this discussion when, with other Northamptonshire MPs, we met the local authority and the regional schools commissioner. It is important that children, at primary school in particular, are read to every day to improve their vocabulary. The better their vocabulary, the more easily they can comprehend what they are reading, and the more they can comprehend what they are reading. The more likely they are to read. That, in turn, will improve their vocabulary and knowledge.

School Places

5. David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase the number of good school places in England.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): I join colleagues from across the House in congratulating you on your decade, Mr Speaker. On the subject of nice round numbers, we are on track to create 1 million new places in schools this decade, primarily through building free schools and encouraging existing high-performing schools to expand.

David Morris: Does my right hon. Friend agree that continual investment in schools in Morecambe and Lunesdale has directly resulted in improvements in education standards?
Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend has been a strong and consistent champion for his constituents and their education. Lancashire has been allocated £140 million over 2011 to 2021. In his constituency of Morecambe and Lunesdale, the proportion of schools rated good or outstanding has increased from 64% to 86%.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Lots of things make a school good. A headteacher who I met yesterday in my constituency had written to the Department for Education for a specific answer to a question. He did not feel that he had had that answer, so I am going to ask it today; I would appreciate a specific answer. What is a teacher to say to a child who asks, “Is it okay to be gay?”

Damian Hinds: They should say yes.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is very welcome that significantly more children are taught in good and outstanding schools in Northamptonshire now than in 2010. The enormous housing growth in Corby and East Northamptonshire is creating real demand for those places. Will my right hon. Friend keep banging the drum for more funding from the Treasury for school places?

Damian Hinds: Yes, indeed. We work with local authorities to make sure that we have up-to-date assessments and projections of the need for school places, and we fund to those projections to make sure that there is the right number of places. We are absolutely focused on making sure that we are doing that by expanding existing good and outstanding schools and putting in good new provision, which also improves diversity and choice.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Johanne Clifton, the executive principal of Billesley Primary School, and its staff and pupils on achieving an outstanding rating in all Ofsted categories? This was previously a school that was in difficulty, and it is in a very disadvantaged part of my constituency. Does he realise, however, that schools like this need adequate resources in order to maintain commitment and achievement? Even a school like this is struggling financially at the moment.

Damian Hinds: I do recognise, of course, that that school and all schools need the right resources. I am also very happy to join the hon. Gentleman in his congratulation and commendation of Ms Clifton and all the staff, pupils and parents at the school.

OECD Programme for International Student Assessment

6. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What comparative assessment his Department has made of the performance of the constituent parts of the UK in the OECD programme for international student assessment tables.


The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Performance in the PISA ranking system has remained stable in England and Northern Ireland since 2006.

John Lamont: Under the SNP, Scotland’s education system has gone from being the best in the United Kingdom, with standards well above the OECD average, to third out of the home nations. Standards in reading, science and maths in Scotland have fallen to their lowest levels and are now no more than average. Average might be good enough for the SNP, but does the Secretary of State agree that the UK needs to be aiming higher and that the falls in standards in Scotland are shameful, particularly when the SNP Government claim to have education at the top of their priorities? [Interruption.]

Damian Hinds: I am not sure what the dismissive guttural noises from our friends in the SNP were all about. I share my hon. Friend’s regret about the decline in maths and science, and I am pleased that he and colleagues both here and in the Scottish Parliament are holding the Scottish Government to account.

Luke Graham: What positive action can my right hon. Friend, and this Government, take to support the devolved Administrations to improve these results and give more transparency to my constituents?

Damian Hinds: Of course, we have regular contact with the different devolved Administrations on a range of matters, not only because there are always things that we can learn from each other, but because we have many shared interests and interdependencies, and education is yet another area where we can work better together as one United Kingdom.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): May I, Mr Speaker, join colleagues in wishing you congratulations on your 10 years in your position? You have done some marathon sessions recently, and it might be worth the House of Commons Library finding out what your total hourage in the Chair would be.

This week, Scottish schools break up for the summer holidays. I am sure the House will join me in wishing the pupils and the staff a very well-earned rest. May I give my very best wishes to Mr Andrew McSorley, the headteacher at St Thomas Aquinas Secondary School, who is retiring this week? In Scotland, we ensure that all young people remain in full-time education until the age of 16. In contrast, in England we see the increased use of permanent exclusions and off-rolling, meaning that young people remain in education and are included in results such as OECD and school league tables?

Damian Hinds: May I start on the happy note of joining the hon. Lady in congratulating Mr McSorley on his upcoming retirement and wishing the best to the pupils and staff at schools across Scotland as they move towards their holidays?

There are more years of compulsory education in England than there are in Scotland. As for permanent exclusions, of course I regret it when children have to be expelled, but sometimes it is necessary, and necessary
sometimes because of the other 27 children in the class. In fact, the rate of permanent exclusions that we see in schools today is lower than it was a decade ago when the Labour party was in government.

**Sixth-Form Students: Funding**

7. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): If he will implement the recommendation in the April 2019 Social Mobility Commission’s state of the nation 2018 to 2019 report to increase significantly the national funding rate for sixth-form students.

**The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton):**

Mr Speaker, may I add my congratulations to you on your 10 years in the Chair? I remember fondly sitting on the Opposition Benches by your side when I was first elected and being guided by your wise advice.

I fully recognise the critical role that sixth forms play in social mobility. When I visit colleges and sixth forms, I see living examples of that. We have protected the 16-to-19 base rate until the end of the current spending review period, but I am very aware of the cost pressures on providers and of the fact that funding has not kept up with costs. We are looking closely at 16-to-19 funding in preparation for the spending review.

**Diana Johnson:** I welcome what the Minister said about the value of sixth-form colleges such as Wyke in Hull North, which does an enormous amount of vital work to promote social mobility and develop the skills we need for a modern economy. There were 17.5% austerity cuts under the coalition Government. If we want to put that money back into the system, why do we not scrap tax relief for the charitable status of private schools?

**Anne Milton:** As I said, I am very aware of the cost pressures. Decisions such as the one the hon. Lady suggests are a matter for Her Majesty’s Treasury. There is more money available, particularly to colleges, through apprenticeships. The money spent on apprenticeships will have doubled by 2020, and T-levels will attract an additional £500 million per year when fully rolled out, but as I say, we will consider this ahead of the spending review, because I am aware that funding has not kept up with the costs.

**Mrs Anne Main** (St Albans) (Con): Schools in my constituency have been arguing for more funding at every level, but they particularly want a funding settlement for 16 to 19-year-olds that represents the pressures on them. What more can be done to ensure that there is a long-term settlement, not a year-on-year settlement? Planning long term is something that schools find enormously important.

**Anne Milton:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. The difficulty with managing budgets on an annual basis is that, in order to make provision and plans that are sustainable, colleges and schools often need a longer-term settlement. I am sure the Minister for School Standards and I will be raising exactly the point that she has made.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Government’s own review of tertiary education said that there was no justification for funding 18-year-olds in sixth forms or colleges at a lower rate than 17-year-olds and recommended that the baseline be raised. Does the Minister accept that the cuts in 2013 were a big mistake?

**Anne Milton:** We will be looking at all the Augar report’s recommendations very carefully. The hon. Lady raises an important point, which will be part of our considerations when we formally respond to the report.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con) rose—

**Mr Speaker:** I call the illustrious Chair of the Select Committee, Mr Robert Halfon.

**Robert Halfon:** Thank you, Mr Speaker, and congratulations. I know that my right hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for more further education funding, but the main estimates memorandum for 2019-20 shows that resource expenditure on further education on a like-for-like basis is falling by 3.3% in cash terms and more in real terms, and the Department for Education’s capital budget for FE is also set to decrease by 40% from £186 million to £112 million. Can she explain the reason for the reduction and its impact?

**Anne Milton:** I had a delightful visit to a college in my right hon. Friend’s constituency of Harlow that does an excellent job. Many further education colleges are doing an excellent job in difficult circumstances. As I have made clear, we are aware that funding has not kept up with costs.

**Apprenticeship Levy**

9. **Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): What recent assessment his Department has made of the effect of the apprenticeship levy on the number of apprenticeships.

**The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton):** I am very aware of the number of apprenticeships, but comparing numbers before and after the reforms we have made is a bit like comparing apples and pears, because we have put quality at the heart of apprenticeships. The number of people starting on the new employer-designed standards in the first half of 2018-19 has increased by 79%, which is an indication of the quality. An apprenticeship must now last for a year, and there must be 20% off-the-job training. There has been an increase of 10% in apprenticeship starts in the first half of 2018-19, compared with the same period in 2017-18.

**Richard Graham:** I am grateful to the Minister for that answer, but chambers of commerce such as Business West do not think that the two-tier system is working as well as it could. Specialist Gloucestershire Engineering Training believes that more funding for small and medium-sized enterprises would enable them to train more engineering apprentices. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is something the Treasury should look at closely in the autumn spending review?

**Anne Milton:** We are determined to make the apprenticeship system work for small and medium-sized enterprises, and smaller businesses get 95% of their training costs paid. We will move smaller businesses on
Anne Milton: Those decisions were made some time ago. They have enabled us to make sure that by 2020 spending on apprenticeships will have more than doubled since 2010.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): My felicitations on your first decade in office, Mr Speaker. Onwards and upwards!

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Ten more years!

Gordon Marsden: Indeed. We are hearing about the ups and downs of funding for apprenticeships, but the National Audit Office told the FE Ministers in March in no uncertain terms that there was a clear risk that the apprenticeship programme would now be financially unsustainable. The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education has said that it could be overspent by £0.5 billion this year. The Minister told FE Week in January that she thought that the apprenticeship budget would be “alright until July”. July is next week. Does she still think that?

Anne Milton: Contrary to what the hon. Gentleman has said, previously the apprenticeship system is working well, and levy payers in particular—and also small businesses—are grabbing at the opportunities that apprenticeships offer. I am aware of the budgetary pressures on the system and we will make representations ahead of the spending review on that point.

SATs: Pressure on Students

10. Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the pressures on key stage 2 students undergoing SATs.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Assessment means that we can ensure that pupils everywhere are getting the standard of education that they should. Of course we want pupils to do their best but that should never be at the expense of their wellbeing.

Andrea Jenkyns: Congratulations, Mr Speaker.

I recently visited a primary school in my constituency rated good by Ofsted since 2005. The headteacher brought to my attention the level of difficulty and stress that key stage 2 children face when undergoing SATs. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how we can minimise exam stress for young children and would he like to complete one of the old tests with me?

Damian Hinds: I am not just saying this, but as it happens I last did one of the SATs papers—SPAG, or spelling, punctuation and grammar—on Thursday or Friday last week. As I said in an earlier answer, the point of the assessments is to assess schools and make sure that wherever children grow up they get the standard of education that they deserve. The SATs are not about testing children, and they are not public exams that will stay with children into their adult life. They are not like GCSEs: nobody in a job interview will ever ask, “What did you get in your SATs?” We trust schools and teachers to administer SATs in an appropriate way so that stress is not put on to children. I meet many teachers who do exactly that.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I also offer my congratulations on your decade in the Chair, Mr Speaker. Interestingly, it is children born since you started sitting in the Chair who are coming up to taking SATs. I have heard countless stories from teachers up and down the country that they have kept children in during break times or sacrificed time that they would have otherwise spent on other subjects to prepare for SATs. Does the Secretary of State take responsibility for that stress put on teachers, which inevitably filters down to children? Frankly, is it not just time to scrap SATs?

Damian Hinds: No, it is not. Notwithstanding the hon. Lady’s clever linking of your decade in the Chair with the age of children doing SATs, Mr Speaker, it is common practice around the world to have standardised assessment of one sort or another in primary schools. That was not always the case, but more and more countries—including most of the high-performing ones—recognise that they need a standardised way to assess children’s progress in different parts of the country. It was Government policy when the Liberal Democrats were in coalition with the Conservatives and, of course, it was policy when Labour was in government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, young Sir Patrick, looking as cheerful as ever.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Is there any way to see whether pupils are being let down by their schools, other than seeing that they are not getting up to certain standards?

Damian Hinds: No, not in the same way. Standardised assessment is part of a suite of methods that we use, and Ofsted inspection is, of course, another very important part. The fact is that before we had standardised assessment, there were individual schools and, indeed, substantial parts of the country where children could have been let down not for one or a few years but for many years, and nothing was done about it, starting with the problem that nobody knew about it. SATs are a very important part of our architecture to raise attainment and, critically, to narrow the gap in performance between the rich and the poor.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I congratulate you on your 10 years, Mr Speaker. Sir Thomas More, who held your fine office, went on to become both a martyr and a saint. [Laughter.] I clearly hope it is the latter for you, Sir. And after this, maybe we could have a discussion about which moisturiser you use.
England’s schoolchildren are among the most tested in the world. Headteachers are telling us that high-stakes examinations are associated with increased stress, anxiety and health issues, but the Secretary of State has let the cat out of the bag: we are staying stable in the programme for international student assessment rankings. That was the gold standard that this Government were going to be tested by, but that is sophistry, for standards have gone nowhere under this Government. The pressure and workload of the existing school assessment regime have also led to teachers leaving the profession in droves. Labour’s pledge to scrap key stage 1 and 2 tests has been universally welcomed by teachers and parents alike. Given that the Minister for School Standards was already consulting on scrapping key stage 1 tests, is it not now time for the Secretary of State to make the same commitment?

Damian Hinds: It is not. May I in passing acknowledge that Robert Bolt, the author of “A Man for All Seasons”, was, I think, a constituent in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency? It is not and never will be the time to get rid of standardised assessment at primary school. As I said earlier, more countries around the world are seeing the value and importance of it. We do not know what the Labour party’s alleged replacement for standardised assessment tests would be, but we do know two things about it: first, it would be less reliable; and secondly, it would require a lot more work for teachers.

School Standards

12. Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to raise standards in schools.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): We would expect the outstanding schools which is in part due to our reforms.

Alex Chalk: Formal partnerships between schools in different sectors, such as that between All Saints’ Academy and Cheltenham College in my constituency, are an excellent way of sharing best teaching practice, enriching extracurricular provision and boosting the professional development of staff. Does the Minister recognise the scope of such partnerships for driving up standards in all our schools?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is right: such partnerships are excellent. They raise standards, not just in state schools; they bring benefits to the independent schools that take part in them. The Government have just announced a new grant fund, which could be used either as seed funding for new partnerships or to expand and deepen existing ones.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): In response to questions about school standards and, indeed, school cuts, the Government often try to persuade us that nothing is wrong by citing the number of children in outstanding schools. Yet over the past year, 80% of the 395 schools rated outstanding by Ofsted saw their ratings fall. Will the Minister therefore now be honest about the impact that austerity is having on our schools?

Nick Gibb: We would expect the outstanding schools that are re-inspected to have a higher propensity to be either good or lower, because Ofsted inspects outstanding schools only when a risk factor, such as a drop in standards or complaints from parents, has been triggered.

Post-18 Education and Funding Review

13. Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the merits of the recommendations of the Post-18 education and funding review.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): Congratulations, Mr Speaker, on your 10th anniversary. If you view it as a marriage to this place, then this is your tin anniversary. May I say, however, that you have certainly not had a tin ear when it comes to representing all voices around this House? [HON. MEMBERS: “Groan!”] Turning to the question, the independent panel’s report, chaired by Philip Augar, reports to the Government. It is an important interim step in the review of post-18 education and funding. The Government will consider the panel’s recommendations carefully and conclude the overall review at the spending review. The Government have not taken decisions with regard to the recommendations put forward.

Wes Streeting: I associate myself with the many fawning tributes to your period in office, Mr Speaker. [Laughter.] I am not sure what was more embarrassing about the launch of the Augar review, the former Minister describing it as a report that will “destabilise university finances, imperil many courses and reverse progress in widening access”, or the current Prime Minister acknowledging that, after nine years of Tory cuts, further education has been “overlooked, undervalued and underfunded”. Will the Minister give us an assurance that the Government’s approach will be one of levelling up funding and not of robbing Peter to pay Paul?

Chris Skidmore: It was an excellent launch of the report at the Policy Exchange; I do not remember the hon. Gentleman being there. I thank Philip Augar for an excellent piece of work, which has 53 recommendations, and I encourage all Members to read it. One disappointing factor was that there was not a single question from the media about further education until right at the end; it was all about higher education. That is a great shame. The report is a post-18 review looking at creating unity of purpose, following students across all parts of their life course. That is what the Government will consider when it comes to looking at the 53 recommendations as part of the spending review. We must ensure that the report is taken as a whole and that HE is not just plucked out.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): There are many positive recommendations in the Augar review, including the proposed lifelong learning loans which will be very welcome, but the proposed tuition fee cut could have a negative effect, reducing the money available for widening access. Can my hon. Friend assure me that we can ensure fair access and good outcomes for students, and not just seek a headline? Can we make sure that funding for universities is not reduced?
National Funding Formula

15. Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the national funding formula on (a) small primary schools and (b) schools in rural areas. [911520]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): The national funding formula provides additional support for small primary schools and rural schools. For example, the sparsity factor allocates £25 million specifically to schools that are both small and remote. Coupled with the lump sum, a small rural primary school could attract up to £135,000 through those factors alone.

Neil O’Brien: Village schools are incredibly important institutions in rural life, but their numbers absolutely collapsed over the past 40 years. Will my right hon. Friend look very closely, in the run-up to the spending review, at increasing further that lump sum and the sparsity premium, so that we can protect these institutions?

Nick Gibb: We will keep the formula design under consideration and we will consider feedback on specific factors when developing the formula in the future. For this coming financial year, the formula is already fixed. However, as I said earlier we are in discussion and preparing for the spending review. We want the best possible settlement for small rural schools and the education sector as a whole.

Mr Speaker: We are running late, but I do not want the subject of special educational needs and disabilities to miss out, so we will take the next question. However, I appeal to the questioners to be particularly brief.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

17. Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. [911522]

21. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. [911527]

22. Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support children with special educational needs and disabilities in their education. [911528]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): The 2014 special educational needs and disabilities reforms were the biggest in a generation. Care Quality Commission SEND inspectors provide evidence of progress at a local level. High needs funding has increased to £6.3 billion in 2019-20.

Sarah Jones: A survey of headteachers in Croydon showed that 85% had been forced to cut special educational needs provision. We know that 50% of excluded kids have a special educational need, that a third of councils have no space left in their pupil referral units, and that not being in school is a particular risk factor for getting involved in criminal gangs. When will the Government wake up to this emergency and act? Actions have consequences.

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Lady would have been fair if she had also acknowledged that we launched a review of school exclusions, led by Edward Timpson. The Children and Families Act 2014 secures the presumption in law that children and young people with SEND should receive mainstream education—of course, 98.7% of them are educated in the mainstream. We have put £4 million into innovation funding to improve alternative provision as well.

Liz McInnes: The Local Government Association has said that councils are facing a national special needs emergency and require more funding to meet colossal demand. Does the Minister agree?

Nadhim Zahawi: There are clearly funding pressures on the system, which is why we have announced £230 million in additional funding to take the funding to £6.3 billion. We are in the middle of a spending review and I will be putting my best foot forward to make sure that we get the funding in place.

Debbie Abrahams: The £1.2 billion shortfall in SEND funding means that children with an education, health and care plan may be refused a local place because schools cannot afford to provide the support that these children need. Does the Minister agree that all children, regardless of their disability, should have the support that they need to reach their potential?

Nadhim Zahawi: I do; all children should have the ability to reach their potential, which is why we introduced the reforms in the first place in 2014. We are beginning to see really good practice in places such as Wiltshire and elsewhere, and we learn from best practice and try to scale it to other parts of the country.

Child Health: Healthy and Active Living

18. Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What guidance the Government issue to schools to encourage healthy and active living among children and young people. [911523]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): The school food standards define how schools should provide healthy food and drink throughout the school day. Guidance is available for primary schools on how to use the £320 million PE and sport premium. We are also making health education compulsory, which will focus on healthy active living and mental wellbeing.
Theresa Villiers: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is crucial that we set achievable targets? In that regard, will he praise the golden kilometre initiative from the Mayor of Barnet to get children and young people running or walking for at least a kilometre a day?

Nick Gibb: I congratulate the mayor on the golden kilometre challenge, which is a very welcome initiative. I believe that every primary school should adopt either the golden kilometre challenge or the non-metric and slightly longer daily mile. Regular exercise is clearly linked to long-term health, which is why the new health curriculum guidance emphasises its importance.

Topical Questions

T1. [911529] Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): This month, we approved 22 new free schools in underperforming areas that need the most. That brings us one step closer to delivering 1 million new school places by 2020, which will be the fastest growth for at least two generations. We announced a second wave of further education providers to teach T-level courses from 2021, bringing that total to over 100, and last week, I announced changes to in-year admissions, so that the most vulnerable children, such as those fleeing domestic abuse, can access a school place as quickly as possible.

Paul Blomfield: Although demand for special needs support across the north has risen by 39%, funding has risen by only 8%. In the next school year, Sheffield will receive £3.7 million less in the high needs block than even the Government say that we need. Unable to cope, mainstream schools are excluding increasing numbers of children with special needs. Local parents say that they are at breaking point. The children’s Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi)—has admitted that more needs to be done, so when will the Government deliver what is needed for our most vulnerable children?

Damian Hinds: I acknowledge what the hon. Gentleman says about the increased strains on high needs budgets. As the Minister for School Standards, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), said earlier, high needs spending has gone up, from £5 billion to £6.3 billion, and at the end of last year we put in place a package to ease the immediate strains on local authority high needs budgets. I recognise, however, that more needs to be done. For example, we need to look at how the reforms are working and at the role of educational psychologists and to make sure that where it is right for children they can be educated in a mainstream school.

T2. [911531] Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Last Thursday, I had the pleasure of attending the Peak awards at Derby College. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating all the winners, especially my constituent Ethan Lee, who was the overall winner for the academic studies award, and recognise the important role that further education colleges play in bridging the gap between schools and universities?

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills and Skills (Anne Milton): I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating all the award winners, particularly Ethan, who won the academic studies award. Derby College does excellent work and FE colleges play an important role not only in vocational and technical education but in academic education. Some 160,000 young people study A-levels at colleges.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Although EU students arriving this year and next will continue to pay home fee rates, there is still ambiguity over their immigration status. Since they have only three years under European temporary leave to remain, students on longer courses, including all undergraduates in Scotland, have no guarantee of being able to complete their course. What are the Government doing to review this policy to ensure it works for students at Scottish universities?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): I reassure the hon. Lady that those students will be able to apply for a tier 4 visa to complete their studies and that we will continue to review this matter, working closely with universities in the Russell Group, which has raised this issue with me.

T4. [911533] David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for allocating £3 million for the essential repairs at Morecambe Bay Academy. What steps are being taken to ensure that building maintenance does not delay school transfers from academies when the school is rated inadequate by Ofsted?

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): As my hon. Friend will know, the Department has a statutory duty to convert local authority maintained schools judged inadequate by Ofsted into sponsored academies, whereby a strong sponsor works with the school to secure improvements in education. We take a case-by-case approach to the conversion of these schools and to addressing failure in academies, which includes consideration of all the different means by which the Government can support the future success of a school, including capital investment where appropriate.

T3. [911532] Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Ind): My constituent Geno Brown rightly points out that education plays a vital role in teaching young people about our country’s colonial past and its implications for generations of black and minority ethnic children. What is the Minister doing to make sure that this history—not just our successes, but our failures—is taught properly in our schools?

Nick Gibb: We have had a debate on the content of the history curriculum and the role that migration and other issues play in it. We give a lot of discretion to schools and teachers over what they teach and how they teach it within that curriculum, and there are many elements in it where those issues can be taught effectively.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Last week, I welcomed some excellent students from Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College to Westminster. The Minister will know that that college, like others, is facing significant financial challenges. What assurances can the Department give
me that it will continue to work with the college to ensure that this valued local provision receives the support that students in my constituency need?

Anne Milton: I thank my hon. Friend for having already raised this issue with me. I hope she has managed to speak to the Further Education Commissioner. Students will be at the heart of all our plans, but we are keen to find a solution as soon as we can.

T5. [911534] Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Some weeks ago, thousands of children marched across the country voicing concerns about climate change. What is the Secretary of State doing to equip teachers to teach the subject so that students are well equipped?

Damian Hinds: I totally acknowledge and celebrate the fact that school children are among those showing leadership on this issue. We cover climate change in the national curriculum, and rightly so.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that, as a proportion of our economy, our spending on primary and secondary education is higher than that of any of the other world-leading G7 nations?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is exactly right. According to the most recent OECD “Education at a Glance” report, published in 2015, the UK’s spending as a proportion of national income was the highest in the G7.

T6. [911535] Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Hounslow schools and families welcomed the reforms for children with special educational needs and disabilities in the Children and Families Act 2014, but as a result of those reforms, as well as the increase in the number of children in our schools, the number of children in the borough with education, health and care plans has doubled. The funding to ensure that children get the most from our excellent education services is not adequate, and there will be a £6 million shortfall in the high needs block next year. Will the Minister meet me, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) and Hounslow headteachers, to discuss the implications of the funding gap?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): We are investing up to £26 million in the introduction and improvement of stable breakfast clubs in more than 1,700 schools. The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that the contract with Family Action will run out by March 2020. Funding beyond that date—and the Chancellor is present—will be provided for in the upcoming spending review.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the headteacher of Dronfield Henry Fanshawe school on the two lifetime achievement awards that she received last week, which demonstrate the esteem in which the school and Miss Roche are held in the Dronfield community?

Damian Hinds: I am disappointed, Mr Speaker, that you missed the opportunity to refer to the original 1984 breakfast club in relation to the behaviour of the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham). Members of a certain age will know what I am talking about.

Of course I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Miss Roche on her long service, and on being commended and recognised in this way.

T8. [911537] David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): When representatives of the National Education Union met Welsh MPs last week, they told us that £59 million of education spending had been lost to the Welsh Assembly Government since 2015 owing to central Government cuts. The Prime Minister recognises that there is a shortfall. What hope can the Secretary of State give of funds to alleviate its consequences?

Damian Hinds: Education is, of course, a devolved matter, but it is also true that funding per pupil is slightly higher in England than it is in Wales.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): On behalf of the deaf and hard of hearing, Daniel Jillings, from Lowestoft, and his mother Ann have been campaigning for a GCSE in British Sign Language. I am aware that the preparatory work has been done, but can the Minister assure Daniel and Ann that the Government are doing all that they can to get that exam into the curriculum as soon as possible?

Nick Gibb: I enjoyed meeting Daniel. As my hon. Friend knows, the exam board Signature has submitted content to our Department, and we are working with that. Ultimately, this is a matter for Ofqual. We have to maintain the standards of the GCSE, but we are working with both Ofqual and Signature.

T9. [911538] Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Will the Government continue to fund the national school breakfast programme after April?

Nadhim Zahawi: We are investing up to £26 million in the introduction and improvement of stable breakfast clubs in more than 1,700 schools. The hon. Gentleman was in danger of permanent exclusion. It would be a very unseemly state of affairs, and I would not wish it on him or, indeed, on his fellow attendees.

Mr Speaker: Order. If the hon. Gentleman were to conduct himself in that manner in a breakfast club, he would be in danger of permanent exclusion. It would be a very unseemly state of affairs, and I would not wish it on him or, indeed, on his fellow attendees.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the headteacher of Dronfield Henry Fanshawe school on the two lifetime achievement awards that she received last week, which demonstrate the esteem in which the school and Miss Roche are held in the Dronfield community?

Damian Hinds: I am disappointed, Mr Speaker, that you missed the opportunity to refer to the original 1984 breakfast club in relation to the behaviour of the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham). Members of a certain age will know what I am talking about.

Of course I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Miss Roche on her long service, and on being commended and recognised in this way.
Mr Speaker: My experience is that whenever I listen to the Secretary of State, I feel not only entertained but improved. I am deeply grateful to him.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): A shrinking curriculum, larger class sizes, less student contact time and less student support are some of the effects of shrinking student funding for 16 to 18-year-olds. It is time to raise the rate. What order of priority is being given to speaking to the Treasury to ensure that that is done?

Anne Milton: The hon. Gentleman is a doughty campaigner on this issue and we have spoken many times across the Chamber both here and in Westminster Hall. I will always make the case for 16-to-19 funding. I will never cease to do so; it is absolutely critical that we get the base rate up higher for schools and colleges.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Final inquiries must not exceed a sentence each.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I hope the Minister will agree that Catholic education providers make a great contribution to education in this country. With that in mind will the Minister provide an update on the uptake of the voluntary-aided capital scheme?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is entirely correct: the Catholic Education Service is a very important provider of education in our country, alongside the Church of England and other denominational groups. I am pleased to be able to confirm that we have approved in principle a new voluntary-aided school in the last couple of weeks; it is the first for some time.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Primary schools in my constituency are facing reorganisation due to the financial pressures placed on them by this Government, even though the Government claim that funding for schools has never been higher. Due to this I am aware of several schools making cuts to their classroom teaching assistants. What has the Minister to say to parents, children and teachers in my constituency who know that that will have a detrimental effect on learning in the classroom?

Damian Hinds: As I have acknowledged on a number of occasions, I know the strains on school budgets and how difficult it can be to manage them. The hon. Lady specifically raised the question of teaching assistants: there has been an increase of over 40,000 teaching assistants since 2010.

Mr Speaker: I would not want the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) to feel socially excluded: I call Ruth George.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

Since 2016, more than 10% of childcare settings in High Peak have closed and a large number of others have contacted me to say that they feel they are no longer financially sustainable. What will the Secretary of State be doing to speak to the Chancellor and make sure those childcare settings can see a way forward?

Nadhim Zahawi: We are monitoring the whole of the system. It is important to recall that, as mentioned earlier, Ofsted has looked at this and the number of places remain pretty constant throughout, but we continue to monitor the whole of the marketplace.
Europeans Council

3.41 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Before I turn to the European Council, I am sure the whole House will join me in sending our very best wishes to the former Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott. All our thoughts are with him and his family at this time, and we wish him a full and speedy recovery.

Last week’s European Council focused on climate change, disinformation and hybrid threats, external relations and what are known as the EU’s top jobs. The UK has always been clear that we will participate fully and constructively in all EU discussions for as long as we are a member state, and that we will seek to continue our co-operation on issues of mutual interest through our future relationship after we have left. That was the spirit in which I approached this Council.

Earlier this month the UK became the first major economy in the world to commit to ending its contribution to global warming by 2050, and I am pleased that the regulations to amend the Climate Change Act 2008, which are being debated in this Chamber later today, have received widespread support from across this House. Ultimately, we will protect our planet only if we are able to forge the widest possible global agreements: that means other countries need to follow our lead and increase their ambitions as well.

At this Council the UK helped to lead the way in advocating for our European partners to follow suit in committing to a net zero target by 2050. While a full EU-wide consensus was not reached, “a large majority” of member states did agree that “climate neutrality must be achieved by 2050”, and I hope we can build on this in the months ahead.

In the margins of the Council I met Prime Minister Conte and discussed the UK’s bid to host next year’s UN climate summit, COP 26, in partnership with Italy. This will continue to put the UK at the heart of driving global efforts to tackle the climate emergency and leave a better world for our children.

Turning to disinformation and hybrid threats, we agreed to continue working together to raise awareness, increase our preparedness, and strengthen the resilience of our democracies. I welcome the development of a new framework for targeted sanctions to respond to hybrid threats. This sends a clear message that the UK and its EU partners are willing and able to impose a cost for irresponsible behaviour in cyber-space.

We must make more progress in helping to ensure that the internet is a safe place for all our citizens. That is why we are legislating in the UK to create a legal duty of care on internet companies to keep users safe from harm, and this will be backed up by an independent regulator with the power to enforce its decisions. We are the first country to put forward such a comprehensive approach, but it is not enough to act alone, so, building on the Christchurch Call to Action summit, the UK will continue to drive to the broadest possible global action against online harms, including at the G20 in Japan later this week.

In the discussion on external relations, the Council expressed its concern over Russia’s issuing of passports in Ukraine’s Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and reiterated its call for Russia to release the Ukrainian sailors and vessels captured in the Kerch strait in November last year.

Russia has consistently failed to deliver its commitments under the Minsk agreements and continues its destabilising activity, so with the UK’s full support the Council agreed a six-month roll-over of tier 3 sanctions, which include restrictions on Russia’s access to EU capital markets, an arms embargo and restricting co-operation with Russia’s energy sector.

In marking the fifth anniversary of the downing of flight MH17, we welcomed the announcement from the Netherlands that criminal charges were being brought against four individuals, and offered our continued support in bringing those responsible to justice.

The Council expressed serious concerns over Turkey’s drilling activities in the eastern Mediterranean, and the UK has made it clear to Turkey that drilling in that area must stop. Our priority must be to see the situation de-escalated.

In the margins of the Council, I raised the issue of Iran. We call on Iran urgently to de-escalate tensions, and our priority remains finding a diplomatic solution to the current situation in the region.

A substantial part of the Council focused on what are known as the EU’s top jobs—the appointments of the next presidents of the EU’s institutions and of the EU’s High Representative. This is of course primarily a matter for the 27 remaining EU member states, and I have been clear that the UK will engage constructively and will not stand in the way of a consensus among the other member states, but it is also in our national interests that those appointed are constructive partners for the UK as well as successful leaders of the EU’s institutions.

The UK supports President Tusk’s approach to create a package of candidates across the top jobs that reflects the diversity of the European Union. As there was no consensus on candidates at the meeting, the Council agreed to meet again after the G20 this coming Sunday, as well as holding further discussions with the European Parliament. I had originally anticipated that this would be my final European Council as Prime Minister, but I will in fact have one more.

Finally, President Tusk and President Juncker updated the remaining 27 member states on Brexit. This scheduled update was part of the agreement I reached in April to extend the article 50 deadline for our departure from the EU to 31 October. The Council repeated its desire to avoid a disorderly Brexit and committed to work constructively with my successor as Prime Minister. I commend this statement to the House.

3.47 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I understand that it is 10 years this week since you assumed the Chair of the House. May I just say congratulations on the first 10 years and thank you for being such a popular Speaker and for taking the role of Parliament out to the public in a meaningful way, particularly to schools and colleges all over the country? That has made a big difference.

I thank the Prime Minister for her kind words about John Prescott. We all obviously wish John all the very best. I cannot wait to see him return to full activity and to hear that voice booming out of loudspeakers all over the country exciting people in the cause of Labour, which is what John does so well.

I thank the Prime Minister for giving me an advance copy of her statement.
Last week, we came within minutes of the USA launching a military attack on Iran. Britain and other European nations must play a role in defusing, not raising, tensions, and that needs to start with the restoration of support for the Iran nuclear deal.

We note that there will be continuing EU-Morocco trade discussions. I hope that the United Kingdom Government will recognise that there is an ongoing territorial dispute over the Western Sahara and that those issues will be borne in mind during the negotiations.

I echo the European Union’s call on Turkey to cease its illegal drilling in the eastern Mediterranean; I welcome what the EU Council said on that.

I also welcome the EU Council’s discussion of climate change, which emphasises how important it is to continue to work with progressive forces to tackle the climate emergency, which this House declared on 1 May. I welcome the EU’s continued commitment to the Paris climate agreement and to deliver a practical plan of action to meet its obligations, and I also welcome the fact that COP 26 will be jointly hosted by Britain and Italy, with some events being held in London.

Yesterday marked three years since the EU referendum —three wasted years in which the Government’s deal has been rejected three times. We have endured three separate Brexit Secretaries, and we will soon have our third post-Brexit Prime Minister. It has been three years of chaos, in-fighting and incompetence. For too long, the Prime Minister allowed herself to be held to ransom by the wilder extremes in her party, instead of trying to find a sensible majority across this House—[Interruption.] Some of the wilder extremes have absented themselves today, but they are no doubt making their views known elsewhere. By the time the Prime Minister finally did reach out, it was a bit too late, and she was unable to deliver meaningful compromise or change.

Does the Prime Minister now regret that she continued to legitimise the idea of no deal instead of warning of its disastrous implications? The two Tory leadership candidates still say that if they cannot renegotiate the backstop, which EU leaders last week said was not possible, they would pursue a no-deal exit. Will the Prime Minister tell us whether she believes that no deal should be on the table as a viable option? What would be worse: crashing out with no deal in October, or putting this issue back to the people for a final say? Given the—[Interruption.] Mr Speaker, it is normal for the Leader of the Opposition to ask questions of the Prime Minister, and that is exactly what I am doing.

Given the shambolic no-deal preparations so far, which were paused in the spring, will the Prime Minister confirm that the Government will not be ready to crash out in October? Neither of the Tory leadership candidates has a credible plan. One even claims that we can crash out on WTO terms and still trade without tariffs, which is interesting. The Governor of the Bank of England was clear when he said: “Not having an agreement with the EU means that there are tariffs automatically because the Europeans have to apply the same rules to us as they apply to everyone else.”

Will the Prime Minister confirm whether the Bank of England Governor is correct on no deal? The former Foreign Secretary also told us that under his no deal plan he could “solve the problem of free movement of goods in the context of the Free Trade Agreement... that we’ll negotiate in the implementation period.”

Will the Prime Minister confirm that there will be no implementation period if there is no deal?

It is deeply worrying that those who seek to lead this country have no grip on reality. The Prime Minister said that the Council reiterated its wish to avoid a “disorderly Brexit”, but I am unsure whether it will have been reassured by the statements of her potential successors. Labour put forward a plan that could bring this country back together, but the Prime Minister refused to compromise. Whoever the next Prime Minister is, they will barely hold the support of this House, so they will certainly have no mandate to force a disastrous hard-right Brexit on this country. I want to make it clear that Labour will work across the House to block no deal. Whatever plan the new Tory leader comes up with, after three long years of failure they should have the confidence to go back to the people to let them decide the future of this country.

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right that we recognise the 10th anniversary of your election to the Chair, Mr Speaker. It does not seem like 10 years at all.

May I correct the Leader of the Opposition? [Interruption.] Yes, surely. The Leader of the Opposition says he thinks that reality and facts are important. He said that COP 26 is coming to the UK, jointly with Italy. In fact, we are making a joint bid with Italy. Others are bidding for COP 26, so we are still working hard and I encouraged those around the European Council table to support our bid.

Jeremy Corbyn: And we support it.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the Leader of the Opposition for saying that the Labour party and the Opposition support the bid, which I think is supported on both sides of the House.

The European Council meeting I attended did not discuss Brexit, no deal or the views of the candidates in the Conservative party’s leadership election, on which the Leader of the Opposition focused the majority of his comments and questions. I am supposed to be talking about what happened at the European Council. Nevertheless I am in a generous mood, so I will respond to a small number of his points.

The Leader of the Opposition talked about the talks on trying to find a compromise and a majority across the House, and we did, indeed, enter those talks. I think both sides entered the talks in a constructive spirit, and I remind him that it was he who actually terminated the talks.

The Leader of the Opposition talked about the position in relation to a no deal, which is, legally, the default option that remains on the table for 31 October if a deal is not agreed. The Government are rightly continuing their preparations for a no deal. He asked about my view on a no deal. I wanted to leave the European Union on 29 March with a deal. If he and his colleagues had voted with the Government, we would already be out.

I remind the Leader of the Opposition that I have done everything to avoid a no-deal Brexit by voting for a deal three times in the past year. He has done everything to increase the chance of a no deal by voting against a deal every time.

“Rejecting any Brexit…deal risks the worst outcome—a No Deal Brexit.”
Those are not my words but the words of his own Labour Members of Parliament.

Finally, the Leader of the Opposition talked about Conservative Members being divorced from reality. I have to say that the person in this House who is divorced from reality is the Leader of the Opposition, who thinks the economic model that we should be following is Venezuela.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware there is an accelerated regulation relating to the question of payments into the EU budget. The Government have the power to veto the proposals. I received a letter from the Chancellor today, in reply to my urgent letter to him last week. Will this matter, in fact, be decided on 25 June, as originally proposed? Will the Government exercise their veto, and not merely abstain?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I understand the matter will be considered on 25 June. It is the Government’s intention to abstain. This does not bind us, and I remind my hon. Friend that the measure could be taken by the European Union at any stage in the future.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I add my congratulations on the 10th anniversary in the Chair, Mr Speaker? I gather that many are asking for 10 more years. Whatever it is, let us hope that you are with us for a considerable period to come.

I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of her statement and for her update. Of course we support the efforts to bring COP 26 to the UK. It is important that the EU summit extensively discussed climate change—the biggest challenge we all face.

The Prime Minister mentioned that she raised the issue of Iran in the margins of the Council meeting. I am somewhat surprised it was not a major issue for debate at the Council meeting. We know that the situation in Iran is challenging to say the least. Diplomacy must prevail. I have just come from meeting with Richard Ratcliffe, who has spent over a week outside the Iranian embassy, now on hunger strike in protest against the wrongful imprisonment of his wife, Nazanin Zahari-Ratcliffe, in Iran, where she is serving a five-year sentence for espionage. Mr Ratcliffe has welcomed the fact that Iran and the UK are talking and has called for a swift solution, stating:

“We are obviously looking for a quick resolution and that’s why she went on hunger strike. It was to say enough’s enough.”

Surely enough is enough. So may I ask the Prime Minister to consider the plight of our citizens and to move to make representations, in the time that she has left, to assist the Ratcliffes in their campaign for freedom and justice?

The Prime Minister will also have seen the Foreign Secretary’s comments this morning on the possibility of military action. We must reduce tensions in the middle east. We will work constructively with her Government in supporting diplomatic efforts, but does she agree with Opposition Members that talk of military action at this stage in the diplomatic efforts is simply reckless?

It is also important to recognise that the statement from the Prime Minister was notably light on the details of the UK’s exit from the European Union. One would have thought that, at least in the margins, that would have been the topic of some debate. Let us remind ourselves of what President Tusk said, which was that we were to use the time wisely. The Prime Minister and both candidates to be her successor have all long promised that the withdrawal agreement can be renegotiated, yet just last week President Juncker said that the EU has repeated unanimously that there will be no renegotiation of the withdrawal agreement. Donald Tusk said the withdrawal agreement is “not open for renegotiation.” Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity today to clarify, for the benefit of her Back Bencher the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) that the implementation period is indeed part of the withdrawal agreement? Does the Prime Minister agree with the comments of EU leaders that the withdrawal deal is not up for renegotiation? Will she confirm today that she will not vote for a Tory leadership candidate supporting a no-deal exit on 31 October? Will the Government not finally accept the reality and support a people’s vote? Prime Minister, this is your legacy, your last few days in power: use them to stop the hard Brexiteers in your party who have pushed you out and who want to push us out of the European Union at any cost.

The Prime Minister: First, on the detention of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, obviously, our thoughts remain with her and her family, and she has faced unacceptable treatment during her three years in jail. Our position is very clear: she was on holiday, visiting her relations. The right hon. Gentleman asks me to raise the issue, and I have raised it on a number of occasions directly with President Rouhani. The Foreign Secretary has continued to raise it with Iranian Ministers as well, and of course it was raised when my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East was in Tehran over the weekend. It was possible to engage on this issue of those of our citizens who are detained. As I am sure the right hon. Gentleman knows, one of the issues here is the fact that the Iranian Government do not recognise dual nationality, and that is one of the issues behind this question of the detention of British citizens.

As regards the wider issues, at a time of increased regional tension and a crucial period for the future of the nuclear deal, it was right that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East was able to further engage with the Government of Iran about the UK’s long-held concerns over Iran’s destabilising activity and the danger it poses to the region. He was able to reiterate our assessment that Iran almost certainly bears responsibility for recent attacks on tankers in the Gulf of Oman and that such activity needs to stop, to allow the immediate de-escalation of these rising tensions. He was also clear that the UK will continue to play its full part, alongside international partners, to find diplomatic solutions to reduce the current tensions.

The right hon. Gentleman then went on to discuss the issue of no deal and these various points. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster pointed out yesterday that the implementation period is set out in part 4 of the withdrawal agreement. If we leave without a deal, there is no withdrawal agreement and therefore no implementation period. But the right hon. Gentleman again invited me to take no deal off the table and to do things to stop no deal. I am afraid that I will repeat to him what I have said to him on many occasions standing
made from the discussions she had at the European Council of the chances of persuading the four member states that currently refuse to do so to change their minds before COP 26 next year?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right, and I want all EU member states to sign up to net zero by 2050. There was indeed a small number of member states that did not feel able to sign up to it at this stage; some of them want to look further into the implications and work through it before they sign up to the 2050 target. I will continue to encourage all member states to sign up to the 2050 target. It is absolutely right that we have led the way, but we need everybody to play their part.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): The Prime Minister will know that last week the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union wrote to Michel Barnier asking that the EU accede to Britain’s request to deal with citizens’ rights outside the yet-to-be-agreed withdrawal agreement—something the EU has so far refused to do. In the margins of the summit, did Michel Barnier give the Prime Minister a nice last-but-one going away present from the Council in the form of a positive response to that request?

The Prime Minister: Michel Barnier was not present at the meeting of the EU Council at 28. On citizens’ rights, there is a question about the legal situation. If the EU is to act collectively, it is my understanding that that has to be done on an article 50 basis—and, in other words, if there is no withdrawal agreement and no deal—then it is up to individual member states. We have been encouraging individual member states to reciprocate the generous offer that has been made by the United Kingdom.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), may I press the Prime Minister a bit further on the discussions about climate change? What discussions did she have, or can she report back to us, about the need to move to a consumer principle, whereby we do not simply reach net zero by exporting all our carbon emissions—just by importing more manufactured goods and agricultural goods? What discussions did she have on that principle?

The Prime Minister: I hope that I can reassure the hon. Lady that that issue was indeed one that was touched on in the discussions that were held around the EU Council table. There was a recognition that this issue has to be addressed across the world. Yes, it is right that the UK has led and that we want Europe to lead, but we want this to be something that is adopted widely across the globe, because that is the only way to ensure that we deal with these greenhouse gas emissions.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What are the prospects of Mr Barnier getting one of the top jobs?

The Prime Minister: I am not going to comment on individual potential candidates. A number of names are being mentioned around the European Union at the moment. As I have said, there was no consensus on candidates for the top jobs at the meeting last week. A further meeting will be held at the end of this week.
Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Both as Home Secretary and as Prime Minister, the right hon. Lady has been extremely assiduous about coming to address this House. In fact, she has probably spent more hours here than she has wanted to or than any other Prime Minister has in many years. She addressed the House within a week of becoming Prime Minister. Will she ensure that her successor addresses this House within a week of becoming Prime Minister, because it would surely be a disgrace for 41 days to pass before they did so?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the comments that he made about me. The question that he has asked is actually not a matter for me; it will be a matter for the incoming Prime Minister and for this House.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Prime Minister, will you miss going to the European Council meetings?

The Prime Minister: Let us just say that I thought that I would have more time available than is proving to be the case because of the extra Council meetings that I am having to attend.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): When article 50 was extended by the EU until 31 October, President Donald Tusk urged the UK not to waste this time. Did the Prime Minister or anybody on the EU Council offer any view on whether this advice was being heeded? Can she tell us what obstacles she faced as she tried to secure a Brexit that her successor will not?

The Prime Minister: First, as I have indicated in response to a number of questions, Brexit was not the subject of the meeting of the EU Council at 28. We discussed various other issues that are of importance for the future not only of individual member states and of Europe, but, in terms of climate change, of the whole world. As I have always said, the issue remains the same. It is still in the best interests of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union with a deal. A deal has been negotiated, but that has been rejected by this House.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): When it comes to protecting the environment, the UK has long used its relationship with its European neighbours to help leverage and magnify our call for action on the wider stage, so may I congratulate my right hon. Friend on making sure that we are the first country to legislate—or the first major economy to legislate—for net zero and that the vast majority of EU countries will follow suit? Would she care to name and shame those who are not quite there yet?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is tempting me to do that. There is a reason why the EU Council conclusions did not identify those member states who do not feel able to sign up to net zero for 2050 at this stage. I fully expect, as I indicated in response to the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), that those member states, in doing further work on this issue, will be able to accept the 2050 date and that we will be able to have a collective European Union approach on this matter.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Colleagues on the Labour Benches voted against the Prime Minister’s initial attempts to get a deal through because it was essentially a blind Brexit, with very little detail on the future relationship. However, the withdrawal agreement Bill tabled just prior to the European elections was actually full of major concessions to Labour’s positions and of compromises—workers’ rights, environmental issues, customs and even a commitment to a referendum vote in Committee. Does she agree that her successor should re-table that withdrawal agreement Bill? Does she share my hope that, if he does, colleagues on the Labour Benches will vote for it?

The Prime Minister: I had hoped that colleagues across the Benches in this House would be able to vote for the deal and that it would have been possible to put that withdrawal agreement Bill to a positive vote. But I hope that the hon. Gentleman, Gentleman will have seen from the details that I and this Government stand by our word. When we said that we would adopt certain compromises that had been put to us by the Opposition, we actually stood by that.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): It turn to the issue of internet security, which was brought up at the Council. Does the Prime Minister agree that, yes, we want the UK to be the best place in the world to run an internet-based business—there is a high number of successful such businesses in North Devon—but also that it needs to be the safest place for people, especially young people, to go online?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree. It is important that we make this the safest place for people to go online, and as my hon. Friend said, it is particularly of significance that young people should be able to feel safe online. We also want to continue to be one of the best places in the world to set up an internet business. A couple of weeks ago, during London Tech Week, I was pleased to sit around the table with a number of companies that have been set up here in the UK, doing extremely well in this area. They all accept, too, the importance of safety for those using the internet.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Aid to the Church in Need raised more than €100 million in 2018 to help support persecuted Christians. Can the Prime Minister outline what support the EU Council is giving, and doing, to support persecuted Christians, especially those in Syria? Will the Prime Minister be prepared to ask for more help, support and focus for this needy group of people?

The Prime Minister: Of course, for persecuted Christians and others who are persecuted in countries such as Syria, it is important that there is a proper political solution to what is happening that enables people to carry on practising their faith without the threat of persecution. I am very pleased that my noble Friend Lord Ahmad, the Minister for freedom of religion and belief, is doing excellent work around the world in ensuring that we are putting the message about the importance of people being able to practise their faith without fear of persecution.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The Prime Minister is absolutely right to point out the continued malign influence that is Russia. Did she manage to impress on her EU counterparts the need to reduce their dependence on Russian oil and gas?
The Prime Minister: This issue has been raised on a number of occasions in debates in the European Union. I assure my hon. Friend that member states sitting around the table are fully apprised of the matter and considering their position.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Prime Minister believe that, to engage constructively with the European Union, our new Prime Minister must set out before the summer recess, here in Parliament, his approach to Brexit, so that we and the European Union can establish whether it commands the confidence of the House?

The Prime Minister: That will be a matter for the incoming Prime Minister.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), in the context of the discussions about Russian behaviour and the security of Europe, did my right hon. Friend specifically bring up the subject of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which would inevitably make Germany and Europe dependent on cheap Russian gas and susceptible to Russian influence? That would be a terrible strategic mistake.

The Prime Minister: Nord Stream 2 was not raised at this Council meeting, but it has been raised at previous Council meetings. The aspect that my hon. Friend refers to has obviously been raised, but there is also the impact that Nord Stream 2 would have on income for Ukraine as a result of diverting oil and gas from going through Ukraine. This is a matter that all those sitting around the table are fully apprised of and considering.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister knows that we live in an uncertain and dangerous world at the moment, with China and Russia, and threats from Iran. She has reported on the attitude of the European Commission on both those issues. How does she see British influence continuing in working with our European partners in future?

The Prime Minister: I think that what we see from some of the ways that we are already working with our European partners will be the future ways. For example, on Iran, we work very much, as an E3, with France and Germany. There are other issues on which we are also working with France and Germany, and obviously others across the world. We do not just work with the European Union on these matters. We work with individual member states when it is in the interests of the UK and those member states for us to do so, and that is what we will continue to do.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for all the work that she does on the European Council, and will continue to do. I notice that there was a lot of discussion on a few very well-paid top jobs. Was there discussion on the millions of people who are without work throughout the European Union—and, indeed, further afield in the near neighbourhood in north Africa and sub-Saharan Africa—and what can be done to tackle this rather more urgent and important problem than a few jobs in Brussels?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an issue on which he has long been a campaigner. It is the case that one of the conclusions from the European Council meeting was that we underline the crucial importance of the strategic partnership with Africa and the need for us to work together. We recognise the importance of working particularly in Africa—as we, the UK, have indicated that we will do as an individual country—to ensure that we are providing the support that enables the economies of Africa to provide jobs for the many millions of young people coming on to that jobs market.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): Anybody listening to the Prime Minister’s statement will be struck by the importance of the issues raised at the Council, and also by the loss that we will have as a nation by not having a seat around the table in future. In her reply to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), she said that it is a matter for her successor whether he takes up to seven weeks before he comes to this House. Is it not the case that the Government could reset the recess dates that are on today’s Order Paper to make sure this House has an opportunity to question her successor on his policies, which have a huge bearing on the issues in her statement?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady will have an opportunity to consider this matter in the debate on the motion on the recess dates that is coming before the House later today.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s comments about the positive reception at the European Council for Britain’s leadership on vital issues such as online harms, internet regulation and, of course, climate change. What mechanisms and institutions can be leveraged by the UK to continue to show this international leadership once we leave the European Union?

The Prime Minister: There are a number of mechanisms that we can use on the two specific issues my hon. Friend has raised—and on climate change, of course. Hopefully, if we are able to win the bid to host COP 26, that will be an important signal. We want to address this issue globally, not just with the European Union. On internet harms, the UK led the way in, for example, setting up the global forum against terrorist and extremist material on the internet. The UK will continue to play its role in encouraging our European partners, but others around the world as well, on those and other important issues.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I wish you a very happy first decade, Mr Speaker.

The Prime Minister confirmed to the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) that in the event of no deal, the UK will not oppose a further £2 billion contribution in November/December as we approach a further payment for the divorce bill. Will she further confirm that convergence funding for Wales will immediately stop in the event of no deal? At a time when we are seeing Ford leaving Bridgend, Airbus leaving Wales and Tata in the balance, is it not time we recognised that the workers in these plants who voted to leave, in good faith for more prosperity, did not vote to leave their jobs and should be given the final say on whether we go ahead with the madness of Brexit or are given the opportunity to remain in the EU?
The Prime Minister: In my response to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone, I pointed out that in a specific vote that is taking place on an EU response to these budgetary matters, we will be abstaining. On the wider issue, if the hon. Gentleman is concerned about the impact that no deal would have on jobs in his constituency and more widely, I simply say to him that he had the opportunity to ensure that we left with a deal by voting for the deal. Parliament rejected that deal, and I believe he voted against it.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It seems overwhelmingly likely that Russia will seek to obstruct the extradition of the Russian nationals suspected by the Dutch authorities of involvement with the downing of MH17, just as Russia obstructed the extradition of nationals suspected of involvement in the killing of Alexander Litvinenko and the Novichok poisonings. What more can be done, as a European community of nations, to ensure that Russia abides by its international obligations and brings suspects to justice?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend will know that, in terms of the activities of Russia across a range of issues, the European Union has used the tools at its disposal. I referred in my statement to the sanctions in relation to Russian activity, particularly in Ukraine, but it is the case—he is right—that Russia does not permit the extradition of Russian citizens who are suspected of crimes in other jurisdictions. We all across the world should recognise the importance of ensuring that those responsible for crimes can be brought to justice. I urge a change of opinion, but I suspect that Russia will continue to wish not to extradite its citizens, which means that those who have been the victims of crimes such as the use of Novichok on the streets of Salisbury, the murder of Alexander Litvinenko and the downing of MH17 do not find the justice that they deserve.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has set an ambitious climate target for this country of net zero carbon emissions by 2050, but it will only be successful if there is strong co-operation across the European single market. To that end, did the Prime Minister have discussions with her counterparts in Europe at the European Council about the possibility of setting an external tariff to the common market area which reflects the carbon intensity of imports to the European Union?

The Prime Minister: There was no such discussion.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I thank the Prime Minister for prior sight of her statement. I think the whole House would welcome any progress on climate change. On Wednesday, I am hosting a Welsh lobby in Committee Room 10 as part of the wider “The Time is Now” lobby on that day. Will the Prime Minister welcome the young people from Wales who will be taking part on Wednesday, and in particular those who marched through the city of Bangor recently—young people who have so effectively put climate change at the heart of the political debate?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to welcome the young people who will be coming to the event the hon. Gentleman is holding here in the House on Wednesday. This is an important issue. It is one that young people have taken up and championed with vigour and energy, and it is right that we respond to their concerns.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Prime Minister mentioned raising Iran and the middle east “in the margins” of the Council. The Foreign Secretary will be partly distracted by other matters. Will she acquaint herself with the details of the case of my constituent, Luke Symons, who is currently being held captive by the Houthis in Sana’a in Yemen, to see whether she can use her influence in her remaining time in office to secure his release and allow him and his family to travel back to the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I will ensure that I am able to look at the specific case that the hon. Gentleman has raised.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The European Parliament is investigating concerns that more than 1 million citizens of other EU countries who live in the UK may have been wrongly prevented from voting in the recent European parliamentary elections. What discussions has the Prime Minister had about those concerns, either at the Council or elsewhere?

The Prime Minister: This is not an issue that has been raised by other member states directly with me, and it was not raised at this EU Council meeting.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I appreciate that the Prime Minister will not want to wade into the battle for her succession, but given that she has spent more time talking to other EU leaders and, I suspect, Members of Parliament than anyone else, she knows what the challenges are in this place, and the boundaries and parameters around the negotiating table. What does she expect our country may reasonably be able to negotiate by 31 October that has not already been achieved by her and her negotiating team?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is trying to tempt me to step into an issue—

Wes Streeting indicated assent.

The Prime Minister: He confirms that. It will be for my successor to take forward, with the House and with the European Union, the approach to our leaving the European Union. As I have said before, if the hon. Gentleman and others had joined me in any one of the three votes that have taken place on the deal that was negotiated, we could have already left the European Union.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The Prime Minister may not have had the chance to speak to the European Council on the important issues of fashion, sustainability and climate change, but does she agree with the all-party parliamentary group on textiles and fashion, which I chair, that as parliamentarians we should walk the walk, and that a recycling bin for clothing should be available in Parliament alongside rubbish bins so that MPs’ garments do not clog up landfill?

The Prime Minister: At Prime Minister’s questions last week, I responded to a question about the report from the Committee on this issue. The Minister of State, Department for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), tells me there is a recycling bin in one of the ladies in the House of Commons, but whether there should be more of those bins is a matter for the House authorities.
Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister share my concern, and that of a number of colleagues on both sides of the House, that one Conservative leadership candidate does not seem to appreciate that if there is no deal, there is no implementation period?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave earlier on that issue.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It has already been mentioned that the intransigence of just four countries held up an EU-wide commitment to binding net zero emissions targets by 2050. Can I press the Prime Minister to expand on what she thinks it would take to change the minds of those four recalcitrant states, and can she say a little about what she will do in advance of this weekend to ensure that a handful of intransigent states does not prevent bold new climate agreements being reached at the G20 summit?

The Prime Minister: For those states that have a concern about the impact on jobs and the employment of their citizens, I would argue that the UK has already seen 400,000 jobs created in the green economy and we look forward to seeing many more. It is not a choice between climate change and economic growth: we can have both and the UK has been a fine example of that.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): The Prime Minister made it clear that she was not present when Presidents Tusk and Juncker reported on the progress of Brexit to the 27. What does she think they will have said?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the comments that I made in my statement. They updated the remaining 27, and the Council repeated its desire to avoid a disorderly Brexit and committed to work constructively with my successor as Prime Minister.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I met many constituents over the weekend who are pretty unimpressed that we are debating things such as Kew Gardens as we wait for a new Prime Minister, and that, as soon as that new Prime Minister is in place, we will go into recess. The Prime Minister told the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) that she would have a chance to raise her concerns in tonight’s debate, but there is not going to be a debate on the motion, which is subject to Standing Order No. 25. Will the Prime Minister therefore address, as a matter of urgency, the recess dates? We could go into recess now and the House could return as soon as the new Prime Minister is in place.

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) to the statement that she made in her statement to the House. What steps is she taking, and what advice will she give to her successor, on ensuring that those matters are firmly fixed down before 31 October?

The Prime Minister: It is not the case that the only way in which we can ensure internet safety and work on it is through the institutions of the European Union. The global forum to which I referred earlier was largely set up as a result of an initiative by the United Kingdom. It does not come under a European Union banner; it has other EU member states in it, but it is something that we look to do worldwide and we will continue to work on internet safety worldwide.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I met many constituents over the weekend who are pretty unimpressed that we are debating things such as Kew Gardens as we wait for a new Prime Minister, and that, as soon as that new Prime Minister is in place, we will go into recess. The Prime Minister told the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) that she would have a chance to raise her concerns in tonight’s debate, but there is not going to be a debate on the motion, which is subject to Standing Order No. 25. Will the Prime Minister therefore address, as a matter of urgency, the recess dates? We could go into recess now and the House could return as soon as the new Prime Minister is in place.

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Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): In her statement, the Prime Minister spoke of co-operation, mutual interest, working constructively and consensus, and said:

“That was the spirit in which I approached this Council.”

May I ask that that new-found spirit be extended to the UK Government’s discussions with the devolved Parliaments?
The Prime Minister: We have always approached discussions with the devolved Administrations in the spirit of co-operation and of wanting to work together. There are issues on which we have disagreements, but we have always approached those discussions in the spirit of finding a way through and of co-operating and working with them.

Points of Order

4.39 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last June, the Government pledged to make payments to people in receipt of severe disability premium who had lost out in transferring to universal credit, but a year later those payments have still not been made. They were part of regulations to the managed migration pilot, which is due to start in July. It will be July next week and the Government have failed to tell this House what is going to happen with either the pilot or the payments. Have you, Mr Speaker, had any indication of whether the Government intend to make a statement to clarify the situation? If not, could you advise on how I might secure such a statement?

Mr Speaker: I have certainly received no indication of any intention on the part of a Government Minister to make an oral statement in this Chamber. However, the consequence of the hon. Lady raising this point of order is that the Treasury Bench has been alerted to her concern. I would very much hope, in the spirit of courtesy, that the Government would give her advance notice of their intention to make such a statement. I hope that that is helpful.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You may have been as surprised as I was to read in The Times today that the Government have paid £118,000 to a company called Big Ideas to get lots of apparent objections to the objections to the Victoria Tower Gardens being used for a national holocaust memorial and learning centre. Until the close of objections to Westminster City Council, the majority were against the proposal. Now that Big Ideas has been there, the numbers have gone up massively, apparently mostly in favour.

Will the Government please explain who made the decision to use public money to influence the apparent responses to a consultation on a planning application that the Government themselves have made? This is the first time I have ever heard of this happening. It deserves an explanation and perhaps the Minister can explain now.

Mr Speaker: The matter is certainly of compelling interest to the right hon. Gentleman—if he has been admitted to the Privy Council. If he has not, it can only be a matter of time. In that case, it is a matter not of compelling interest to the right hon. Gentleman, but of compelling interest to the hon. Gentleman. It is also of notable interest to a great many other people to boot. However, the attempted point of order—I use that term advisedly, as he will understand—does suffer from the notable disadvantage, which does not put it in a minority category, that it is many things but not a point of order. In other words, it is not a matter for the Chair; it is not for my adjudication.

In so far as the hon. Gentleman is referring to something that seems to resemble an organised campaign, I cannot say that that of itself is a great shock to me. However, his reference to the fact that there is public money involved is of course of great interest and does render the matter worthy of ministerial attention. It is quite open to a Minister now to respond and to seek to assuage the concerns of the hon. Gentleman, but I do not notice a Minister leaping to his feet with alacrity to do so.
Indeed, it would be fair to say that the Leader of the House is seated comfortably in his perch on the Treasury Bench. Ah—he evinces a display of interest. Does the Leader of the House wish to comment? He is not obliged to do so, but we are always happy to hear his mellifluous tones.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend’s point is noted. I do not know the answers to his very specific questions with regard to the appointment of the Big Ideas group, but I will look into the matter and I will come back to him on it.

Mr Speaker: The matter had already been communicated to me earlier today by another means. If the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) is dissatisfied at the end of that exchange, he can always return to it.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wonder if you could give me some advice or perhaps commission, in your role as the Chair of the House, some training for Members on the issue of domestic violence. This weekend, I have been shocked and appalled at the rush of Members insisting on moving back the dial in this area to suggest that such matters are private family matters to be kept within the confines of walls. Now, I am certain that in almost any circumstance the people in this House do not believe that that is the case. However, I guess they had their priorities elsewhere when they went out to say it. That led to all the women’s charities in this country having to reissue a statement to assert that of course people should call the police; of course people should gather evidence where they can; and of course people should try to intervene. The message that came from this House—perhaps you could send a different message today, Mr Speaker—was that people should not try to help. Please, Mr Speaker, will you assert that domestic abuse is never just a domestic? It is never a personal family matter?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he wished to raise this matter. The new edition of “Erskine May” states in paragraph 2.12: “By convention, the motion”—the motion to which reference is being made is that for the issuing of a warrant for a new writ—“is moved by the whip of the party which last held the seat.” I emphasise that that is the starting premise in these matters. I am confident that the right hon. Gentleman is aware both of that convention and of the recourse open to him if there is what he considers—indeed, others might agree—an unreasonable delay in the Government Chief Whip moving the motion. The timing of the by-election, after the House agrees to the relevant motion, is a matter for statute law and those empowered under the relevant statute. It is not something on which I can pronounce, but I hope that the two parts of the right hon. Gentleman’s concern have been at least adequately addressed by my initial response.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister has just clarified that there will be no opportunity to debate the motion on the summer Adjournment dates. This is an extremely grave matter. About 0.25% of the population will be selecting the next Prime Minister at a crucial time in our history. Is there anything you can do to make sure that the House has an opportunity, when other Members are here, to properly debate this issue and make sure that the next Prime Minister can be held to account by this House without there being an extended period of summer recess in the way?
Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady and most certainly understand her concern. I want to offer her two responses. First, it is perfectly open to Members if they disapprove of the motion to vote against it. They are not obliged to accept it; they can oppose it. Secondly, although I do not myself know at this stage what is in the minds of Ministers today, or what was in their minds at the time of the tabling of the motion, since I am not psychic and it was not something they discussed with me or would ordinarily have been expected to discuss with me, I can tell her something that may be of interest to her.

I have been assured that there is no intention on the part of the Government to prevent the new Prime Minister from appearing before the House before it rises for the summer recess. The Leader of the House had his first outing relatively recently on a Thursday morning at business questions, and as he addressed the House the Government Chief Whip approached me, unsolicited but on the back of a number of queries about Prorogation and the timescale for the announcement of the new Prime Minister, specifically to tell me—as I say, unsolicited—that the Government had no intention of doing that.

The Government Chief Whip told me that he judged it most important that that not be the case. I am merely faithfully reporting what he told me on that occasion. If there has been some change in thinking, I am sure the Government would wish to communicate that to the House. I think it very important that there be some clarity about the Government’s intentions beyond simply the motion, which is a procedural motion, sooner rather than later, not because that is a matter of procedural necessity but because it is a matter of parliamentary courtesy.

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Change UK): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Thank you so much for what you have said. The Leader of the House is here. Such is the concern across the House about the Government’s plans and the very real concern that the next Prime Minister will not even come into this place before we rise for the summer, notwithstanding what you have been told, would it be in order for the Leader of the House to make a statement as soon as possible—literally in the next day or two—in order to satisfy the very real concerns that exist?

Mr Speaker: It would be perfectly orderly for the Leader of the House to do so. If he wanted to make a statement earlier than that, I am sure that we would accommodate him, either now or before the close of business tonight. It is up to the right hon. Gentleman. However, I had no notice of these points of order. I have responded to them in a public-spirited way, and I know that that is always the instinct of the Leader of the House.

Mel Stride: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. First, I think I can confirm that it would certainly not be the Government’s intention to allow a situation in which there was not an opportunity for the new Prime Minister to appear before the House.

Mr Speaker: Before the recess.

Mel Stride: Indeed: before the recess. Secondly, I think it will also be accepted that Parliament would express its will if there were any likelihood of that becoming an issue.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I regard that as most helpful.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful for your statement, and also for that clarification, as far as it went. However, the Prime Minister said that she could not bind her successor. Presumably, the incoming Prime Minister may well reshape the Government, so any statements or commitments that are made now will not necessarily apply at the time when we have a new Prime Minister and, potentially, new Ministers in place. Can you clarify, Mr Speaker, what the position—as far as you understand it—would then be?

Mr Speaker: In a sense, the hon. Gentleman has stated a fact. That is true: of course a current Prime Minister cannot bind her successor, and a current Leader of the House cannot bind his successor, although we wish the right hon. Member for Central Devon well in his tenure. That is, in a sense—if the hon. Gentleman will forgive my saying so—blindingly obvious. What can I do about it? The honest answer is that I cannot do anything about it. However, I think that there was merit in the raising of these questions, because answers have been obtained, and some people will feel—I express myself cautiously—that considerable weight should be attached to what the incumbent says not just to one Member, but to the whole House. One would like to think that that would have a value that would endure for some time, and certainly for the material time between now and the summer recess.

I hope that that is clear; I think that we shall have to leave it there for now.
Kew Gardens (Leases) (No. 3) Bill
[ Lords ]

Second Reading

Mr Speaker: I can inform the House that I have certified the whole Bill in accordance with Standing Order No. 83J, for Jemima, as being within devolved legislative competence and relating exclusively to England.

4.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

As the Minister in the House of Commons with responsibility for the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, I am delighted to present a Bill that will provide the ability to grant longer leases on Crown land there, opening new streams of revenue that will support the great British institution and enable it to flourish in the future.

Let me place on record, at the outset, my appreciation of the work of Members in this House—my hon. Friends the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) and for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith)—who have promoted similar private Members’ Bills on Kew Gardens. I also note the keen interest of noble Lords in supporting Kew. A similar Bill was promoted by Lord True, and this Bill, before coming to this House, was amended by Lord Whitty so that he and others could be reassured in placing the duty to prevent inappropriate development at Kew unequivocally on the face of the Bill.

Indeed, I think it fair to say that the Bill has already received support from Members on both sides of the other place. Baroness Jones of Whitchurch considered the Bill, and Lord Whitty’s amendment, supported by the Government, provides a double lock on future extended leases. Baroness Kramer and Lord Rooker were pleased that the Bill strengthened the protection of Kew and allowed us to look to a future as distinguished as its proud history.

Kew is a scientific institution of the utmost importance, not only for the United Kingdom but as a global resource—the global resource—for knowledge of plants and fungi. We are facing immense challenges when it comes to the preservation of the natural world, and it is clear that there is an essential role for plants and fungi in that regard.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talks about Kew being a centre of scientific research. For those of us in west London not blessed with wide open spaces, Kew is a treasure house—an absolute treasure trove of delights. The recent exhibition of Dale Chihuly showed Kew Gardens at its absolute finest. I hope that I speak for everybody on the Opposition Benches when I say we entirely support the hon. Gentleman, but particularly those of us in west London who absolutely love this treasure so close to our hearts.

David Rutley: The hon. Gentleman speaks well for the west London posse. He speaks very assuredly and with great passion as always for Kew Gardens, and we are grateful for that. It is a wonderful institution. I assure him that people not just in west London but across the nation want to visit it, and I hope that that is a boost to the local economy.

We are facing immense challenges in preserving the natural world. Within the challenge it is clear that there is a central role for plants and fungi, and Kew can provide answers about how plants and fungi will help us and our planet not just thrive but survive. Kew is a custodian of world-renowned collections, including the Millennium Seed Bank at Wakehurst and the Herbarium at Kew itself. The restoration and digitisation of the Herbarium will need considerable investment and will make the collection accessible globally.

Kew scientific research leads the world. With more scientists than at any time, its research is crucial in solving the challenges facing humanity today. Kew plays an extraordinary global role, in partnership with scientists, educators and communities, promoting research, education and conservation.

Kew does so much to involve the public, as we have already heard. With over 2 million visits to Kew and Wakehurst each year and around 100,000 pupils on school visits, it is building a wider understanding of plants and fungi and why they matter to us. Across the spectrum of public engagement, Kew is fostering a wider understanding of plants and fungi and why they matter to us.

Kew is not only an extraordinary scientific institution; as visitors and scientists will know, the estate includes many special buildings and structures, more than 40 of which are listed. It is a huge challenge to ensure the maintenance of these structures, which due to their historical nature is undertaken at considerable expense. We have a duty to balance public spending against priorities, and Kew is no exception. In view of Kew’s important role, DEFRA has been able to maintain funding to Kew in cash terms over this spending review period, but a key part of that was to support Kew to develop its other sources of income to deliver its ambitions.

Kew has made great strides in improving its financial sustainability. Kew’s Government grant forms just over one third of its income—37% in the 2017-18 accounts—and its mixed funding model is proving hugely successful, for example by using Government funding to leverage significant philanthropic and grant funding for renovation of the Temperate House, which reopened in 2018. Nevertheless, parts of the Kew estate, including some listed residential buildings near Kew Green, badly need investment to maintain and enhance their condition and enable Kew to realise additional income.

Attracting capital investment to refurbish buildings within the boundaries of Kew is one of the big opportunities available, but the current 31-year limit on leases imposed by the Crown Lands Act 1702 has made this difficult to realise. The Bill will allow leases to be granted on land at Kew for a term of up to 150 years. Longer leases will enable Kew to realise additional income from land and property, and will reduce maintenance liabilities and running costs. The additional income generated will help Kew to achieve its core objectives, maintain its status as a UNESCO world heritage site, and prioritise maintaining and developing its collections as well as improving the quality of its estate.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): We all support the work that Kew does and obviously want to support its estate strategy and the funding, but the point my hon. Friend has just made is important. Will he confirm that this is less about income and more about capital receipts? The significance of going to a
150-year lease is that the seven or so residential properties around Kew Green can be sold on a leasehold basis. Kew Gardens is also interested in developing the car park area alongside the Thames.

David Rutley: My hon. Friend speaks from experience; he knows this Bill very well. [Interruption.] Yes, very well. I agree: this is about not just income generation but cost reduction because of the maintenance costs of these properties. It is about getting capital in to help to renovate these important buildings and enable Kew to achieve its wider ambitions, so my hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, any development will be restricted by local planning legislation and by Kew’s provenance as a world heritage site. Many protections will be put in place, notwithstanding the need to take forward these renovation works.

The Bill has the full support of Kew’s board of trustees and residents in the Kew area, in particular through the Kew Society. It might be helpful to set out the protections that have already been alluded to, particularly to confirm that the various safeguards that apply now would continue to apply to any lease granted under the Bill.

Kew’s activities are overseen by Kew’s board and by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew is an Executive non-departmental public body and an exempt charity. It is governed by a board of trustees established under the National Heritage Act 1983. As an exempt charity, although the Charity Commission does not regulate it, it must abide by charity law with the Secretary of State as Kew’s regulator for charity purposes. This regulation is co-ordinated between the Charity Commission and the Secretary of State.

To ensure that Kew’s operational arrangements comply with the National Heritage Act and with public and charity law, a framework document exists between Kew and DEFRA to deal with business planning, resource allocation, the appointment of board members and, pertinently, the disposition of land. Thus, at all times in the governance process, the board of Kew, the Secretary of State and DEFRA play a key role in determining the operational management, and will continue to do so in the grant of any lease under this Bill.

The Bill goes further on that point in requiring that, before granting any lease, the Secretary of State must be satisfied that the lease—and anything that the leaseholder is permitted to do with the property under the terms of the lease—would not have any adverse impact on the functions of the board of trustees as set out under the National Heritage Act.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I note from the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) that there might be some question of a car park facility. Will the Minister ensure that, so far as possible, a low-carbon transport policy is developed for Kew? It seems ironic that we would do anything else, and there should clearly be sufficient electric charging points, sufficient public transport and sufficient cycling and walking routes to ensure that this really is genuinely state of the art for the 21st century.

David Rutley: My right hon. and learned Friend makes a good point, and I am sure that these matters will be given due consideration. The car park that may be envisaged in the future would need to comply with planning regulations locally, so these things would have to be considered.

Stephen Pound: Will the Minister read into the record a fact that is known to many of us, but perhaps not to every one of the vast number of people paying attention to the debate? Anyone who emerges from the main gate at Kew and strolls less than 100 yards up the road will find themselves at Kew Gardens station, where they can take the elegant District line to almost any place that their heart desires. There is also the London Overground. No one actually needs to drive there. There are three buses that stop there and two tube stations very close by. Would he care to note that for the record?

David Rutley: Noted. The hon. Gentleman is well informed, and I thank him. Of course it makes sense to use sustainable transport whenever possible, particularly when visiting Kew.

Another element of protection that will continue under the Bill is that of Kew’s UNESCO world heritage site status, and other designations that offer protection under the planning system. These will apply to any lease granted under the provisions of the Bill. Once again, the Bill goes further, requiring that before granting any lease the Secretary of State must be satisfied that the lease and anything that the leaseholder is permitted to do with the property under its terms would not have any adverse impact on Kew’s UNESCO world heritage site status.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend will be familiar with the fact that it is typical with leasehold properties, particularly flats, for a leaseholder to have an entitlement to extend the lease before it reaches an 80-year cut-off period. With the type of leasehold we are discussing, will it be possible for a leaseholder to continue to extend in the normal way, or will it be a fixed term of 150 years only?

David Rutley: It would be possible to extend the lease in the normal way, except for the fact that a lease would never go beyond 150 years. There are different protections in place because Kew is on Crown land.

It is important to note that the Bill goes further on the UNESCO world heritage site status. Kew was inscribed as a UNESCO world heritage site in 2003 owing to its outstanding universal value as a historic landscape garden and world-renowned scientific institution. As a result, the UK Government, through the Kew board and the Secretary of State, have the ultimate responsibility for ensuring the protection, management, authenticity and integrity of the site. As part of its world heritage site status, Kew has a management plan to show how its outstanding universal value as a property can be served, and that includes protections and mechanisms in the planning system relating to conservation areas in the London boroughs of Richmond and Hounslow.

The Kew Gardens site is also listed as grade I on the Historic England register of park and gardens of special historical interest in England. Much of the Kew site is designated as metropolitan open land, which applies similar protection to that offered to green belt land. Forty-four of the buildings and structures within the site are listed, and Kew is part of an archaeological priority area.
All the protections mean that any building work or alterations to any leased property, including the interior declarations in some cases, would require local planning permission and compliance with the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, the national planning policy framework, and the Government’s policy for the historic environment.

Finally, of course, conditions would apply to the lease itself. In accordance with the duties that the Kew board and the Secretary of State must carry out, the lease itself, while seeking to be commercial, will include any restrictions that the Secretary of State decides are required—for example, to the extension or change of use to protect Kew, its UNESCO world heritage site status, or to ensure that the functions of the board of trustees under the National Heritage Act 1983 are not interfered with in any way.

As I set out earlier, the Bill disapplyes the restriction in section 5 of the Crown Lands Act 1702 in relation to the maximum duration of leases of land at Kew. The Bill will remove the limit of 31 years on leases on land at Kew and apply a maximum of 150 years, bringing Kew into line with the provisions made for the Crown Estate by the Crown Estate Act 1961. The changes provide the ability to grant longer leases on the land. The Bill will not alter the many existing protections in place for Kew and its status as a world heritage site. In fact, the Bill strengthens the protections by formalising the duty of the Secretary of State to uphold them.

All proposals for granting leases are subject to scrutiny and must go through both Kew and DEFRA’s governance and comply with the protections in the planning framework, and in every case the lease itself will contain any restrictions that may be necessary.

The Bill will ensure that Kew’s historic properties are afforded the best protection. It is all about empowering Kew to manage its assets on a sound and sustainable commercial footing to enhance the estate and to pursue its core objectives. Kew’s trustees need the Bill to do what is necessary for the future of this national institution, which is part of our shared global heritage.

The modest dimensions of this two- clause Bill belie its importance in helping to safeguard Kew and its invaluable work. This is an opportunity for us to support Kew’s mission, because enabling Kew to maintain and enhance all parts of its estate will be crucial to its long-term success and to its global role in addressing today’s challenges for plants, fungi and humankind.

5.13 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to be able to speak on Second Reading. The Minister can relax because the Opposition have no intention of dividing the House. In fact, we hope that the Bill gets on its way speedily. I thank him for arranging for me to go to Kew last week. It was the third time that I have managed to get to Kew, which is a haven of peace and a wonderful facility. It is no wonder that it is a UNESCO world heritage site, and we must maintain that status and do everything we can to do improve it.

I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) to the Opposition Front Bench. It is apposite that this debate comes before the debate on the motion relating to climate change. The Labour party believes that climate change must be given greater emphasis both in this place and outside. I hope that my hon. Friend can take part in future debates, but perhaps not this one because it will be fairly short.

Stephen Pound: I will not interrupt again.

My hon. Friend just mentioned his visit to Kew, which I have visited many times. I was delighted to be shown around by Eric White last weekend, and the all-party parliamentary group on gardening and horticulture has also arranged such visits. Given that other things are happening in the world of politics and we are not blessed with a huge attendance, does my hon. Friend agree that it might be an idea to invite the director of Kew to set up an invitation to parliamentarians to visit Kew? Those who have not tasted the delights of this glorious oasis of peace do not know what they are missing.

Dr Drew: I thank my hon. Friend. And I am sure the director will have heard him—particularly if he can get £18 off us all individually as our contribution to keeping this wonderful facility in place. I did not pay my £18, so if the Minister wants to take it off me later, I willingly make that offer.

This long-awaited Bill has been around for some time, and it is urgently needed. The enthusiasm of the staff for their wonderful facility is only enhanced by their need for this Bill, because they need more money. We will talk a bit more about that.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) will doubt say a few things about the Bill, because he, like Lord True and the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), tabled a previous Bill. This Bill has been round the houses. It may not have been scrutinised before, but it has been known about, and it is a short Bill that should not take much time.

In fact, we offered to get through the Bill much quicker, because it will come back again on Report and Third Reading. We were quite happy to consider the Bill in one sitting. We are not tabling any amendments, because the amendments moved by my noble Friends Baroness Jones and Lord Whitty have already been made. We have got what we wanted on giving greater protection to this heritage site, and we are happy the Government agreed to that.

It is important to recognise that the Bill dates back to the difficulties in which Kew Gardens found itself in 2014-15, when there was a potential funding crisis. The then director identified that Kew could lose up to 150 research staff, which would have been a tragedy given the facility’s international importance not just in terms of public access but in being the world’s most important research institution. I will say a bit more about that shortly.

Kew’s particular grouse in 2014-15 was that, in 1983, it got 98% of its funding from the state through grant in aid, which the Minister says is now down to just over 40%. By comparison, the Natural History Museum still draws the vast majority of its funds through the state. There is a lack of parity, at the very least. When and if Kew gets this money, I want assurances about what happens to that money, and I will say something about that in a minute.
The Select Committee on Science and Technology called the Government to account in 2014–15, and one of the things the Committee was clear about is that the Government did not have a clear strategy with regard to Kew Gardens, so it would be interesting to know what progress has been made on the strategy. This Bill may be part of that progress, and there may be other things that the Minister wants to say about the progress that can be made, but progress there needs to be. Protecting and enhancing this wonderful facility will take money. The cost will partly be defrayed by what we are talking about today, but there is no substitute for the fact that the state has to put its hand in its pocket. It has done to some extent, but it needs to do more—again, I will say more about that in a moment.

In a sense, things are on a more even keel than they were, because the cost of going into Kew has risen and now stands at £18 per individual. There are discounts and family tickets, but for people in many walks of life £18 is quite a high contribution, despite the fact that it is a wonderful day out, given that they can go to museums for free. One problem in attracting people, particularly tourists, to Kew is that additional cost they face. Will there be any implication here in terms of additional rises in the entrance fee, even though this may give Kew some extra money? My worry always with this extra money is whether it will go to Kew directly and will not be intermediated by the Treasury, which may just see it as a little cash bonus and take some of it away. We are talking about £15 million, as a maximum. In terms of what Kew gets, that may be a considerable sum, but it will get that hit only on one major occasion. It would therefore be interesting to hear from the Minister that he has got assurances from the Treasury that the money will go to Kew, will be ring-fenced and will not be taken for anything else. I say that because I want to talk about what this wonderful institution will have to do.

We welcome the Bill, but I just want to establish that we are talking about 11 properties. When I walked around the estate, it was apparent that other houses were already in the private sector, so it would be interesting to know exactly what properties we are talking about. I know it is a mixture of houses and flats, but the Minister could certainly clarify that. Again, it would be interesting to know, following on from what the Select Committee said, some of the ways in which the charitable context, which the Minister has explained, is fully understood by all concerned. A slightly different arrangement does apply, because this is not subject to the Charity Commission. We have all received a briefing note from the Charity Commission, but it has very little say over how this charity operates. It is entirely dependent upon the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and therefore DEFRA has to be the agency that protects Kew more than anyone else.

I have a big ask of the Minister, and I hope he is listening. The one thing I did learn was about the need to digitise the herbarium records. They are the most important records of flora—there are some of fauna—in the world. I, for one, would be exceedingly worried if we did not digitise that record as a matter of urgency. There is a £1 million cost, but I hope the Government will look to make a big contribution towards it, because if that building was to catch fire and those thousands of exhibits were lost—I know that is a big if, but these things could always happen—the world’s greatest collection would be endangered. So I hope the Minister might have some say over the way in which the Government’s future strategy takes us towards digitising those herbarium records, and there would be another big advantage, because many people from all over the world want access to those records but currently have to arrive in person at Kew. For people on the other side of that world that involves a big cost, and it is important to recognise that is our obligation to make those records more easily accessible.

I just want to share a few stakeholder views, which are important to put on the record. These largely came out of the inquiry of nearly five years ago, but they are still pertinent. One key thing was about Kew’s status in the global strategy for plant conservation, where it has an important part to play, as it does in terms of the convention on international trade in endangered species, livelihoods, and UK and international biodiversity strategies. All that is tied up with where Kew is and what it does. I hope the Minister accepts that the Bill will contribute towards that, so we can be clear on where the Government’s strategy is taking us.

I have some questions that the Minister needs to answer on the record, because Kew is such an important aspect of the heritage of not only London but the whole country. I have already mentioned the cost of entry, so I shall not labour that point. Another argument that the Select Committee put forward was that in a sense the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has become the sole funder of Kew, which is largely understandable. However, Kew draws no money from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, let alone from the Department for International Development, even though both Departments draw benefit from what Kew has to offer. It would be interesting to know what discussions the Minister has had with those other Departments to see whether they could contribute to the funding as we take Kew Gardens forward.

There is an issue with how we balance what Kew is in respect of its research work and public access. None of us will want to see it become more commercialised, let alone a theme park, which has been a prominent idea in some people’s views on how to deal with the financial shortcoming at Kew. We want to keep it as it is, open for public access, but the back-office elements are important. Kew is crucial to our understanding of climate change. Much of the research that will have to be done on how we feed our future population will be undertaken by Kew scientists, so it would be interesting to know where it fits into the Government’s climate change strategy. One hopes it will play in important part.

I have two more issues to raise quickly. In respect of the action on biodiversity, it is crucial that we do not in any way downgrade Kew’s status because of lack of funding. I hope that the Government will make it clear that Kew has an important part to play in the biodiversity strategy that the Government wish to address.

Finally, the recent report by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, which was published in January 2019, showed that the UK is on track to miss 7 out of its 20 Aichi biodiversity targets. By which date does the Minister expect the UK to be on track to meet those biodiversity targets, given that the only way we can do so is through Kew’s active participation?
Overall, the Bill is good, short and pertinent, so we give it our support and hope that the Government can get it through as a matter of urgency.

5.28 pm

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): It is a rare opportunity for a Member to be able to speak on legislation that pertains almost exclusively to his or her constituency, but I have that honour today, because the magnificent Kew Gardens is in my constituency—

Stephen Pound: And really close to mine.

Zac Goldsmith: That is absolutely right.

I am delighted that the Government have taken up this small, uncontroversial but nevertheless important Bill. Members who have visited Kew Gardens will know what an extraordinary place it is. With 2 million visitors a year, including 100,000 schoolchildren, the gardens are one of the great wonders of the world. There are stunning landscapes, extraordinary plants and peaceful walks—except when they are punctuated by the noise of aeroplanes flying over, but that is a debate for another day.

Kew is a great deal more than a beautiful garden or a tourist attraction: in addition to hosting the world’s largest collection of living plants, its herbarium contains a collection of more than 7 million plant species. It is an extraordinarily valuable international resource, which is in the process of being digitised, as we have just heard, and made freely available worldwide. Kew Gardens is at the forefront, the cutting edge, of international plant science, which is crucial in providing a response to the existential threats of climate change, antimicrobial resistance, and diseases such as cancer, diabetes and more. Kew is simply a priceless national asset, and we should be doing everything we can to support it.

That brings me to the Bill. Very briefly, let me say that I first brought it to this House as a ten-minute rule Bill in January of last year, following similar efforts by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) and by my friend Lord True in the other place. Unfortunately, it was blocked, I think, nine times by a friendly colleague on the Government Benches. I want to repeat my thanks to Ministers from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for their decision to bring the Bill forward in Government time, and I welcome the changes that have been made to the Bill in the Lords. Although the intention of the Bill was never to allow Kew to lease out core parts of its estate, it is welcome that that is now clear in the Bill, with explicit protections for its UNESCO status.

Having visited Kew many, many times, including this morning, I can assure hon. Members that the clear intention is to use the powers in this Bill to lease out the residential buildings on the periphery of Kew’s estate. In fact, I saw a number of those buildings this morning, all of which are beautiful and all of which have been empty for more than a decade. The anomaly of Kew Gardens being Crown land means that it has several buildings that can be leased for a maximum of only 31 years, which is not commercially attractive compared with the 150 years that the Bill will now allow.

Like the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), I want to caution against the suggestion that passing this Bill into law will provide some kind of windfall for Kew. There is no doubt that the potential financial gains are significant, but they must not be seen as a substitute either for visitor income or for Government funding. I hope the Minister agrees that this Bill is an opportunity for Kew to do more. With the spending review on the horizon, I urge him to make sure that Kew continues to receive significant support from Government. I want to reiterate that this Bill must not be used as a pretext to reduce such funding sources.

I thank the Bill team for their support and their willingness to take this Bill off my hands, out of the risk of its being blocked by some on the Back Benches, and on to the statute book. I look forward to it passing its first Commons stage this afternoon.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): What a well balanced debate, as a result of which we go straight into the wind-ups and immediately back to Dr David Drew.

5.32 pm

Dr Drew: I haven’t even written my notes yet.

With the leave of the House, I will say a few things. It is important to do so, because various people have made contributions to this whole process over quite a long period. I welcome what not only the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) but my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) and the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) said, because they have all played a part in making sure that we get this Bill into play as a matter of priority.

I have two very quick things to say. First, I hope the Minister will answer some of my questions. I welcome the Government’s commitment to this Bill, because it is important. As I have said, the enthusiasm of the staff at Kew took me aback. It made me realise how much people care for this institution. Secondly, I hope that we will now be able to move forward with some of the other business that needs to come back to this place, such as the Agriculture Bill, the Fisheries Bill, and, dare I say it, the environment Bill, which should be an environment and climate change Bill.

5.33 pm

David Rutley: With the leave of the House, I will respond to the debate. Indeed, it is my pleasure and privilege to do so. I think there was one other Bill that the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) had in mind as well.

Dr Drew: The Bill on animal sentience—I could throw that in there as well.

David Rutley: There we go. As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am a reasonable man, and I am trying my best to move forward with this legislation. With support from the Opposition, Government Members and those across the House, we are making progress. Hopefully we can make more.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that it is appropriate to hold the Bill’s Second Reading ahead of the climate change debate. I wish to join him in welcoming the hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) to her place.
It is also good to see my hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth in his place for what will be another important speech.

I want to respond to many of the points made in the debate. With characteristic enthusiasm and passion, the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) has persuaded people at Kew in no time at all that it is entirely appropriate for a group of MPs to come along. They would indeed like to extend that invitation to Members here, so I hope that he can join us on that occasion. It is rare for our suggestions to be put into action so quickly, but the hon. Gentleman has managed it.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) mentioned low-carbon transport. Kew’s transport policy is, of course, not within the scope of the Bill, but we will pass on his comments to people there. My hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) talked about extending the leases; I responded by saying that leaseholders could apply to replace the original lease with a new one of no more than 150 years. The hon. Member for Stroud also asked which properties would be included.

My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) made a very important speech; I say a huge thank you to him for his remarkable work and support for Kew over the years. He also does a huge amount on the wider debate about biodiversity and climate change, for which many Members—not least DEFRA Ministers—are extremely grateful.

Of the properties that we are talking about today, five are currently let on a one-year lease following renovation work, partly funded by a loan, and two are unoccupied and require substantial renovation to bring them up to a habitable condition or make them fit to become office accommodation. In the first instance, Kew would like to focus on that portfolio of properties, particularly the unoccupied properties. That portfolio can itself generate a capital sum or remove liability for renovation or maintenance works—a cost avoidance of about £15 million over a 10-year period.

The hon. Member for Stroud also asked about funding and what would be done with it. The Government’s intention is for Kew to receive the income to support its mission, including investment in its infrastructure and the quality of the world heritage site itself. Although I cannot prejudge the outcome of the forthcoming spending review, the importance of Kew’s mission and of securing the institution’s future means that my Department will be working closely with Kew to put forward the strongest possible case. That includes significant investment in digitising Kew’s herbarium collection, which the hon. Gentleman called for and which my hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth in his place for what will be another important speech. I hope that Members are now fully aware of the necessity of the Bill and the benefit that it will bring to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and the wider role played by Kew generally. I also hope that hon. Members feel reassured that proposals under any new lease will be subject to scrutiny by trustees, the Secretary of State and through the planning process with the local planning authority, as well as being in line with Kew’s world heritage site management plan.

It is an honour to have participated in this debate. We care passionately about Kew, and we are grateful to the team there for their important work—I think everybody would echo that—and for their sheer enthusiasm.

Stephen Pound: Long may they flourish!

David Rutley: Long may they flourish, grow and prosper—absolutely. Their enthusiasm is infectious, and we are grateful for it. We want them to continue to succeed in the work they do. I hope the Bill will continue to make positive progress through Parliament, so that we can take this work forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you.

Stephen Pound: Thank Kew!

Madam Deputy Speaker: For the avoidance of doubt, and particularly for Mr Pound’s information, I should say that that was entirely unintentional.

I thank the whole House for dealing so swiftly with this important matter after the many months that the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) spent trying to get the Bill through the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

KEW GARDENS (LEASES) (NO. 3) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Kew Gardens (Leases) (No. 3) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to the Legislative Grand Committee (England).

Proceedings in the Legislative Grand Committee (England), on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(2) Proceedings in the Legislative Grand Committee (England) on the Bill, proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee on a consent motion shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings in the Legislative Grand Committee (England) on the Bill.

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

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in the Legislative Grand Committee (England) on the Bill or to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

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

Question agreed to.
Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure that SNP Members would be keen to take up the opportunity to visit Kew Gardens as well, and we certainly would not want to stand in the way of the progress of this Bill, given the support for it across the House. However, the programme motion that the House has just agreed to has the certainly very unusual, and possibly unprecedented, effect of committing the entire Bill directly to the Legislative Grand Committee (England). I assume that it will have to meet here in the House rather than anywhere else in the Palace of Westminster, because nowhere else has enough space to accommodate all the English MPs who will, I am sure, want to participate in the debate and, potentially, in Divisions. Could you clarify that, under the Standing Orders, while Members from Scotland and Wales would not be able to participate in any Divisions in the Grand Committee, they would be able to participate in the debate if they so chose?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I am very pleased to have the opportunity to clarify the point that he raises. First, I can confirm that the procedure that the House has just agreed to is indeed unprecedented. It is my understanding that the matter will be dealt with here on the Floor of the House—if, I suppose, there is enough space to accommodate all the English MPs who will, I am sure, want to participate in the debate and, potentially, in Divisions. Could you clarify that, under the Standing Orders, while Members from Scotland and Wales would not be able to participate in any Divisions in the Grand Committee, they would be able to participate in the debate if they so chose?

5.43 pm

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Chris Skidmore): I beg to move.

That the draft Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 12 June, be approved.

It is an honour to be in the House debating this order less than two weeks after this seminal legislation was laid in Parliament. I should say that I stand here as the interim Minister for Energy and Clean Growth—as an understudy to my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry). It is a tribute to her efforts that we are debating this measure today. I am sure that she would have dearly loved to be at the Dispatch Box speaking to it herself. I pay tribute to her work, her industry, and, above all, her passion, which is testament to the legislation that is being taken through today.

The draft order would amend the 2050 greenhouse gas emissions reduction target in the Climate Change Act 2008 from at least 80% to at least 100%. That target, otherwise known as net zero, would constitute a legally binding commitment to end the United Kingdom’s contribution to climate change.

Last year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change published a sobering report on the impact of global warming at 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. In that report, it made clear that a target set to limit global warming at 2°C above pre-industrial levels was no longer enough. It made clear that by limiting warming to 1.5°C, we may be able to mitigate some of the effects on health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security and economic growth. It made clear that countries across the world, including the United Kingdom, would need to do more. The House has heard of the great progress we have made in tackling climate change together, cross-party, and how we have cut emissions by 42% since 1990 while growing the economy by 72%.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): When Greta Thunberg was in Parliament a few weeks ago, she called on politicians to be honest at all times. Does the Minister agree that it is a bit misleading to suggest that we deserve great credit because we have reduced emissions by 42% since 1990, since we have done that primarily by outsourcing a huge amount of our manufacturing emissions to other countries? We do not account for our consumption emissions, and if we did, our success would look rather less rosy than he has just presented.

Chris Skidmore: The draft order builds on a framework of legislation set in 2008; I see the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) in his place, who introduced that legislation. We have always recognised as a country that we are on a journey towards reducing our carbon emissions. That journey includes ensuring that we show global leadership and demonstrate to other countries that are not cutting their carbon emissions the need to do so. Above all, we recognise the need to do so sustainably and to ensure that we can continue to grow our economy. The last thing we want to do is reduce our carbon emissions at the risk of increasing unemployment and shrinking the economy. We have taken the independent advice of the Committee on Climate Change, which has demonstrated how we can do so not only sustainably but, importantly, in a just transition. It is important for some of the poorest in society that we have a just transition towards net zero.
Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the Government, as the largest purchaser of goods and services in the country, should also be a net zero purchaser and provider of services? That means a root-and-branch change of the way that government—local, national and quangos—procure what they buy for taxpayers.

Chris Skidmore: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and for the leadership she has shown on the Environmental Audit Committee. I will come on to how the independent Committee on Climate Change produced its response, but it set out clearly a range of scenarios involving a net zero transition and what action would be needed in industry, within society and among individuals to go from 80% to 100%.

We have set carbon budgets 1 to 5 to take us to 2032. Carbon budget 6, which will lead to 2037, will be set by June 2021 at the latest. It is important to recognise that we all have a role. Government especially have a role not only in legislating today, to ensure that we set the policy framework for achieving net zero, but in demonstrating each and every one of its Departments’ commitment to net zero. Her Majesty’s Treasury will conduct a review over the summer, as we move towards the spending review, of the impacts on business, society and across the public sector of the need to decarbonise swiftly and securely.

As part of that progress and the pathway towards net zero, we will be publishing an energy White Paper in the summer. A variety of different documents will be published, but I take the hon. Lady’s point; when it comes to the public sector, we will need to show leadership. We will need to be able to explain or change and to set out how all different areas of society will meet future carbon budgets—whether that is carbon budget 6, 7 or 8—on the road towards net zero.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Skidmore: I have given way a significant number of times, and this will be the last intervention for a while so that I can make progress with my speech.

Dr Drew: The Minister will know that the NFU has set a target for earlier than 2050. At the very least will he look at options for bringing forward the date by which we should be able to meet the target of net zero emissions?

Chris Skidmore: We have obviously taken advice on the 2050 target from the independent Committee on Climate Change, which has suggested that at the moment 2050 is the earliest possible date for reaching net zero. Obviously, we are the first G7 country to make that commitment to 2050. Other economies, such as Norway, have committed to 2038. As part of the Government’s local industrial strategy, the Greater Manchester area committed, just last week, to a net zero target by 2038. I welcome the NFU’s commitment, but what we are saying as a Government is that all agencies across society will need to take action.

We welcome the NFU’s leadership on agricultural emissions, and looking at how the agricultural sector can be decarbonised. However, when it comes to the framework of the Climate Change Act, as the right hon. Member for Doncaster North highlighted during the statement made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, the review mechanism is built into the legislation to allow us the opportunity to review the target in five years. When it comes to the overall cost—and some hon. Members may wish to reflect on the costs of going from 80% to 100%—the review mechanism is important. The Committee on Climate Change has recommended that the overall cost envelope of reaching net zero be the same as the 80% envelope, because since the original 80% target was set out, the costs of renewables and other technology have come down.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a hugely important point. Earlier he talked about the need to balance the need to reduce emissions with concerns about jobs. Does he agree that we have already seen the creation of 400,000 low-carbon jobs in this country, and that by leading the transition to a clean economy—which will happen whether we like it or not—there will be even more opportunities for job creation in the future?

Chris Skidmore: I thank my hon. Friend for making that excellent point, and he is right. When we consider any impact on wider society of introducing this legislation over the next few decades, while we may see short-term costs from the transformation, we need to look at the investment opportunities that will be created by new green jobs, which are expected to rise from the 400,000 figure he mentions to 2 million by 2030, potentially creating an economy worth over £150 billion in the longer term.

It is important that that investment is recognised, because we want the UK to lead the world in future technologies such as carbon capture and storage. The legislation today provides a catalytic moment for us to look at how we can achieve this target and to invest for the future. The Treasury review will lead into the spending review and we will wish to look at how we can continue to invest in clean growth as a technology.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the Government on bringing this proposal forward and assure him of my party’s support. I want to put that on record today. This issue is a topic of conversation every day in my office; it has become that sort of issue. Will the Minister outline how he intends to bring businesses along on the climate change agenda and ensure that they are encouraged, rather than forced, to make small changes that could make lasting changes globally? It would be great to bring small businesses along, as it would be a step in the right direction.

Chris Skidmore: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his leadership on the issue. We have had several conversations in the past few weeks on the legislation, but he is right that we have to take a whole of the United Kingdom approach to this. I know that it is more difficult for certain industries to make the changes that are needed, but for small businesses and those groups that we know will have questions or difficulties in making the transition, we will want to be able to set that out clearly. The energy White Paper will be published shortly, as the first in a series of documents to demonstrate the changes and consultations that we need. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that those consultations will allow that sort of issue. We will want to be heard in this debate. It is possible to achieve the changes, and we want to make sure that small businesses feel reassured of that.
Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Does my hon. Friend welcome the support of the CBI and the British Chambers of Commerce, the NFU, the Royal Academy of Engineering and many household-name companies, because the legislation will give them certainty about investment so that they can benefit from the growth in our economy? It really is not only achievable to reach net zero by 2050, but affordable.

Chris Skidmore: I thank my hon. Friend for putting on record the wide range of support from many companies that have written to the Prime Minister and set out their own ambitious targets. I feel a bit like the BBC when it comes to whether I should name certain companies rather than others, but I know that many food manufacturers and retail corporations—big names on the high street—have already made the commitment to 2050. We are following in their footsteps as a Government and Parliament to provide the legislation today. My hon. Friend is right: the legislative framework will provide long-term security for those companies to begin their transitions.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Within the Government, there are many different estimates of the impact on jobs and the cost to the Treasury. Why do we not have an impact assessment for this statutory instrument? That would be good regulatory and legislative practice.

Chris Skidmore: The way that the legislation from the Climate Change Act 2008 has been framed means that impact assessments are not needed specifically for the SI. We did not have an impact assessment when we moved from 60% to 80%, because the risk is incumbent on Government in making the legislation. The impact assessments that are needed under the framework of the Act arise through the carbon budgets themselves. We have already legislated for carbon budgets 1 to 5, to 2032. The framework for carbon budget 6 will be recommended by the independent Committee on Climate Change ready for next year: it needs to be implemented by June 2020. There will be a full impact assessment on the next period, 2032 to 2037.

Following the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), it is the carbon budget process that needs the certainty in place for businesses and society to plan ahead. Any impact assessments that are made will reflect carbon budgets 6, 7 and 8. The Treasury is also taking forward its own independent impact assessment of the wider costs to business and society. That work is ongoing and will be presented at the time of the spending review.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): Many of my constituents, especially schoolchildren, will be delighted by this announcement, but others are rightly sceptical about the costs. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that the plan will be achievable and affordable?

Chris Skidmore: My hon. Friend is right that the legislation today is not simply about warm words or passing a law. We need to be able to demonstrate the action that lies beneath it. Action will come relatively quickly with the publication of an energy White Paper in the summer that will look at the future of our energy supply, at a household level and an industrial level, and the energy network itself. The White Paper will demonstrate the action that the Government are taking and it will lead to a series of future consultations.

In order to lead the debate on climate change and demonstrate the global leadership that the UK wishes to have, it is right that the process highlights the need for clean growth. That is not oxymoronic: we can grow the economy at the same time as removing greenhouse gases from our atmosphere and ensuring that new, greener technologies and more renewable forms of energy come on board. It is right that we lead that conversation, that we reassure those who may be concerned about the future, and that we take action to demonstrate to those businesses worried about any economic impact that this transition is both just and sustainable.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): This measure is not long overdue but it is welcome, and I believe it will be very popular right across the country. Has my hon. Friend looked at the interim report of the all-party parliamentary group on British bioethanol, which proposes that E10 petrol should be introduced as standard in the UK, as it is in most parts of Europe, America and Australasia? That would reduce carbon emissions from standard petrol by the equivalent of 700,000 cars; it would save jobs in the north-east of England, where the two British bioethanol plants are based; and it would be cleaner in terms of pollution. It would, of course, be a temporary measure while we introduce more electric cars, but is it not overdue?

Chris Skidmore: My right hon. and learned Friend has also raised that point with me in private, and I am happy to raise the issue of bioethanol with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which has responsibility for agriculture. It is important to reflect that, as part of a grand challenge in our industrial strategy, we have set out a number of missions on the future of mobility and transport in our cities, including the reduction of congestion, the introduction of electric vehicles and the adaptation of battery technology. I was delighted to visit Warwick Manufacturing Group on Friday, to discuss the advances it has made with lithium-ion batteries. We must do that because of the need to reduce not just carbon emissions but air pollution; we know that tens of thousands of people are literally dying as a result of air pollution in our streets and cities, so the impact we make today is not just for 2050 but for now.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The Government have committed to phasing out new sales of the internal combustion engine by 2040. My Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has recommended that the date be brought forward by almost a decade, if there is to be any chance of meeting the commitment of net zero by 2050. Will the Minister look again at the phasing out of the internal combustion engine, so that we can get more electric vehicles on our roads and bring down carbon emissions?

Chris Skidmore: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady: we want to see the greatest possible transition, as fast as possible, to electric and hybrid vehicles for the future, but we have to be able to do it in a sustainable way. We have to ensure that electric vehicle technology, including batteries and other opportunities, moves with
us at the same time. Other countries have moved faster than us, and I recognise the points the hon. Lady makes, but what is important is that we begin this discussion about how we can achieve that. There are a number of policy measures by which we can do it. There is also a supply-side as well as a demand-side issue when it comes to electric vehicle technology, and we need to be able to work on both sides of that economic argument in order to increase the number of electric vehicles on our roads. There are issues about charging points, which I also recognise. We need to do it in a sustainable and affordable way that ensures that we can continue a transformation of the economy.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): I would really welcome an earlier shift towards electric cars and electric bikes, but is it not the case that, where possible, we really need to be getting people out of their cars altogether and instead use a combination of cycling and walking? Will the Minister assure me that there will be increased investment in cycling and walking?

Chris Skidmore: I will get back to my speech in a moment. It is important that the Government are able to set out a pathway for considering the range of responsibilities across society, and that will encourage a range of individual actions. The Committee on Climate Change is the lead independent committee whose advice the Government have taken in order to legislate today. It has set out a range of future possibilities to reach net zero, many of which include individual actions for reaching the final 4%, but this is about system change and decarbonising our energy and heating systems, both domestically and industrially. There are a large number of areas where we will need to take action across society, and we need to be able to take that action now.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) rose—

Chris Skidmore: I have been generous in taking interventions—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. If I might help the Minister and, indeed, the House, the Minister has been very generous in giving way and a great many Members have intervened on him. Perhaps the House is not aware that this debate has been allocated 6 minutes on Back-Bench speeches.

6.8 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I rise to emphasise just how strongly we support this order. As you have said, Madam Deputy Speaker, we have 90 minutes to debate it, but I for one think that that is miserably insufficient time for what we need to talk about. I hope that the parliamentary authorities will arrange a whole day’s debate as soon as possible on the order and its implications. Of course accept that this is how orders work, but I know that hon. Members across the House are itching to talk about the consequences of this momentous change and to review what it means for how we go about tackling climate change, the measures we will have to take and, indeed, the commitments we will have to make over the next few years to make sure that the order does not fall dead from a legislative press but instead really works in our war on climate change.

The Labour party has long called for that change. My hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) called in the House for net zero as long as a year ago, as indeed did the Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). The change has, of course, been widely called for by climate strikers and green activists across the country. This first step in the right direction is for them as much as for the Members debating it today. It is also a tribute to the sagacity and draftsmanship of the original Climate Change Act 2008.

The 2008 Act was taken through this House by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), who is in his place. The fact is that such a momentous and far reaching change in the UK’s target horizon, on the removal of greenhouse
gases in the atmosphere and the move to a permanent net zero carbon economy, can be effected by an order consisting, effectively, of one article and the substitution of one figure in one subsection in the Act. It is possible to do that, because, as the Minister mentioned, section 2 of the Act states that the Secretary of State may, by order, amend the percentage specified in section 1(1)—the current 80% target—if it appears to the Secretary of State that there have been significant developments in scientific knowledge about climate change.

I am sure the Minister agrees that that is precisely what has happened since the passing of the Act. What we thought might be a sustainable emissions reduction target to keep the global temperature rise to below 2°C by 2050 already looks insufficiently robust. The UK’s contribution to a global effort seeking to arrive at a 2°C outcome—a commitment to reduce the UK’s emission load of carbon dioxide by 80% from a baseline of 1990 levels—is no longer sufficient. We need to aim for global temperature rises of no more than 1.5°C by 2050. The Minister mentioned the recent seminal Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, which shows us why the target is so important and why even limiting temperature change to 2°C will not get us to a tolerable safe place as far as the effects of global warming on the planet are concerned. That does indeed count as the “developments in scientific knowledge” specified in the Act.

The UK’s contribution to the global effort has to ensure that we can achieve net zero emissions by 2050—or, I would hope, before 2050. That has to be our new target and it has to be enshrined in our legislation. I say before 2050, because it may well be that further scientific advances indicate that we need to achieve the target before then. I think that that will be the case and the Act could be amended further, if necessary, to take that into account.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Does the 2017 manifesto commitment to a revolution in fracking and shale gas extraction not fly in the face of the grand ambitions we are discussing today?

Dr Whitehead: If one is trying to get a zero-emissions outcome, trying to get a lot more high carbon fuel out of the ground using some of the most difficult ways possible does not exactly seem to be in line with that target.

Wera Hobhouse: Can we encourage the Minister to acknowledge—I wish he would listen—that as the 80% target now needs to be 100% by 2050, now is the perfect time to say we no longer support fracking?

Dr Whitehead: That is one of many things we will have to do in the very near future as we address how properly to sort out the new target. As I will come on to say, there is a big list of challenging things we need to do, and that is just one of them. There are many, many new policy guidelines that we need to get into place to get us to that target.

The Committee on Climate Change, established under the Act as the guardian of science in our proceedings on climate change in the UK, reported strongly, as has been outlined, that we need to move to net zero and that we could do it by 2050, within the cost parameters established in the original target, if we put in place the very challenging policies it outlined. We strongly support that small change that means so much.

As the Minister will know, however, that is not the end of the matter. In fact, it is barely the beginning. I therefore want to ask the Minister for some points of clarification and some further information when he comes to respond to this short debate. There are, essentially, four points to consider.

First, the Minister will know all about the carbon budgets, which were admirably and clearly established under the Climate Change Act. They are designed to keep us on track for a steady reduction in emissions and to put in place measures to keep emissions decline on track. It set out three budgets from the 2008 start date, established in total size by the Committee on Climate Change, and required a Government plan to be put into place on how to meet each budget. The Minister will know that while we have done well by international standards in reducing our emissions by 47%—it is much less in consumption emissions, if we look at it that way—that is not a sufficient trajectory for net zero carbon targets. Our current performance, and likely achievements on known policies right now, place us in a disadvantageous position as we seek to adhere to the budgets that will drive emissions down to net zero by 2050.

The carbon budgets are designed—all five of them, to date—to put us on a path for an 80% reduction and 2°C, not net zero 1.5°C. It is shocking that we are currently failing to get to grips with the later budgets, budgets four and five, even under the circumstances of 2°C. We have exceeded our earlier budgets only partially because of policy and partially because of economic circumstances, meeting or exceeding the first two budgets and probably the third.

After that, however, it gets very sketchy. Indeed, the latest updated emissions projections from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy show us badly off target: over by 139 megatonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent for the fourth carbon budget, or 7% over on central estimates; and 245 megatonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent, or 13% over the central estimate for the fifth carbon budget. This is at a time when we will need to introduce a radically reduced sixth carbon budget, and subsequent budgets, to meet our new challenges. We are failing even to get to grips with the old targets, which will make our work so much harder when the later budgets come upon us.

What urgent steps are the Minister and the Government taking to get us back on track for the fourth and fifth carbon budgets, on which we are currently failing so badly? I can make an offer to the Minister: if he wants to sit down and sort out a raft of new policies, extended commitments to policy programmes, and extensions of the urgency of existing programmes, we will happily jointly draft those with him, so that there is solid buy-in across the House for that vital initial effort.

Secondly, we received the alarming news recently that the Government seemingly intend to roll over historical surpluses—some 88 megatonnes of carbon dioxide saved from the second carbon budget—to ease the passage of the third carbon budget, thus creating a higher starting point for the fourth and fifth carbon budgets. That move is not completely illegitimate in terms of the construction of the Act, but the Committee on Climate change has always recommended that that should not
be done, and that banking and borrowing on future budgets would gravely distort the safe progression downwards of carbon dioxide emissions. Similarly, we should not seek to offset our own account through international emissions allowances, as the Government seem intent on doing.

Will the Minister explain why the Government have moved to set aside emission surpluses from earlier budgets? Will he say now that he will unwind that intention and not use them to inflate future budgets? Will he confirm that international offsets will have no place in future budget setting? We note in the explanatory memorandum to the order that despite the committee’s recommendation in the report that the UK legislate as soon as possible to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, with the target of a 100% reduction in greenhouse gases from 1990 covering all sectors of the economy including aviation and shipping, the Government have, for the time being, merely left headroom in the budgets for international aviation and shipping. Shipping and aviation currently make up 3.2% and 2.1% of global emissions, but this could rise to over 30% if action is not taken alongside other greenhouse gas reductions. What is the Government’s intention with regard to aviation and shipping coming properly and fully into carbon budgets, and why are they continuing to delay what we all know is an essential inclusion if those targets are to be meaningful for the future?

Thirdly, does the Minister recognise, as I am sure he does, that net zero is the practical outcome of the legislation to require a 100% reduction in the UK’s net carbon account? Net zero means that in addition to developing low carbon policies, as we were for the 80% target, we have to develop policies that are essentially carbon negative—that put carbon back into the ground in one way or another to compensate for the remaining positive carbon elements of our overall account. This means that techniques such as BECCS—bio-energy with carbon capture and storage—extended carbon capture and storage, carbon capture from the air and radical afforestation are all important policies for the future target. What plans do the Government have—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but before he comes to his further points I hope he is bearing in mind that there is well under an hour left in this debate and that a great many Members wish to participate.

Dr Whitehead: Indeed, Madam Deputy Speaker. I assure you that I have about half a page to go, so I hope that that will keep the timetable intact.

What plans do the Government have to proceed urgently with negative carbon policies? We will be on hand to help them if they want to bring those policies in at an early stage.

Finally, the Minister will no doubt have been copied into the recent letter from the Chancellor concerning legislating for net zero, in which he urged that there should not be legislation until a review of the costs had been carried out by the Treasury. The letter was widely regarded as being somewhat climate economic illiterate, in that it set out only the costs and not the benefits of moving forward in this way. As I said, the Committee on Climate Change indicated that in its opinion the GDP cost of 1% to 2% was unchanged from when the 80% target was set—this was presumably approved by the Treasury. Indeed, as Lord Stern reminded us in his seminal report of 2006, which seems a long time ago, the GDP costs of doing nothing might be several times as much.

Will the Minister provide assurance on that point? Indeed, I take it from the fact that we have this legislation, and that it has not been put off to some time in the future, that the Treasury’s rather insidious advice has not been taken on board. Might it not be a good idea to set out in the round and well in advance what the overall costs and benefits of moving to this target will be? I look forward to the jobs in the low-carbon industries that we will set to work replacing our infrastructure, so that it works for a green future; the immense improvements in the quality of our environment that the measure will bring; and the assurance that we will leave a world fit for our children and grandchildren to live in. That surely does not have a price, but, if it does, it is well worth paying.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The time limit for Back-Bench speeches will begin at five minutes and is likely to be reduced.

6.22 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I give a warm welcome to today’s legislation and to the Minister, who has taken this brief by the scruff of the neck since he was appointed, for which we are all grateful.

This is a moment to give sincere thanks to the Government and the Committee on Climate Change for acting and allowing us to act in the way we are set to, because the IPCC report, which the Minister referred to, is really devastating. If we do not manage to limit the rise in global temperatures to 1.5°C, we will find that sea levels keep rising to an unsustainable degree and that the impact on biodiversity is completely unsustainable. The difference between a 1.5°C and 2°C rise is clearly illustrated in that report. At 1.5°C, we will lose 6% of insects, 8% of plants and 4% of vertebrates. That is devastating enough by any measure. At 2°C, the IPCC forecasts that we would lose 18% of insects, 16% of plants and 8% of vertebrates.

Limiting global warming to 1.5°C compared with 2°C has other consequences, most notably for us as a species. Keeping it to 1.5°C may reduce the proportion of the world’s population who are exposed to climate-induced water stress by 50%. The impact on an increasingly volatile and dangerous world can scarcely be overstated. We need to do this—the science is clear—and we need to rebut the notion that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), referred to. I agree with him that we need to fight back against the idea that the costs exceed the benefits, because doing the right thing for the environment is not at odds with doing the right thing for our economy. The UK’s performance since the 1992 Rio summit—we have decarbonised the most of any G7 nation at the same time as growing our economy the most—only goes to prove that.

The committee’s report was crystal clear that we can deliver net zero at no additional cost relative to the 2008 commitment to an 80% reduction in CO2 by 2050,
owing to the pace of technological change. That needs to be factored into all our calculations when it comes to the achievability and costs of the commitment. Anyone who has listened to Lord Adair Turner talking about this, as he has done so well, and seen the work of the Energy Transitions Commission can be well assured that we are on track to deliver this in a cost-effective fashion.

This goes to the point that the coalition Government’s energy policy, under David Cameron, was a huge success. The contracts for difference mechanism, which enabled huge reductions in the cost of offshore wind in particular, goes to show that we can achieve massive economic and technological change if we incentivise markets to deliver the outcomes that we all need. Anyone who looks at the proportion of the UK’s energy generated by renewables—it stood at just over 6% in 2010 and is now 33%—will see that we can deliver far-reaching change in a very short period.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very important point about the good that Government can do and the change that they can bring about. Does he agree that to reach this ambitious target, we will need every level of government, including local government, the devolved Administrations and central Government, to work together to make sure that we can deliver this ambitious target for 2050?

Mr Clarke: I absolutely agree. No one can regard this as somebody else’s challenge, and that goes for the private sector as well as the public sector. Everyone will have to realign their expectations in the light of this commitment because it is genuinely groundbreaking. It is easy to underestimate the significance of what we are gathered to legislate for. This is a world-leading initiative by a developed nation. It is a profound statement of our commitment to a cleaner and greener world.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Clarke: I will, but I promise not to take more than my allotted time.

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend has campaigned so vigorously on this issue. He is right to say that this is world-leading legislation and that the UK is taking the lead, but does he agree that China, whose carbon emissions are something like 25 times that of the UK, really needs to play its part?

Mr Clarke: I do. That is not a counsel of despair. In many ways, we are setting a powerful example that other countries will be inspired to follow. By legislating for net zero, we start to create some of the economic opportunities that other countries will, in turn, be keen to seize. We can set a powerful moral and economic example for other countries to follow. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind words. He, too, has fought long and hard to make this happen, and I thank him for that.

On the economic opportunity, I will briefly bang the drum for carbon capture and storage. The CCC is absolutely clear in its report that we need to deliver CCS—[Interruption.] Contrary to what the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) said from a sedentary position, the Government are now taking CCS as an integral part of their green industrial strategy. We need to make sure that we get a number of clusters rolled out as quickly as possible, and one of those should be Teesside. I praise the work of the Teesside Collective, which is a pioneering group of industrial companies, all of whom want to see this happen, not least because there are certain industries such as steel, cement, plastics and fertilisers that emit CO₂ as an inextricable part of their production techniques. Even if we fully decarbonised our energy mix, those sectors would still need CCS to avoid contributing to our carbon emissions.

Finally, this is a wonderful example of how the UK can take a moral lead in the world after Brexit, and I praise how we are fighting to deliver the COP 26, alongside Italy, as part of our efforts. If we secure that, I hope we will make the drive for net zero an integral part of our prospectus for the conference.

6.30 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Like everyone in the Chamber, I found the results from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change according to which we need to limit the increase in temperature to 1.5°C very sobering. Its findings should if anything spur us all into very determined action. The results of such a rise would be an increased likelihood of food scarcity, disease and poverty, which we cannot just stand by and watch. I am pleased to say that the findings have refocused minds, and I am glad to have this debate today—it is only a pity it is so short. Just last Friday, we saw another UK-wide school strike outside Parliament and across schools. That is particularly important given that we had a visit from the world’s most powerful leader, who is a climate change denier, just a few weeks previously.

By contrast, last week, Glasgow Caledonian University hosted the world forum on climate justice, at which Nicola Sturgeon spoke about the big climate conversation—a nationwide conversation to discuss action to tackle the global climate emergency. We rightly realise that climate change is the challenge of a generation. Whether we are academics, activists or politicians, we have not only a duty to raise awareness of climate change, but an urgent obligation to take action and seek solutions.

I therefore welcome the UK Government’s decision to legislate for a net zero target by 2050. Since the publication of the Committee on Climate Change’s report last month, the Scottish Government have been calling for this, given that the Committee was explicit in its advice that Scotland could not achieve net zero emissions by 2045 unless the UK Government did so by 2050. Will the UK Government respond to the Scottish Government’s request for an urgent meeting to discuss how reserved levers can be applied to help achieve net zero emissions in Scotland and the rest of the UK?

This is an important moment to take stock of what has been achieved so far, to examine our future plans and to set out what needs to be done imminently now that these new targets have been set. I am proud to say that Scotland is already world leading in its approach to climate change. We are committed to setting and meeting the most ambitious targets possible. We have already halved emissions since 1990 while growing the economy and increasing employment and productivity. Scotland continues to outperform the UK in delivering long-term emissions reductions, with statutory annual targets for 2014,
2015 and 2016 all met, and progress remains consistent with meeting the current interim target for 2020. The only country in the EU15 to do better is Sweden.

The Scottish Government declared a climate emergency last month and acted immediately on the Committee on Climate Change advice by lodging amendments to our Climate Change Bill to set a net zero target for 2045 and increase the target for 2030 to 70% and for 2040 to 90%. These are the most ambitious statutory targets in the world for these years and this immediate response has been welcomed by the committee, which said:

“Scotland has been a leader within the UK with many of its policies to tackle climate change. By setting a strong net-zero target for 2045 it can continue that leadership on the world stage.”

That said, simply discussing climate change, setting targets and reflecting on achievements will not solve climate change. Progress to date has been achieved with little impact on most people, and few of us have had to make any real radical lifestyle changes. As the committee pointed out, to achieve these new targets we will require “extensive changes across the economy”. The next phase will require much more noticeable changes and tougher decisions, with people having to embrace significant lifestyle change in order to achieve our collective ambition. The sooner we start, the easier it will be to achieve.

Scotland has already made progress with efforts to ensure a just transition—I was pleased to hear the Minister mention that in his speech in relation to the UK Government’s own ambitions—and has set up a Just Transition Commission specifically to provide advice on how to transition to a low-carbon economy that is fair for everyone. I hope he will pay close attention to its progress. It will advise Scottish Ministers on how to apply the International Labour Organisation’s just transition principles to Scotland—for example, by examining the economic and social opportunities that the move to a carbon-neutral economy will bring; the impact on a sustainable and inclusive labour market; and lastly, issues that could arise in relation to cohesion, equalities and poverty.

Furthermore, climate change will be at the heart of the next SNP programme for government and spending review. Last year, the Scottish Government published their climate change plan 2018-32, which set out how we would continue to drive down emissions over the period. This is due to be updated within six months of the Climate Change Bill receiving Royal Assent to reflect these new targets. We are announcing new and ambitious action on deposit return, on the way we farm and on renewables. For example, a new part of the Scottish strategy for achieving 100% reduction in emissions is through establishing a publicly owned, not-for-profit energy company to deliver renewable energy to Scottish customers “as close to cost price as possible”.

The UK Government should pay close attention to that.

Looking ahead, for the UK Government to be serious about meeting their new target, they must heed the advice of the Committee on Climate Change, which set out five scenarios for the UK to reach net zero emissions by 2050, based on known technologies. These included resource and energy efficiency, and societal choices that cut demand for carbon intensive activities; extensive electrification supported by a major expansion of renewable and other low-carbon power generation; the development of a hydrogen economy to service demands for some industrial processes; and changes in how we farm and use our land.

None the less, the recommended scenario that sticks out for me is carbon capture, usage and storage. The committee’s report states that it is a “necessity not an option”. The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee report on carbon capture, usage and storage concludes that the UK will not be able to meet its Paris agreement climate change targets without deploying carbon capture. In spite of all this, the Conservative UK Government shamefully reneged on their promised £1 billion of investment in carbon capture and storage technology, which was expected to create 600 jobs in Peterhead, in a deal signed by David Cameron in the months leading up to the 2014 independence referendum.

Earlier this month, my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) pointed out to the Secretary of State that St Fergus near Aberdeen could at a minimum capture 5.7 gigatonnes—equivalent to 150 years of all Scotland’s 2016 gas emissions. With the right investment and commitment, this could be operational by 2023. I remind the Minister of the huge potential of carbon capture, usage and storage and encourage him to do all he can to support its development in Scotland. Will he please announce what further plans he has?

Finally, the Committee on Climate Change outlined the obstacles that needed to be overcome to achieve net zero emissions as well as a number of priorities for the Government, such as ensuring that businesses respond, engaging the public to act, developing the infrastructure, providing the skills and ensuring a just transition. Crucially, the report recommended that the net zero challenge be embedded and integrated across all Departments, at all levels of government and in all major decisions that impact on emissions. This would be the right course of action and one that I hope is followed through on.

Like the Scottish Government, the next Prime Minister must put tackling this climate emergency at the heart of what the Government do. It is something that each and every one of us must keep at the forefront of our minds every day. Make no mistake: climate change is a global problem and responsibility and its consequences will not respect national borders. Let us ensure that this target is delivered upon with no room for complacency and help to set the agenda for other nations to aspire to.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The time limit must be reduced to four minutes.

6.37 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I very much support this motion and I congratulate the Government on bringing forward this legislation so quickly after the passing of the motion on 1 May accepting that there was a climate change emergency.

I hope that the motion will be approved this evening. If it is, we must not rest on our laurels but move immediately to provide the full policy framework so we can deliver what is an ambitious target. The good news is that much of the framework is already there: the Climate
Change Act 2008, the industrial strategy, the clean growth strategy and the sector deals. Some pieces of the jigsaw have been put in place, such as the offshore wind sector deal—the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), launched it in Lowestoft in March—which will help to revitalise the local economy.

Other pieces of the jigsaw are missing, however, such as a route map for decarbonising transport, a flexible policy framework for promoting local bespoke heating schemes and a comprehensive plan for meeting the domestic energy efficiency targets in the clean growth strategy, as put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) in her ten-minute rule Bill last week. The UK has made significant strides in decarbonising the nation's power supply, with offshore wind providing a means of regenerating coastal communities such as Lowestoft, but more work needs to be done, including providing a clear route to market for other clean energy technologies and getting on with delivering those big-ticket items of nuclear power and carbon capture, utilisation and storage, which are absolutely vital to delivering on the zero carbon goal. It is important for us not to be not to be a one-trick pony and concentrate only on power. We must immediately set about making significant strides in decarbonising transport and heat, as well as improving our performance in relation to energy efficiency.

The challenge is a big one, and the UK Government cannot deliver on their own. We need to be working with and leading other countries, and incentivising and encouraging the private sector to step up to the plate and invest. Norway is a country with which we have a great deal in common, as we share the North sea oil and gas basin. We must work with the Norwegians to ensure that oil and gas are produced in a low-carbon, efficient manner in future, and that we realise the full potential of carbon capture, utilisation and storage. Companies that were exclusively oil and gas businesses are responding to the winds of change and are making the transition to low-carbon forms of energy production. The Government must incentivise them to move as quickly as is practically possible, and to ensure that the highly skilled workforce on the United Kingdom continental shelf have every opportunity to move to jobs in the low-carbon economy.

The UK has a record of which we can be proud, but we now need to accelerate our efforts to meet the challenge, and the motion is the first step in that process. It is welcome, so let us now ensure that it is passed, and then get on with the enormous amount of work that is required for that challenge to be properly met.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I am glad to follow the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous). There is something paradoxical about the fact that this is a low-key debate on a Monday evening, but one thing that it indicates is that there is a great deal of consensus on the need for action, and that is a good thing. The fact that there is not a huge row going on shows that, on both sides of the House, we want to act.

I shall make three substantive points. The first is about the target itself. It is based on the recommendations of the Committee on Climate Change, and I welcome it, but I believe that it should be regarded as—I hesitate to use this word—a backstop. [Laughter.] I could not think of a better word, although I asked my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) for one.

The reality is that the science is heading in one direction, towards more urgent action. Let me draw the House's attention to a document that was produced for the Committee on Climate Change by its international advisory group, chaired by Peter Betts, an excellent former civil servant who was responsible for the international negotiations. In that document, the group said that we should set a net zero date no later than 2050, and that there was a case for 2045. As the Minister said, it is good that there is a review clause, and I think that we may well have to bring that point forward.

My second point is this: if you will the end, you have to will the means. I am glad to hear that the energy White Paper is coming, and the Minister has built up my expectations about what it will contain. My hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Peter Aldous) launched it in Lowestoft in March—which will help to revitalise the local economy.

Thirdly, if we will the means as well as the end, we should think not just about the 1% to 2% of GDP that this will cost—on top of what we already spend—but about the 98% of other economic activity. I raise the issue of the Heathrow third runway gingerly, but if we are so serious about this climate emergency, I do not see how we cannot look at all the things that the Government and the private sector are doing and ask whether they make sense in a net zero world. I hope that the comprehensive spending review will have a net zero carbon budgeting process attached to it.

My final point concerns the international negotiations. It is excellent that we shall be hosting the conference of the parties next year, but let me say to the Minister and to the House that this is a massive challenge. It is an incredibly important moment for the world, when every country has to update its Paris targets. In a way, this is the last chance for us to get on track for what the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has described to us as a really dangerous and urgent situation. Let me say this to the Minister. Of course Brexit will be ongoing, at least for a bit, but will he please ensure that all the political and diplomatic muscle of Government will be put into this process? It is a massive thing for the world, and it will require a huge focus from the Government. This is an important moment, and I welcome it, but, in a sense, the hard work is only just beginning for all of us.
Moreover, the next stages of the decarbonisation of our economy will be much more difficult than the progress that we have already made.

As I have said, the UK has a good record. The climate change performance index, which is collated by the independent organisation Germanwatch, lists it as fifth in the world, behind only Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania and Morocco. We are ahead of every other country that Members may want to mention, so it is not a question of the Government’s marking their own homework. We are a world leader in this area. Ours is the best performance in the G20. We were the first country to announce that we would abolish coal energy production by 2025, and are now the first to announce a net zero target of 2050.

It has not been mentioned yet in the debate, but we should not forget that all this progress has come not necessarily at a cost to businesses, although they are having to change, but principally at a cost to consumers. All these levies are paid by the consumer. In 2010, we were spending just over £1 billion. Today, consumers are bearing a cost of more than £7 billion a year, and the figure will be more than £9 billion by 2020. When we make more progress—as we will—we must do so in a way that is sensitive to, particularly, those on low incomes, because otherwise the burden will be entirely disproportionate.

Yes, we have made progress. As has been pointed out, 33% of our energy comes from electricity. However, that is only 19% of the total energy that is being produced. The next challenges, particularly those involving heating and transport, will be much more difficult. We need a stable framework. It is great that the Government have made their announcement, because it means that businesses will respond and feel confident that their investments will be supported in the future.

There is plenty of innovation coming down the line that will have nothing to do with Government action. I am thinking of, for example, transport as a service. When we do not own cars any more, but simply dial a number on our iPhones so that they arrive outside our doors, energy requirements for transport will be transformed. Solar energy and batteries will transform them as well. This is more about a technology disruption than about a transition. As the right hon. Member for Doncaster North said, it is about economics. It will be cheaper to run a car that is electric and autonomous than to run one with a diesel engine.

It has been good to hear this issue debated on both sides of the Chamber today, but if we are to deliver these solutions, we need a fact-based debate. We cannot simply say that we need to decarbonise our energy and that therefore we need to stop using gas, and then stop producing gas. Fracking has been mentioned today. Given that 90% of my constituency is covered by petroleum producing gas. Fracking has been mentioned today.

I welcome the Government’s actions, and I have been delighted to speak in the debate.

6.49 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I am proud to speak in this debate, and I am proud that the country that first legislated with the Climate Change Act in 2008 is going a step further today by updating the Act and will be the first G7 economy to legislate for net zero. I think we should all be proud of those achievements. But the role of Parliament, and my role as Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee is, where appropriate, to push the Government to go further in a whole range of areas. Those areas include electric vehicles and carbon capture and storage, on both of which my Select Committee has produced reports. Another is energy efficiency, on which a report is coming shortly looking at energy efficiency in homes and at the building of homes—we must not build homes today that we know are not fit for the future given the new commitments that we are making.

Other such areas are international aviation and shipping, which I am disappointed are not included in the SI we are debating today. The chief executive of the Committee on Climate Change, Chris Stark, who gave evidence to our Select Committee, said that it was absolutely imperative to include international aviation and shipping in our climate change commitments, because they contribute 10% of our carbon emissions. I hope the Government will look at that evidence again and update our legislation in light of it.

There are other things that we need to do. Our Committee took evidence last week, including from the World Wide Fund for Nature, which said that a target of 2045 was eminently possible. We heard other evidence that by 2050 we should be looking not at net zero, but at taking carbon out of the atmosphere, as my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) said earlier, with a 120% target to do exactly that. I hope that when we have the five-year review we can look at being more radical and going further, so that we achieve net zero before 2050 and continue to be a world leader and ensure that we are at the forefront of creating green jobs and taking the opportunities that meeting this target will offer.

However, achieving all that goes well beyond our debates and the decisions we take in this House, and that is why I am also pleased that, along with five other Select Committees, my Committee announced last week that we will be setting up a series of citizens assemblies to bring the public into this debate. Debates and resolutions in this House are not going to take carbon out of the atmosphere; they are not going to get somebody to buy an electric vehicle, or eat less meat, or farm in a different way, or build houses in a different way. To do that we need to take businesses and everyone with us. I hope that those citizens assemblies will look at the evidence, take evidence from a range of experts and deliberate on how all of us can play our part, and I hope that we collectively find that we have in us, in all our communities, the solution to the challenges we face today so that all of us can play our part in achieving a really important objective. That is what all of us should set out to do.

6.53 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), the Chairman of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, on which I have the privilege to
serve, and I concur with everything she said. I wish there was more time for this debate, because I would like to celebrate the fact that this issue has engaged the imaginations of the young people of this country. I would especially like to thank Sir David Attenborough for the extraordinary work he has done in raising public consciousness on this matter.

I am a grandfather, and I want my grandchildren to have a future in a cleaner and more sustainable world of wonder, and for that to happen—or to be a real prospect—we need to act now. To bring this into stark contrast, reference was made to the speech given nearly 30 years ago by Margaret Thatcher at the United Nations; she is the only Prime Minister, I believe, who was a scientist before assuming office. She said in that speech that it is life itself—human life, and the innumerable species of our planet—that we wantonly destroy. It is life itself that we must battle to preserve; we must never lose sight of the nub of this issue. So I fully support the Government’s ambition to achieve a net zero target in CO₂ output by 2050—a target that will set a benchmark for the whole world to follow.

However, while I applaud the objective, a goal is only a wish if we do not have a fully detailed plan complete with milestones, and we need to fully communicate the implications of those details for our current way of life, because we will all need to change certain aspects of our daily lives and adjust the expectations that we have largely assumed. We owe it to the people of this country to have a frank and full discussion with them about the implications of what we are doing in this House this afternoon. It will require the very strongest signals from Government and from this Parliament for the target to be realised, and it must be agreed on a cross-party basis.

I want to say a few words about electric vehicles. Transport, energy-intensive industries, housing and agriculture will all need to be brought firmly under the microscope, but let me talk about transport. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) offered some really interesting ideas when he was a Transport Minister in relation to electric vehicles and charging points. We need more charging points up and down the country, and they need to be visible, recognisable and user-friendly. If we want driver confidence in making the move to EVs to have a future in a cleaner and more sustainable world—some assurances from Ministers that this really is a joined-up process.

I have already spoken for longer than the time limit, but let me just say that I endorse everything said in this debate on the subject of carbon capture, utilisation and storage. The Government must make an early move so that we can be on the front foot not only in achieving our targets, but in exporting our technological know-how to the rest of the world so that we can truly take a lead on this matter.

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I am also concerned about the Government’s ability to meet even this modest ambition. For instance, the Minister raised the matter of the Leeds and Birmingham city councils’ clean air zones, and those councils do a magnificent job; however, the Government have not stepped up to the plate because they are delaying the implementation of vehicle charging and the payments system, which means that we cannot implement those clean air zones in January 2020 as planned in Leeds.

The Green Alliance has briefed me that the Government will be unable to meet their fourth and fifth carbon budgets, and I am hosting a roundtable on this subject tomorrow. The Minister is welcome to attend. The explanatory notes to this statutory instrument state that the Government “will continue to leave headroom for emissions from international aviation and shipping”: we do not acting in this place to hasten the day when there will be standard connection leads in plug-ins, and what are we doing in government to bring the momentum about?

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Kerr: I apologise, but I really should not give way again; I wish we had more time.

The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee recommended that we should bring forward our aim of stopping the sale of new diesel and petrol cars from 2040 to 2032, and that would be the prudent thing to do. We have seen the effect of mixed messaging from Government on diesel engine producers, and there must not be mixed messages on the subject of the move to EVs. The Government must give the industry very clear signals, which will lead to an upgrade in investment plans. Are we satisfied that the road to zero is clear or ambitious enough? I am not sure that we should be satisfied about that. Are we satisfied that government is really joined up? Government tends to work in silos: are the BEIS and Transport Departments and the Treasury all aligned in relation to this matter of public policy? I look forward to hearing—maybe not today but at some point—some assurances from Ministers that this really is a joined-up process.

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6.58 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this statutory instrument, but have to say that although it is necessary it is insufficient. The Government lack ambition in this area; an 80% reduction on 1990 levels and a 2050 date are not the levels of ambition that I would expect if we are to avert catastrophic climate change. This is not net zero; this is net zero-lite.

I am also concerned about the Government’s ability to meet even this modest ambition. For instance, the Minister raised the matter of the Leeds and Birmingham city councils’ clean air zones, and those councils do a magnificent job; however, the Government have not stepped up to the plate because they are delaying the implementation of vehicle charging and the payments system, which means that we cannot implement those clean air zones in January 2020 as planned in Leeds.

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As others have said, the implementation date for the diesel and petrol car sales ban is far too far into the future and needs to be moved up to 2030 at the latest. In this House, I have raised the need six times for electric vehicle charging points in my constituency, mainly with the right hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry). The Minister will be pleased to hear that we are getting our first vehicle charge points in three weeks’ time, so I will no longer be annoying members of the Government about installing points in Leeds North West. We have achieved that ourselves through Leeds City Council, which has a fleet of more than 100 electric vehicles. When the Environmental Audit Committee raised this same issue with the NHS, it told us that it had no plans to transition to an electric vehicle fleet. Why can the Government’s own fleet not transition to electric vehicles just as local councils are doing?

On housing, the code for sustainable homes was set up by the last Labour Government but scrapped by the coalition. We have had eight wasted years with houses being built to poor standards that will not meet our carbon budget targets under the Paris agreement. And where is the onshore wind? I want the Minister to commit today to returning onshore wind.

However, I will finish on a positive note. I acknowledge that the UK has been a climate leader for the last 25 years or more and that that is reflected in our being awarded the COP 26 conference in 2026, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) referred to earlier. I wrote a letter with the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) on this matter, and I welcome the conference coming here, but I want it to be a net zero COP. I want to see Britain having a real net zero strategy and leading the world on net zero, not just this net zero-lite that we have been presented with today.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am reducing the time limit to three minutes. I call Colin Clark.

7.1 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I assure you I will expel as little hot air and greenhouse gas as possible, and that I will be very short.

The UK shows no lack of ambition today. The debate has moved on from “why” to “how”, and the UK can be at the forefront of this revolution. Most importantly, the UK has the scientists, engineers, energy companies, natural resources and capital markets to deliver on this target. We must reduce carbon dioxide. Gas has played a massive part in displacing coal, and it could do that throughout the world. It creates half the greenhouse gas emissions that coal creates, and it fits perfectly into the intermittent supply that we need, along with renewable energy. If we could convince India and China to join us in this, we could reduce coal usage from a staggering 4 billion tonnes to under 1 billion tonnes by 2050.

However, it is important that we do not offshore our manufacturing. The UK will require a CO₂ main ring to decarbonise manufacturing, and that will involve carbon sequestration, in which the North sea could play a major part, but all of this will be possible only if we back our technology and energy companies. In my constituency, offshore wind goes hand in hand with the offshore oil and gas industry, and we will one day see a hydrogen economy that is based on natural gas. The siren voices telling us to divest ourselves of energy companies put at risk this essential technological revolution. This will be of national importance, and all four nations can play their part. I finish by saying that we should not crush our national economy but liberate it.

7.3 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): This is the most ambitious target for emissions reductions that the UK has ever had, but it is still not enough: 2050 is too late. Christiana Figueres, the former United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change chief, described the prospect of the net zero target as not even a stretch. The UK is one of the world’s richest countries and has caused more historical emissions than most. We have both the means and the responsibility to go faster, so we need a new kind of mobilisation of the kind that we do not normally see except in wartime. We need a transformation of our economy, with a green new deal bringing secure, cleaner jobs and genuinely sustainable industry. Not only is 2050 too late, but there remain huge loopholes in the target. First, the Government have avoided the chance to include legally in our carbon targets international shipping and aviation, despite advice from the Committee on Climate Change to do so. Warm words about whole economy strategies for net zero are welcome, but they must be given legal backing in order to be taken seriously.

The second door that has been left open is to the offshoring of our remaining emissions using international carbon credits. When I asked the Business Secretary to close that loophole earlier this month, he attempted to reassure me by saying that the Government would not be making use of these credits, but I am not reassured simply by those words. This Government might have no intention of using international carbon credits, but who can say whether a new Administration in five years’ time—or, dare I say it, five weeks’ time—will share such scruples?

Ultimately, Governments are judged by their actions not their words, and behind the warm words on climate leadership, distant targets and reassurances, the actions of this Government tell a different story. It is one of forcing fracking on local communities, blocking onshore wind, flogging off the Green Investment Bank, undermining solar power, building new roads and runways and the Heathrow expansion. We are in a climate emergency, so let’s act like it. No one calls 999 and requests a fire engine for 30 years’ time. We need to drop everything and put the fire out, as Greta Thunberg said. Let us take the far-reaching action now that we need to turn this crisis around, because in doing so we will not only save lives and livelihoods across the world but create a better life for people here in the UK.

There is a message of hope at the heart of this agenda. We can have improved public transport, cleaner air, thriving nature, warmer homes and much cleaner jobs. I welcome the new commitment, but I urge the Government to make their warm words mean something—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The hon. Lady is under time pressure, but if she wishes to take an intervention, there is time for her to do so.

Caroline Lucas: Ah! I am sorry. I did not see the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon).
Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. I have been present during this debate, but I had to go to another meeting. I hear what she is saying about onshore wind, but does she agree that 7 TWh of onshore wind power were generated in 2010 and that the figure is now 30.4 TWh? It has increased and it can increase more, but she has used this rhetoric and again to say that it has not increased. It really has, and much more can be achieved.

Caroline Lucas: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I apologise for not hearing him earlier. I was too busy expounding my case. I am glad to take his intervention, but I do not agree with him. Of course, yes, we can say that onshore wind generation has increased from 7 TWh to 30 TWh, or whatever the figures were, but it would have increased an awful lot more if this Government had not effectively blocked its expansion. That is what they have done in recent years. Local communities are being told that they have absolutely every right to block onshore wind, yet they are not being given the right to block fracking. That just seems to be absolutely incoherent, so I rest my case that an awful lot more could have been done on onshore wind, not least because it is now one of the cheapest forms of energy generation, if not the cheapest. We do not have the counterfactual about how much could have been done if we had had an enabling Government for the last few years rather than one who have blocked onshore wind. Immediately post-2010, good work was done, but in the last few years they have been blocking it. The right hon. Gentleman can roll his eyes as often as he likes, but that is the case.

I conclude by saying that this is not the time to be patting ourselves on the back; it is the time for rolling up our sleeves, picking up the fire extinguishers, putting out the fire and treating this as the emergency it undoubtedly is.

7.8 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Government’s commitment to the 2050 target is welcome, but we must ensure that that general commitment today is turned into clear interim targets and legislation. There has been a fantastic rise in public awareness of the climate crisis in recent months, and young people have played a vital part in that. It is their future and this is a wake-up call for all of us, with difficult choices ahead. We need to get widespread public buy-in for climate change action. Citizens assemblies are one method that the Liberal Democrats believe could help to achieve that.

Secondly, we need to take a positive co-operative approach when working with the business community, but we must not be complacent. We are relying on business to find innovative solutions to many of the problems we need to solve. We need to replace jet fuel with a carbon-zero fuel, for example. Natural gas, petrol and diesel have no place in our energy future, but we should not be naive about the realities of tackling vested interests. The fossil fuel lobby will probably disagree with our approach.

Matt Western: Does the hon. Lady agree that France and Germany are showing ambition on electric vehicle charging points? France has four times the number that were introduced here in the past year, and Germany has 150% more than the UK.

Wera Hobhouse: I totally agree that we need to look at the progress being made by countries, because we have not made the progress that the Government are so complacently spouting about.

The current Government have effectively banned onshore wind which, as we have just heard, is the cheapest form of renewable energy. They slashed subsidies for solar power and scrapped zero carbon homes. They ended the green deal, which was there to improve energy efficiency. They have set meaningless targets for the phasing out of petrol and diesel cars. They continue to support fracking, which involves a fossil fuel, and airport expansion, with no plan for research into jet fuel.

Most importantly, transitioning to net zero risks placing an unfair burden on those who can least afford it. Energy and power is likely to cost more for the next 20 years, so we must ensure that the costs are fairly shared. We do not want to end up slapping punitive costs and taxes on the most vulnerable, so we must not ignore social justice. The transition to carbon zero provides an excellent opportunity to build a fairer society. We need to turn that opportunity into reality, and I wish that Ministers would listen.

7.11 pm

Chris Skidmore: The format of this debate prevents me from responding to many of the points made, so I commit to write formally to every Member who has raised matters that require a Government response. I will also seek Government time from the Leader of the House for a debate on this important issue as we work towards hosting COP 26. I thank all Members for their contributions. This debate is an historic moment and will ensure that we can progress the legislation for achieving net zero by 2050 to the other place.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 12 June, be approved.

Business without Debate

STANDING ORDERS (CONSIDERATION OF ESTIMATES) (NO. 2)

Ordered,

That, notwithstanding the Order of 26 June 2018 (Standing Orders (Consideration of Estimates)), Standing Order No. 54 (Consideration of estimates) shall apply for the remainder of this Session as if, for the word ‘Three’ in line 1, there were substituted the word ‘Seven’.—(Matt Warman.)

ESTIMATES (LIAISON COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 145 (3).)

That this House agrees with the Report of the Liaison Committee of 18 June 2019:

(1) That a day not later than 5 August be allotted for the consideration of the following Estimates for financial year 2019–20:
- Department for Work and Pensions, and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government;

(2) That a further day not later than 5 August be allotted for the consideration of the following Estimates for financial year 2019–20:
- Department for International Development, and Department for Education.—(Matt Warman.)

Question agreed to.
BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (26 JUNE)

Ordered,
That at the sitting on Wednesday 26 June, paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) shall apply to the Motion in the name of Ian Blackford as if the day were an Opposition Day; proceedings on the Motion may continue, though opposed, for three hours and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(Matt Warman.)

ADJOURNMENT (SUMMER)
Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25).
That this House, at its rising on Thursday 25 July 2019, do adjourn until Tuesday 3 September 2019.—(Matt Warman.)

The House divided: Ayes 223, Noes 25.

Division No. 423

[7.14 pm]

AYES
Adams, Nigel  
Afolami, Biy  
Afriyie, Adam  
Aldous, Peter  
Amess, Sir David  
Andrew, Stuart  
Argar, Edward  
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi  
Baldwin, Harriett  
Barclay, rh Stephen  
Baron, Mr John  
Bellingham, Sir Henry  
Beresford, Sir Paul  
Berry, Jake  
Blackman, Bob  
Blunt, Crispin  
Bone, Mr Peter  
Bottomley, Sir Peter  
Bowie, Andrew  
Bradley, Ben  
Brereton, Jack  
Brine, Steve  
Bruce, Fions  
Buckland, Robert  
Burns, Conor  
Burt, rh Alistair  
Cartidge, James  
Caulfield, Maria  
Chalk, Alex  
Churchill, Jo  
Clark, Colin  
Clark, rh Greg  
Clarke, Mr Simon  
Clevery, James  
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
Collins, Damian  
Courts, Robert  
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey  
Crabb, rh Stephen  
Crouch, Tracey  
Davies, Glyn  
Davies, Mims  
Davies, Philip  
Dinenage, Caroline  
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  
Dodds, rh Nigel  
Donelan, Michelle  
Doyle-Price, Jackie  
Duguid, David  
Duncan, rh Sir Alan  
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain  
Hughes, Eddie  
Hurd, rh Mr Nick  
Jack, Mr Alister  
James, Margot  
Jenkins, Sir Bernard  
Jenkyns, Andrea  
Johnson, Dr Caroline  
Johnson, Gareth  
Jones, Andrew  
Jones, Mr Marcus  
Kawcynski, Daniel  
Keegan, Gillian  
Kennedy, Seema  
Kerr, Stephen  
Knight, Julian  
Lamont, John  
Lancaster, rh Mark  
Lee, Dr Phillip  
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver  
Lewer, Andrew  
Lewis, rh Dr Julian  
Lopez, Julia  
Lopresti, Jack  
Loughton, Tim  
Mackinlay, Craig  
Madean, Rachel  
Mak, Alan  
Malthouse, Kit  
Mann, Scott  
Masterton, Paul  
Maynard, Paul  
McVe, rh Ms Esther  
Menzies, Mark  
Merriman, Huw  
Metcalfe, Stephen  
Miller, rh Mrs Maria  
Mills, Nigel  
Milton, rh Anne  
Moore, Damien  
Morgan, rh Nicky  
Morris, Anne Marie  
Morris, David  
Morris, James  
Murray, Mrs Sherry  
Neill, Robert  
Newton, Sarah  
Nokes, rh Caroline  
Norman, Jesse  
O'Brien, Neil  
Opperman, Guy  
Parish, Neil  
Paterson, rh Mr Owen  
Penning, rh Sir Mike  
Penrose, John  
Percy, Andrew  
Philp, Chris  
Pinchcr, rh Christopher  
Poulter, rh Dr Dan  
Prentis, Victoria  
Prisk, rh Mark  
Pursgrove, Tom  
Quin, Jeremy  
Quince, Will  
Redwood, rh John  
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob  
Robertson, Mr Laurence  
Robinson, Gavin  
Robinson, Mary  
Rosindell, Andrew  
Ross, Douglas  
Rowley, Lee  
Rudd, rh Amber  
Rutley, David  
Sandbach, Antoinette  
Seely, Mr Bob  
Selous, Andrew  
Shannon, Jim  
Shapps, rh Grant  
Sharma, AloK  
Simpson, David  
Skidmore, Chris  
Smith, Chloe (Proxy vote cast by Jo Churchill)  
Smith, rh Julian  
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline  
Spencer, Mark  
Stephenson, Andrew  
Steven, Sir John  
Stewart, Bob  
Stewart, Iain  
Stewart, rh Rory  
Streeter, Sir Gary  
Stride, rh Mel  
Stuart, Graham  
Sunak, Rishi  
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
Syms, Sir Robert  
Thomas, Derek  
Thomson, Ross  
Throup, Maggie  
Thurlow, Kelly  
Tomlinson, Justin  
Tomlinson, Michael  
Tracey, Craig  
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie  
Truss, rh Elizabeth  
Vara, Mr Shailesh  
Villiers, rh Theresa  
Walker, Mr Charles  
Walker, Mr Robin  
Warburton, David  
Warren, Matt  
Watling, Giles  
Whatley, Helen  
Wheeler, Mrs Heather  
Whittaker, Craig  
Whittingdale, rh Mr John  
Wiggin, Bill  
Williamson, rh Gavin  
Wood, Mike  
Wright, rh Jeremy  
Zahawi, Nadhim  

Tellers for the Ayes: Amanda Milling and Mike Freer  

NOES
Berger, Luciana (Proxy vote cast by Mr Gavin Shuker)  
Blackford, rh Ian  
Blackman, Kirsty  
Brock, Deidre  
Cameron, Dr Lisa  
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
Coffey, Ann  
Cowen, Ronnie  
Edwards, Jonathan  
Farron, Tim  
Gapes, Mike
Question accordingly agreed to.

PROCEDURE

Ordered,

That Alison Thewliss be discharged from the Procedure Committee and Kirsty Blackman be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

PETITION

Nnamani Family, Glasgow

7.26 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I rise to present a petition from the ever-compassionate constituents of Glasgow East who have joined in solidarity with the Church of Our Lady and St George in Penilee.

The petition states:

The petition of Glasgow East,

Declares that Mary Nnamani and her family who fled from Nigeria in danger of their lives have become a full and valued part of our community in Glasgow through our schools and Church Community; further that the Nnamani family have claimed asylum here and we would dearly love them to stay.

The petitioners, therefore, request that the House of Commons urges the Home Office to grant Mary Nnamani and her family the right to remain in this country, where they have claimed asylum.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002474]
want to go. It will be like a robot taxi—that is how I would think of it. This would mean less congestion in our cities, because we will not all have to have cars and we might not all be travelling at the same time. Less car parking would be required in cities and in high streets, and we hope there would be a consumer benefit in terms of less cost. One question to the Minister is about consumer benefits and costs in the future, and how we make this beneficial for consumers.

Toyota is designing multifunctional vehicles, able to serve as not only a taxi but a hospital shuttle, delivery van or mobile co-working space. I therefore ask the Minister to ensure that determinations in this regard are fully inclusive and adaptable for those with special needs and disabilities. I chair the all-party group on disability, and I was thinking about the impact of these vehicles on the Motability scheme; it will be essential to ensure that vehicles can be adapted for wheelchairs and for people with special needs.

Space10 is the innovation hub run by IKEA and I understand it is piloting autonomous healthcare vehicles, which bring medical equipment and professionals to people’s doorsteps. I was reading in *The Times* today that 5G can enable hospital specialists to make a diagnosis remotely while patients are still in the ambulance, as faster connections can allow paramedics to perform ultrasound scans as clinicians watch live; it is happening in the ambulance and guidance can be offered on what to do through robotic gloves. This technology would boost survival rates by allowing more timely diagnosis, reducing diversions to other hospitals. What often happens is that the initial diagnosis may change when the patient reaches the hospital and they then have to go to a different specialist hospital. This technology should reduce the rate of those misdiagnoses and improve morbidity rates for patients, who will be able to get to surgery much faster.

We will therefore have to look ahead and alter our training—of paramedics, health professionals, doctors, surgeons, nurses and so on—to ensure that we capitalise on this technology. A whole-government approach will be needed. I do not expect the Minister to answer all those questions tonight, but it would be useful to find out how this is going to be co-ordinated in the future.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Lady is right about co-ordination, and perhaps the Minister will respond on this issue. It is imperative that the four regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are part of this, so not Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England are doing this together. Does she feel that when it comes to working on a policy and a strategy it is important that we all feel the benefits?

**Dr Cameron:** Yes, I absolutely think that. It is why, although this debate is on “Smart Cities”, I have placed such an emphasis on all areas of our populations—towns, villages and rural populations, too. That has to be right, both across the United Kingdom and internationally. Specialists in the health aspects I was speaking about can be international specialists from across the world, who are able to lend their expertise through this technology, so that it does not just connect the UK, but instead connects us to the EU—although some in this House are trying to disconnect us, following the vote—and right across the world. That is important to specialists internationally.

Traffic management may be a particular issue that can also be improved—I am sure we would all be glad to hear that—particularly for those who have long journeys in the morning. I see lots of congestion in London when I am travelling to the House of Commons each day.

This technology may get people to the hospitals faster and police to critical incidents much more quickly. Our delegation heard in Chicago about how sensors on lamp posts in high-risk areas are sensing gunshots in milliseconds, so that the police and emergency services can get to the area where someone has been harmed, both to apprehend those responsible and to treat those impacted much more quickly. So this technology is also aiding the police and emergency services, and such technology will also be expanded to look at sensors for fire and to respond to other types of difficulty that citizens can get into.

The data can also be used to convict those responsible. On the visit, we asked questions about data security and GDPR—the general data protection regulation. It appears crucial that any and all of these advances must be developed with community participation. That was what really helped this to work in Chicago. There was buy-in from the local community, who had experienced the gun-related deaths, wanted something to be done much more quickly and were then agreeable to the data being collected in this way and used to the community’s benefit. That participation must be at the forefront, with communities on board.

We all need education in this regard, as members of the community and as Members of Parliament and leaders within the community. We therefore need to make sure that our communities are aware of the new technology, understand how it might improve their lives and put in place appropriate consultation about the data usage that can come from it. I ask the Minister for training for MPs in this new technology and its implications for our constituencies, so that we will also then be able to try to improve training locally to make sure that all the agencies that will be affected should be on board and understand how to take this forward for the best benefit.

I also heard about how 5G will also allow technologies such as augmented reality and virtual reality to become commonplace—so “Star Wars” fans may now be able to have their own Princess Leia moment. I even heard, in a local school I was visiting, Duncanrig Secondary School in East Kilbride, that a constituent who is an inventor has sought to bring holograms to children’s reading materials. They may soon be able to speak directly to Harry Potter when they turn the page and, thus, have a much more interactive experience with their reading development.

The delegation heard that 5G had vastly altered infrastructure projects in South Bend. For instance, they were going to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on new sewerage systems, similar to the billions being spent in London for the same reason.

**David Morris** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that the trip was worth while because a company in my constituency called InTouch, headed by John Walden, is now working with the sensor group EmNet on flooding logistics?
Dr Cameron: Yes, that is the value of the trip: we were able to make connections between the UK and the US, and between those who are developing the technology, to make sure that we share in the benefits seen in South Bend, which include the reduction of flooding through the use of new sensors in the sewerage system. The technology has saved saved billions of dollars, because South Bend was going to have a whole new sewage pipe infrastructure but is now able to regulate the flow with the 5G and the sensors. These technologies are transferable to other areas of the world.

The hon. Gentleman is assiduous in representing his constituents and the first thing he said when he spoke to EmNet was that he would make connections so that the benefits could be seen in his constituency. The technology can save money, and in South Bend the money set aside for new infrastructure can be spent elsewhere. London might consider at least liaising with South Bend and the innovative agency EmNet, which provides the technology there.

I am pleased to be able to speak about these developments today. My concern, and my request to the Minister, is that the technology is made fully available in towns, villages and rural areas. Everywhere the delegation went, people spoke about smart cities, but the technology has to be rolled out elsewhere. In some areas of our constituencies, internet speeds are not at the appropriate level to enable children to do their homework, and we are still waiting for 4G in some areas. Rural areas in particular tend to be the ones that miss out.

On rural areas, I read a magazine article by Tim Hulse that says that Beard Hill farm, which is part of the UK’s agri-tech strategy, now has robotic milking, and it seems to be working well. I am not quite sure how it works—perhaps I will get to visit it—but it seems to be helping most by milking the cows when they want to be milked, rather than their being on a regime, thereby improving the quality of the milk and improving the cows’ welfare. The Government are involved in work that is already being done in some rural areas, and I would like to find out more about that. What type of consultation and communication does the Minister have with the devolved Governments throughout the UK to make sure that, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, the benefits are shared throughout the different countries of the UK?

I thank the Minister for hearing and responding to the debate. Will he ensure that we have not only smart cities, but smart towns and villages, and even smart small businesses? Big business is often able to capitalise on new technology, but how do we get it rolled out to small businesses so that they do not lag behind and can be competitive, too? Please do not forget our rural areas; they must benefit from the technology. What will the strategy be not only to ensure that technology is applied to things such as infrastructure, roads and autonomous vehicles, but to give us a good work-life balance and enable a focus on wellbeing? We should focus on wellbeing in the community, and the technology that is being developed will augment that. We have just had a debate on climate change, and the technology that is brought forward and in which we invest should improve our climate objectives, rather than undermine them. There are a lot of points for the Minister to answer, so I look forward to his response.

7.45 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) on securing this debate and welcome the opportunity to set out the Government's position on smart cities. First, though, I thank the hon. Lady and her colleagues on the British-American parliamentary group delegation for their valuable work in visiting the United States to inquire into smart cities. As Science, Research and Innovation Minister, I have spoken previously about the importance of remaining truly international in our collaborations—we recently published an international research and innovation strategy—and the hon. Lady’s work contributes a great deal to the maintenance of our global partnerships. We must be able to learn from our friends and colleagues across the Atlantic and bring back that learning to the benefit of everybody in the House.

There is no bigger trend in the world today than the move to urbanisation. By 2050, it is expected that three quarters of the world’s population will live in cities, with nearly 200,000 people globally making that transition every day. It is clear that city living presents unique opportunities and challenges. Smart cities, which involve the melding of digital technology and data to monitor, manage and improve our urban environment are what we need to harness those unique opportunities.

I reassure the hon. Lady that when it comes to Government policy on smart cities, we provided a formal definition in 2013. It stated that “the concept is not static: there is no absolute definition of a smart city, no end point, but rather a process, or series of steps, by which cities become more ‘liveable’ and resilient and, hence, able to respond quicker to new challenges.”

A smart city can also be defined as “an urban area that uses different types of electronic Internet of things...sensors to collect data and then use these data to manage assets and resources”.

Although termed a city, a smart city is actually a fluid concept that can incorporate anything that supports it. Those things range from 5G to autonomous vehicles, but it is crucial to note that smart cities are a process as much as a policy.

Smart cities encompass a vast array of technologies and policies that the Government have a role in creating and influencing, involving everything from transport to energy and communications, as well as the many issues that the hon. Lady raised in her valuable contribution. Because of that, the Government have recognised the need to support the development of smart cities, as part of the industrial strategy, in the interests of economic growth, combating climate change—I was proud earlier to be the Minister responsible for taking forward the statutory instrument that the hon. Lady mentioned—and, crucially, enhancing the quality of life for residents, which must always lie at the heart of any policy. This will be achieved through a number of Government initiatives, to which I shall now turn.

A smart city, town or area that recognises the need for new and emergent technologies to deliver better living standards for its citizens and efficient transport, enabled by new technologies. The “Future of Mobility: Urban Strategy”, which the Government published in March, outlines our approach to urban transport innovations,
ensuring that technologies are safe, accessible and green. It is worth referring to some of the strategy’s core principles to reassure the hon. Lady that putting the consumer and the citizen at the centre of our vision is exactly what we intend to do. The principles of the strategy include that new modes of transport and new mobility services must be safe and secure by design, and that the benefits of innovation in mobility must be available to all parts of the UK and all segments of society. As I will touch on later, if we are to convince the public of and maintain public trust in the need to invest in future innovation, technology and research, it is crucial that we are able to communicate the value of that for the taxpayer across every region of the United Kingdom.

Other principles from the strategy include that walking, cycling and active travel must remain the best options for short urban journeys, and that touches on the health-related points that the hon. Lady made in her speech. Mass transit must remain fundamental to an efficient transport system. New mobility services must lead to the transition towards zero emissions. Mobility innovation must help with British congestion through more efficient use of limited road space. The marketplace for mobility must be open to stimulate innovation and give the best for consumers.

The new mobility services are designed to operate as part of an integrated transport system, combining public, private and multiple modes of transport users. The data—the hon. Lady touched on data—from new mobility services must be shared where appropriate to improve both choice and the operation of that transport system.

In addition, we have established a future of mobility grand challenge, which I also cover as Science and Innovation Minister. This grand challenge is one of the four announced as part of the industrial strategy. It will take advantage of the extraordinary innovation in UK engineering technology to deliver better journeys for all. The main objectives are to be able to stimulate innovation, create new markets and secure a 21st century transport system. We believe that this could be a £900 billion global market in intelligent mobility by 2025, which is why it is equally important to be in the vanguard of developing those new technologies so that we can be world leaders. Since the “Future of Mobility: Urban Strategy” was published in early 2019, setting out the nine principles that will guide Government decision making, we have continued to ensure that we will take forward the biggest regulatory review of transport in a generation, taking advantage of technological advances to be able to better connect people, goods and services.

Alongside the strategy and the future of the mobility grand challenge, the Government have launched a competition for up to four new future mobility zones. This £90 million competition will test innovative transport ideas around the UK that could reduce congestion, pollution and costs, while making travel more accessible. Some £20 million of that £90 million was allocated to the west midlands last year to help develop the concept of future mobility zones—zones not just exclusive to cities but including urban areas and towns. As the Member of Parliament for Kingswood, near Bristol, I fully understand the importance of representing the urban region that includes not just the city centre, but areas around the outside of major cities. This can capitalise on related investments in the transport innovation in the region. The remainder of the funding will be awarded through a competitive process, with the winners announced this autumn.

Internationally, it should be noted that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office hosted a smart sustainable cities workshop in Madrid in February, with a focus on transforming mobility in cities. The workshop brought together 20 cities, looking at planning and delivering new, smart, low-carbon mobility systems.

Turning to the issue of smart technology, only a few weeks ago, I visited the Bristol and Bath science park to unveil a foundation pledge for the new £70 million Institute for Advanced Automotive Propulsion Systems. This institute is a specialist hub, which aims to deliver transformational research and innovation within the automotive industry, looking at the development of clean, efficient, ultra low emission vehicles. This is just one example of an investment made in a region. We have seen others. I was at Warwick Manufacturing Group in the west midlands on Friday, demonstrating our commitment to invest not just in London, Oxford and Cambridge—that so-called golden triangle of research—but in other areas of the country with traditional technologies that may not have had the opportunity to demonstrate that they can also be in the vanguard.

I have been to Glasgow, which I know is not far from the hon. Lady’s constituency, to see the fantastic work that is being done on quantum and the impact that quantum can have on the future of smart cities. It is potentially unfathomable at the moment, but we certainly know that those new technologies need to be supported to establish a future opportunity for visions in our cities and allow academic researchers at both Glasgow and Strathclyde to combine with industry to focus on what they know will be the huge potential for quantum. That is just one example of how we are trying to invest additionally not only in existing technologies, but in future and emerging technologies.

In further efforts to modernise our transport systems, the Centre for Connected and Autonomous Vehicles, a joint Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and Department for Transport policy team, was established in 2015 to secure the UK’s position at the forefront of this technology.

Automation can save lives, improve traffic flow and offer people better travel options. The Government are committed to ensuring that we can all benefit from the advent of these technologies as they emerge, which is why we intend to invest more than £250 million of industry match funding up to 2022 in research and development and in testing infrastructure. That will accelerate the development of these technologies and, crucially, anchor them in the UK. In addition, the Department for Transport’s £2.4 billion transforming cities fund was launched as part of the industrial strategy and expanded in the 2018 Budget by the Chancellor to address weaknesses in city transport systems. More than £1 billion has been devolved so far to six metro Mayors, and the Government are allocating a further £1.28 billion across another 12 cities on a competitive basis.

Creating an economy that harnesses artificial intelligence and big data, as the hon. Lady said, is one of the great challenges of our age. Data collected by smart meters, for example, facilitates innovative tariffs, with prices varying throughout the day as a result of a range of
energy saving tools for households and small businesses. On Friday, I was in Solihull to see one of 100 homes in an experiment in which we are looking at having sensors placed in every single room.

As we talk about smart cities, smart towns and smart villages, I would extend the idea further to smart houses, smart dining rooms and smart living rooms so that we are able, for example, to meet the net zero target on carbon emissions by 2050. We know that some of the challenges that we face will be around clean growth. They will also be about looking at existing buildings to see what can done to ensure that they are more energy friendly. That will allow everybody using smart meters to better engage with their energy use and save money on their bills. A better understanding of energy demand will allow new local networks to manage their energy flows by supporting the integration of local decentralised energy resources, reducing the cost of network upgrades, facilitating detailed asset and building-level data, and creating secure, more centralised communication networks.

Smart meters are one of the enabling technologies for smart cities. What we have seen already is that by placing technology in individual homes, we are able to connect up with a wider picture. We can take advantage of the data to establish patterns and demonstrate how best we can create future networks.

Last week, I was fortunate enough to attend a roundtable with the Energy Systems Catapult, which champions a whole-system approach to our network. For that reason, it has been responsible for the Government’s energy data taskforce. It has been challenged to identify gaps in the energy sector where data could be used more efficiently. This approach will be integral to the effective deployment of smart cities in order to encourage industry collaboration. Last week the taskforce published its recommendations, which we, alongside Ofgem, are considering.

In addition, we established the artificial intelligence sector deal in April 2018, which outlines nearly £1 billion of support for our future AI capability. This includes investment in leadership, skills, data, the new Office for Artificial Intelligence and the Alan Turing Institute, which I was able to visit this morning. Visiting the institute, it was absolutely clear that there is a huge potential for change in our public sector and our local authorities. However, that potential will be realised only if they have the opportunity to harness the high-performance computing and AI modelling that will demonstrate what can be done to define and establish behavioural change within cities.

Another field that can contribute greatly to the development of smart cities is robotics. At the beginning of the year, I enjoyed a visit to the University of Bristol, where I was promoting a £7 million funding announcement for robots that can be deployed into sewerage, water or gas pipes to inspect them and make repairs. That will be critical for transport systems on every road right down to village roads and country lanes. We know that the disruption caused by taking up pipework can stymie rural communities in particular for months on end, especially if it is the on the only road in and out of the village. It is estimated that innovations such as using robotics to inspect and make repairs without digging up the road in the first place could save the economy about £5.5 billion every year through reduced road excavations.

Turning to the need to benefit regions and towns, I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. As I said earlier, it will be vital to demonstrate that this is a shared initiative—that the research that is ongoing around smart cities is not just going to be put in place in the large cities of London, Edinburgh, Bristol, Birmingham or Manchester, but is to be devolved further down to the localities surrounding cities.

I am also the Minister for agri-tech, so I believe that we can do a lot through advances in rural technology and emerging technologies. The last agri-tech strategy was published in 2013; it is time that it had a refresh, because the technology has moved on. There have been fantastic opportunities to use British research in international partnerships to bring about agricultural change in other countries. We now have the opportunity to use some of that research to benefit rural communities.

When it comes to investment in areas such as those near the hon. Lady’s constituency, I point to the benefits that have already come about, such as the Innovate UK future cities demonstrator. Innovate UK awarded Glasgow £24 million to become a future cities demonstrator site, developing digital infrastructure and data initiatives to make it an interconnected smart city. What was fantastic about that project was that it led to £144 million in savings and new investments for the council. At the time, it focused on four key areas: active travel, such as cycling and walking; energy; social transport; and public safety. The hon. Lady mentioned small businesses and SMEs. Local businesses reported significant benefits from their involvement with that programme; some 63% of SMEs attracted additional business. When we look at the projects and at the funding from our research councils, it is crucial that we can make these evaluations and communicate them to the public—to say that they did benefit people’s lives. People may not necessarily have noticed that something was a specific part of a programme established as part of the smart cities initiative, but to further the work we need to do, we need to go out and celebrate those investments.

Other investments have been made across the country. I wanted to mention to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that the Connected Places Catapult, which spearheaded the digital infrastructure innovation strand, was a key part of the Belfast region city deal, which brought industry, academia and local authorities together around that shared proposal to the Treasury. That resulted in a £350 million investment from the UK Government.

I went to Belfast back in February and spoke to representatives of the University of Ulster and to the vice-chancellor of Queen’s University. Belfast. They demonstrated to me the importance of the triple helix—investment in a locality by the Government, with the university as a key locator of the knowledge economy in a local area and also with local businesses. It is about supporting local businesses and using the money to put them in contact with academics, who they might not have been in contact with before. I saw that with Quantum in Glasgow and the recent announcement of the ARCHER super-computer in Edinburgh, and with robotics in Bristol—it is about linking them up with Sheffield and Manchester and other regions that will have to adapt and demonstrate the new technology.
Jim Shannon: It is not just Belfast, but its peripheries: it is my constituency of Strangford; my council area of Ards and North Down; Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council; Mid and East Antrim Borough Council; and Newtownabbey Borough Council. Belfast and its surrounding areas all benefit—that benefit is for everyone.

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Setting out the benefits beyond the inner city locations is so crucial. When it comes to dealing with the issues of science and technology, we need to demonstrate the need for smart cities that will improve congestion and public transport.

I have not yet touched on the critical need to make sure that the lives and experiences of disabled people are better met in our cities. As Universities Minister, I am really keen that inclusivity must be mainstreamed. We should not be thinking about disabled people as part of the strategies; they should be at the centre of any strategy. That is the same in a university campus as in an inner-city location or a pedestrianised zone in a shopping centre. Placing the needs of disabled people at the heart of a vision from the very beginning is also critical in the design of smart cities for the future. Any local authority should make sure that it takes those issues of inclusivity absolutely to heart.

I conclude on a point of principle. The Government are committed to spending 2.4% of GDP on research and development—both private and public spend; at the moment, roughly a third of that spend is public and two thirds private. At the moment, we spend 1.7% on research and development. Other countries such as the United States, Germany, South Korea and even China are spending vastly more than us. That allows them to make advances that we must match.

Hitting 2.4% of GDP by 2027—the Government’s target—will just take us to the OECD baseline. We have to be able to make that investment, which would mean increasing the amount we spend on research and development across the public and private sectors from about £35 billion a year to £60 billion. To do that, we must convince SMEs to change their business models and recognise the value of research and development.

For example, we set up a robotics strategy in 2013. We invested about £386 million as a Government in robotics, and we leveraged in private capital of over £1 billion as a result. We need to see how we can increase that leverage; at the moment, the private sector puts in roughly £1.40 for every pound we spend on research and development in areas such as smart cities. In Germany, the figure is nearer £2.40 and in Israel it is about £3. We could be doing more to ensure a greater sum total pot for research and development on smart cities and the technologies that underpin them. However, we have to be able to make that initial public investment.

I have been giving a series of speeches about the road to 2.4%. First, I have covered the critical issue of people—investing in universities and future research leaders. Secondly, I have spoken about international partnerships; I am delighted that the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow took part in the delegation to the United States, setting out the new countries with which we wish to work for the future. Thirdly, I have been focusing on the new technologies such as quantum and robotics—the underpinning of smart cities and a future R&D strategy. My fourth speech on 10 July will be about how we can increase leverage and private investment for the future.

All four speeches relate to the key point of smart cities, which will happen and expand into our regions, towns and villages only if we make the investment in research and development in the longer term. We will need to spend £60 billion across the private and public sectors by 2027. We will need a catalytic moment from the public sector.

As science and technology Minister, I am also determined to ensure that we increase spend on clean and green technology for the future. The debate earlier focused on carbon capture, utilisation and storage. It is the regions that are coming up with some of the great new ideas; on Thursday, I will be going to Cheshire to look at some of the latest technology in that area. We do need to invest publicly as well as trying to increase private investment. The 2.4% figure must be a cornerstone of this Government’s and any future Government’s desire to meet the net zero target by 2050.

I am delighted that the hon. Lady secured this debate. It has highlighted some of the challenges that will lead to huge opportunities if we make that commitment to spending 2.4% on research and development. We can reach out to the whole country. Rather than research being focused in certain cities, we will be able to make sure that everyone in this country can share the proceeds of growth from research and development. We are looking at smart cities, but every town can be a smart town and every village a smart village.

Question put and agreed to.

8.9 pm

House adjourned.
Recall of MPs Act 2015: Member for Brecon and Radnorshire

Text of the notification received by the Speaker:

Recall Petition 2019—Public Notice of Outcome of Petition
Petition to Remove the MP for Brecon and Radnorshire, Chris Davies

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Petition signing period</th>
<th>Thursday, 09 May 2019 to 20 June 2019</th>
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<td>Constituency</td>
<td>Brecon and Radnorshire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recall condition</td>
<td>The relevant recall condition was due to Chris Davies MP being convicted of an offence of providing false/misleading information for a parliamentary allowances claim and also of a second offence of attempting to provide such information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petition successful</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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Number of electors eligible to sign the petition: 53,032
Number of electors who validly signed the petition: 10,005
Percentage of electors who validly signed the petition: 19%
Number of rejected signing sheets due to:
- No official mark: 0
- Unmarked or void for uncertainty: 41
Total number of rejected signing sheets: 41

Name: Caroline Turner (Petition Officer)
Date: 21 June 2019
Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Does the Minister agree that if the Opposition want a deal, they should vote for one?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I do not know whether to be pleased or astonished at the Minister singing the praises of the United Nations. Presumably, this means that the Government will be taking every step they can to comply with the recent resolution on the sovereignty of the Chagos Islands?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is not a binding judicial decision, as the hon. Gentleman absolutely knows. He can expostulate as much as he wishes—it is a great act to watch—but he know the facts and I am sure he would admit it if he were pressed further.

Mr Speaker: I note that the hon. Gentleman is advised to expostulate rather than to expatiate. It is an interesting essay question in its own right as to the respective merits of each.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): There are clear international rules regarding British sovereignty in Gibraltar, yet Spain continuously and repeatedly breaches the integrity of the maritime waters surrounding the Rock. What will the Minister do to remind Spain of its obligations under the rules-based international order?

Sir Alan Duncan: Any such incursions in the proper waters of Gibraltar are always responded to by us. We watch them closely, but I very much hope that there can be no increase in tension and that we can in the years ahead reach a very settled position between ourselves and Spain on the absolute rights of Gibraltar as a British sovereign Rock.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I had hoped to start by congratulating the Foreign Secretary on making it to the final two in the Tory leadership race, but unfortunately, to coin a phrase, he has chosen to bottle the very first question, perhaps because he knew some of the issues that we were going to raise. But if the Minister of State is answering on his behalf, may I ask whether our potential future Prime Minister will commission an independent public inquiry or authorise a full parliamentary inquiry to establish which Ministers or civil servants over the past four years have been responsible for authorising arms sales for use in Yemen, even when, as the courts have found, it is clear there was a high risk that those arms would be used to commit war crimes?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am very happy to join the right hon. Lady in congratulating my right hon. Friend on reaching the final two and indeed the final one—that is what we look forward to, for the good of the country. I save up such a question for topicals, when I am sure she will get such a chance. However, as she well knows, all of our arms sales meet the most rigorous rules, and we will continue to adhere to them.

Emily Thornberry: I thank the Minister for that answer, but all the arms sales have not met the most rigorous rules. That is the whole point. He knows that there are
men in this Chamber and beyond—Ministers—who ignored the evidence of risk to innocent civilians; guilty men. Ministers who signed off the export of arms that have now been found to be unlawful. Two of the men responsible for those decisions are the candidates to be our next Prime Minister.

Let me ask a related question, for which the Foreign Secretary has exclusive responsibility. It is now almost nine months since Jamal Khashoggi was murdered. Thanks to the Senate, we know that the CIA has concluded that Crown Prince Salman most likely ordered that murder, and we have heard from the United Nations that there is credible evidence for that conclusion. Will the Minister simply tell us, nine months on, when he will produce an official assessment of who ordered the murder of Jamal Khashoggi? Unlike Yemen, this is entirely on his watch.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am afraid the right hon. Lady appears not to have read the 20 June Court judgment, which acknowledged “rigorous”—her very word—“robust” and “multi-layered” processes “carried out by numerous expert government and military personnel”, upon which the Secretary of State could rely.

As the right hon. Lady appreciates, my responsibilities do not cover Saudi Arabia, but we speak directly to our Saudi counterparts on all such matters, including arms and human rights.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State, who we hope will get to his feet for once on this question, not agree that the selling of weapons to a regime that murders journalists and civilians and repeatedly breaks international humanitarian law entirely undermines the United Kingdom’s role as a proponent of the rules-based international order?

Sir Alan Duncan: I hope that for the time being at least I am an adequate substitute for the Foreign Secretary in answering these questions; it is a perfectly reasonable allocation of a question to a broad thematic policy area for which I am responsible. Within that broad theme, I assure the House that we endeavour to maintain the highest standards, not only within the rules-based international system but when it comes to the export of arms.

Chris Law: I welcome the Minister’s response, most notably his reference to this House, because earlier this year it was our own House of Lords Select Committee that reported that UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia were “unconscionable” and that the UK Government are “on the wrong side” of the law. Last week, the Court of Appeal ruled that arms sales to Saudi Arabia are unlawful. The Government’s actions have been denounced by the upper House of the legislature and ruled unlawful by the judiciary, so on what grounds does the Secretary of State, or, indeed, the Minister, still insist on selling weapons to the regime?

Sir Alan Duncan: The Court judgment did not say that our arms sales are unlawful. It criticised an aspect of process that we are studying very closely and will address. It is incorrect to say that our arms sales to Saudi Arabia are wholesale unlawful.

Trinidad and Tobago: Criminal Justice

2. Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What support his Department is providing to Trinidad and Tobago to improve that country’s (a) handling of murder cases involving UK citizens and (b) criminal justice system.

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): Since 2017, under a bilateral security memorandum of understanding with Trinidad and Tobago, the UK has delivered targeted programmes to improve local judicial and policing capacity.

Neil Coyle: I ask this question with specific reference to my constituent Sharon St John, whose son Adrian was murdered three years ago. She is still waiting for justice. I thank the Foreign Office for belatedly getting involved in the case, but what further pressure can Ministers and the Government put on the Trinidad and Tobago authorities to set the date for a full trial as soon as possible?

Harriett Baldwin: I commend the hon. Gentleman’s assiduousness in raising this truly terrible constituency case. He can be reassured that we have taken every opportunity to raise the case with Trinidad and Tobago. We obviously cannot interfere specifically in Trinidad and Tobago’s judicial process, but we are extending every possible support where we can. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that in May last year the magistrate committed the accused to stand trial for murder, but we acknowledge that the trial date has not yet been set.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): When I visited Trinidad, I found the people and nation to be peaceful, loving and entrepreneurial. There are some specific problems, but will the Minister confirm that the Foreign Office advice is still that British citizens can travel to Trinidad and Tobago? Many people will enjoy a vacation there.

Harriett Baldwin: Yes, of course. Thousands of people from the UK and elsewhere enjoy holidays in Trinidad and Tobago, and it is of course a close friend and Commonwealth partner. The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) is right to raise the issue, and I am sure that my hon. Friend would do the same should a constituent have such a bad experience anywhere in the world.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Over 30,000 British nationals visit Trinidad and Tobago every year. Forty people were murdered there in January 2018 alone, and the deaths of Mr and Mrs Wheeler in particular exposed the need for protection measures for British citizens visiting Trinidad and Tobago. Will the Minister outline the steps being taken to secure the safety of UK citizens when they are on holiday?

Harriett Baldwin: Millions of citizens travel world wide all the time, and we ensure that we provide good and up-to-date travel advice. We always encourage travellers to take out insurance policies when they are going on business trips or holidays and to look at the Foreign Office’s travel advice pages.
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary may not know that at the time two parliamentary delegations went to Hong Kong to check how the declaration had been accepted by local people. I was on one of those delegations, led by Ian Mikardo, and we all came away absolutely convinced that one nation, two systems was a solemn, sacred obligation. Will the Foreign Secretary give a message to the Chinese Government: none of their nonsense—we know who is behind this and that they want to crush democracy in China, and that if it comes to it, we could have a system of embargoes on their goods coming to this country and to Europe?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his passionate support for the people of Hong Kong, and I want to reassure him on this. On my first visit to China as Foreign Secretary, I spoke to my counterpart, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, about the very issue of Hong Kong to underline just how important it is not just to this Government but to everyone in this House.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): As a former investment banker specialising in the markets of Hong Kong up to and beyond the 1997 handover, I fully appreciate the incredible efforts made by Governor Chris Patten in securing the one country, two systems agreement for 50 years. Economic stability is an incredibly fragile commodity. Will my right hon. Friend reinforce and redouble his efforts to make sure that the one country, two systems arrangement does continue for the next 27 years?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. I think that what happens in Hong Kong is, for us all, a litmus test of the direction of travel that China goes in, because we had an internationally binding agreement signed in 1984 that Britain feels very, very strongly about. It is, as my hon. Friend rightly says, at the heart of Hong Kong’s economic success as well as its political freedom.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Is not the real problem that although the Chief Executive may not directly take her orders from Beijing, she often looks over her shoulder to find out what the Communist party of China is saying? Is not the fundamental truth that in the end one can repress human freedom for a while but one cannot finally quash it?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman puts it beautifully; he is absolutely right. Whatever the pressure that may or may not be exerted on the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, what works in Hong Kong at the moment is that the judiciary is independent, and that must not change.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): My right hon. Friend has said that one country, two systems must mean exactly that. Will he support the legitimate demands of the protesters, many of whom are waving Union flags in the hope of support from this Government and this House for the permanent withdrawal of this most contentious Bill?

Mr Hunt: I called publicly for the Bill to be halted, and I agree with what the Hong Kong Government belatedly decided to do, which is to commit to not bringing it back until concerns about democratic rights have been addressed.
UK Soft Power

4. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to enhance UK soft power overseas.

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): The UK has recently been rated the world’s No. 1 soft power. Our strengths in sport, education and culture are a vital diplomatic asset.

Craig Tracey: I really welcome the upcoming conference on media freedoms that the Minister is hosting next month. What specific asks can be made of the countries attending to ensure that they promote the values of democracy and free speech?

Harriett Baldwin: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing attention to the important media freedom conference that we are hosting jointly with the Canadians in London in a couple of weeks’ time. He will be glad to hear that so far Ministers from 50 countries will be coming along to that event. We are asking countries to sign up to the free exchange of information.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you have just graciously opened Parliamentary Links Day, celebrating science in Parliament and the UK’s world-leading position as a science nation. Unfortunately, all too often African scientists are prevented from coming here to collaborate because of the UK’s outdated and arbitrary visa system. The all-party parliamentary group for Africa, which I chair, is conducting an investigation into this. Will the Minister commit to joining us for the launch of the report on 16 July and to working with the Home Office to address this real barrier to our soft power in the world of science?

Harriett Baldwin: I commend the hon. Lady’s chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group for Africa. As she knows, I try to come along to all her meetings when I can, so I will add that request to the list and hope I will be able to join her. She will be glad to know that we have recently gone out to every part of our diplomatic network to find out from the frontline where there are issues with the UK visa system. She knows how many millions are processed every month. We want to see what we can do, working with our colleagues in the Home Office, to make sure that everyone who wants to come to visit the UK, for scientific or other purposes, and who has a legitimate reason to be here, the means to be here and the opportunity to return can do so.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The Secretary of State clearly believes that he is a master of soft power and diplomacy. He says that Europe will be willing to renegotiate the Brexit withdrawal agreement if a new Prime Minister comes forward with ideas on how to solve the Northern Ireland border issue. I presume that, like her colleague the Minister for Europe and the Americas, the Minister is supporting the Secretary of State for the premiership. If she is, can she please tell us what those ideas are?

Harriett Baldwin: Let me take this opportunity to say that, yes, I do support the Foreign Secretary’s campaign to be the next leader of the Conservative party. The hon. Gentleman has been extremely ingenious in this question on soft power in shoehorning the sort of questions that will rightly be asked by members of the Conservative party in this campaign. What I will say from this Dispatch Box is that I am absolutely confident that, whatever the outcome of those negotiations, the UK’s leadership in soft power will continue to shine brightly in the world.

Middle East

5. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with his Iranian counterpart on the political and security situation in the middle east.

13. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential risk of military conflict between the US and Iran.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): We are very concerned about the situation in the middle east and the risks of an accidental war. We have made serious efforts to de-escalate tension, including the visit by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East to Tehran at the end of last week.

Alan Brown: With regard to the recent tanker attacks, the UN Secretary-General has stated that the truth will be known only if an independent entity verifies the facts. Does the Secretary of State agree with that and will he confirm that the UK will not be dragged blindly, with the US, into a war against the wider wishes of the international community?

Mr Hunt: The US is our closest ally. We talk to it the whole time. We consider any requests that it makes carefully, but I cannot envisage any situation in which it requests, or we agree to, any moves to go to war.

Daniel Zeichner: I think the whole House appreciates the efforts that were made by the Minister for the Middle East at the weekend to de-escalate this crisis, but can the Secretary of State tell us what work is being done with the UN to make further progress?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is right to ask that question. We have been doing extensive work. The message that we are sending with our partners in the European Union, particularly the French and the Germans, is that, with respect to Iran’s nuclear programme, this is a crucial week. Iran has said that it will reach the limits of what it is allowed for low-enriched uranium by 27 June, which is later on this week. It is absolutely essential that it sticks to that deal in its entirety for it to be preserved and for us to have a nuclear-free middle east.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): May I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East on his visit to Tehran, which I know that he will have found as fascinating as I always did? In his conversations about Iran with his US counterparts, may I ask the Foreign Secretary to remind them of
David Petraeus’s key question: “Tell Me How This Ends?”. Although it is very clear that Iran has to take actions to assuage regional tensions, does he agree that the United States needs to move cautiously and listen to wise voices such as those of Dr. Anwar Gargash who urges political solutions to long-standing and complex regional problems?

Mr Hunt: No one speaks more wisely on the middle east than my right hon. Friend after his very long and distinguished time in the Foreign Office with responsibility for that brief. He is, of course, right. Neither side wants war in this situation, but it is very important that there are ladders for people to climb down so that discussions and negotiations can take place.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I, too, commend the Minister for the Middle East for his visit to Iran. Time and again, Iran demonstrates that it has no intention of being a serious and responsible member of the international community through its human rights abuses, its ballistic missile tests and its export of terror and violence throughout the region. Are we not naïve in thinking that with a bit more love and a bit more carrot, Iran will change its ways?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend speaks very wisely on this. The truth is that the only real solution to this problem is for Iran to stop its destabilising activities in Yemen, which has seen missiles being fired into airports in Saudi Arabia; in Lebanon, which is seeing Hezbollah activity and attacks happening on Israel; and in Iraq and in Syria. That is the long-term solution.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): US President Donald Trump said this weekend that all the current tension with Iran could disappear if only Tehran agreed to co-operate on ending its nuclear programme. Have the Government tried to explain to the President that if he wants to achieve that outcome, all it takes is for all sides to honour the terms of the Iran nuclear deal—the joint comprehensive plan of action?

Mr Hunt: May I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that the cause of the problems is that destabilising activity by Iran has continued even after the JCPOA? It has had success in restraining Iran’s nuclear ambitions, and that is why we continue to support it, but we are not naïve in thinking that with a bit more love and a bit more carrot, Iran will change its ways.

Journalistic Rights and Freedoms

6. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What steps he is taking to protect the rights and freedoms of journalists throughout the world.

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison): This year, the UK is spearheading a global campaign on media freedoms, and our diplomatic missions around the world have stepped up their activity accordingly. We have announced the appointment of Special Envoy Amal Clooney, establishing a high-level panel to drive legislative reform throughout the world, and we will announce further practical steps with wide international support at next month’s UK and Canada-led conference.

Jeremy Lefroy: I welcome my right hon. Friend’s answer, but at least 94 journalists were killed in the course of their duties last year. Will he and his ministerial colleagues undertake, on every occasion when they travel overseas or meet foreign Heads of State, to raise this issue, which is so vital if we are to get real news, not fake news?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As it happens, at the weekend I was in Tehran, and I made the points that he has made to my interlocutors. It is absolutely vital that journalists are able to do their work unhindered and certainly unthreatened, and the secret to peace and prosperity across our world—our troubled world—today is the ability to have the transparency that is the stock in trade of journalists.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): Will the Minister look at the situation of journalists in Turkey, and in that context, will he welcome the victory of the opposition in Istanbul as a sign that at least in Turkey there are people fighting against the authoritarianism of President Erdogan?

Dr Murrison: Istanbul has very much been in the spotlight over the past few days, and I think we probably welcome the political vibrancy that we have seen in Turkey over the past few days. Of course, Turkey is a very dangerous place for journalists right now, and the hon. Gentleman is right to underscore the importance of Turkey in particular engaging with this process. I very much hope that Turkey is represented at the conference in London next month.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): We all welcome the Foreign Secretary’s decision to host a ministerial summit on media freedom next month. However, can the Minister of State explain why it took an outcry from Britain’s National Union of Journalists even to get an invitation to the summit and why, even though journalists have now been invited, they are still not being allowed to speak? Will he also say what involvement the International Federation of Journalists has had?

Dr Murrison: I am absolutely delighted that journalists, and of course their representative bodies, will be represented at this conference. I am very keen for them to suggest what part they might play in the proceedings, and I am looking forward to hearing from them. This is meant to be Britain being a window to the world on the importance that we assign to journalistic freedom and a free press. Let us see what they have to say.

Departmental Staff Pay

7. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to ensure that staff working in his Department are paid (a) on time and (b) at the correct rate.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has well-established processes in place to ensure that our staff, wherever they work around the globe, are paid correctly and on time.

Diana Johnson: I am disappointed that the Secretary of State is not answering this question, because in the last set of questions he said of the Interserve dispute going on in his Department:
If we failed to pay any of our staff on time, I take full responsibility.”—[Official Report, 15 May 2019; Vol. 660, c. 88.]

I understand that nothing has happened, and in fact the FCO is now the second Department to set up a food bank to help its staff. Are these really the actions of a person who wants to lead this country? He cannot even sort out what is going on in his own Department.

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Lady is completely misinformed to say that nothing has happened. What did happen is that Interserve changed the date in the month on which the salary of some of the lower paid workers in the Foreign Office was paid, and it made some errors in calculating what was owed. It was thanks to the personal intervention of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who not only wrote to the CEO of Interserve but called people in the Foreign Office to account, that, first, those people were properly paid, and secondly, they received a subsequent and additional good-will payment.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): One set of staff who are deservedly well paid are Her Majesty’s trade commissioners. The nine have been in place for a year and have been a big success. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the new position shows how well the Department for International Trade and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office work together to promote trade by hiring the right people to lead that work?

Sir Alan Duncan: My right hon. Friend is a champion of international trade. Trade commissioners are of great value and of course—in line with the question on the Order Paper—they are paid appropriately and on time.

Climate Change

8. Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What recent progress the Government have made on tackling climate change through international co-operation.

9. Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What diplomatic steps the Government are taking to lead the international effort to tackle climate change.

14. Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What recent progress the Government have made on tackling climate change through international co-operation.

15. Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): What diplomatic steps the Government are taking to lead the international effort to tackle climate change.

21. Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): What recent progress the Government have made on tackling climate change through international co-operation.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The FCO is playing a leading role in promoting international co-operation on climate change, maintaining the momentum generated by the Paris agreement, and raising ambition, as indicated by our new net zero 2050 target.

Afzal Khan: This Government pride themselves on the special relationship with the United States. With record low temperatures gripping the US last winter, President Donald Trump tweeted that it would be good to see some of “that good old-fashioned Global Warming”.

What progress was made during Donald Trump’s recent state visit on making him see sense on climate change?

Mr Hunt: We are very direct with President Trump. We do not agree with him on climate change, which is why we continue to uphold the Paris accord and why we are championing a UK bid to host the next big climate change conference, COP 26. We want it to be held in London at the end of next year, and if we are successful, it will tell the whole world how seriously we take the issue.

Alan Mak: I welcome my right hon. Friend’s efforts to secure the COP 26 summit for Britain. If he succeeds, how will he ensure that schools in Havant and across the country can contribute to the summit, given the importance of climate change to the next generation?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to focus on young people, and I am sure there will be a youth event if we are successful in our bid to host COP 26, but in some ways I want to have an oldies event as well, because I want young people to see that older generations really do take this issue seriously. Their concern is that we are not as committed to it as they are, and we must prove them wrong.

Stephen Morgan: The UK is now exporting more waste to countries with the highest levels of ocean plastic pollution. The ban on plastic exports to China has led to the UK offloading its waste on nations with questionable records on marine pollution. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to reduce environmentally costly plastic exports?

Mr Hunt: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the scenes in Malaysia and other parts of the world of plastic waste that has often come from us are not acceptable. All I can do is salute the extraordinary work done by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in championing an end to plastics in the ocean. The international leadership he has shown is extraordinary.

Bim Afolami: I welcome the fact that, yesterday, this House of Commons voted to make the UK carbon-neutral by 2050. That is a great achievement for this Parliament. The Foreign Secretary is fully aware that the UK accounts for only a very small percentage—about 2%—of global emissions, so for the change to be made a reality for the world, other countries need to follow suit. What is his assessment of how the effort is going in other developed countries to ensure that they follow our lead?

Mr Hunt: I think we are making progress, despite the setback of not having the United States on board. As for exactly what the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is doing, we have 299 people across the world whose job is entirely or partly to advocate on climate change. We are using our diplomatic network to its fullest effect.
Ruth George: At present, there is no primary legislation to prevent this Government or future Governments using carbon offsetting in other countries to reduce our own carbon emissions. Will the Foreign Secretary commit to such legislation to ensure that we are not simply exporting our own problems?

Mr Hunt: I recognise the fairness of the hon. Lady's point. There will, of course, be legislation to follow relating to our net zero 2050 target and that will be the moment to have that debate.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Handling plastic waste is a key environmental challenge, as was highlighted earlier. Last week, I met Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir, who agreed on the importance of partnership between our two Governments to tackle the issue of unrecyclable waste illegally exported to Malaysia. Our high commission in Kuala Lumpur is already on the case. Will my right hon. Friend pass on to colleagues in the Cabinet the importance of reviewing penalties for subcontractors in the UK who are illegally mixing waste for export? This is not the sort of export that the Foreign Office or the Department for International Trade want to support.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is a very well connected fellow indeed. I have had cause to observe that before and I do so again.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is extremely well connected, Mr Speaker. You are absolutely right. Prime Minister Mahathir is just one of many Prime Ministers that I know he knows. Perhaps he should be doing my job. What he says is right. As was mentioned in an earlier question, we are responsible for only 2% of emissions, so the power of UK leadership is the power of the example that we set. That is why on these issues we have to ensure that we get it right.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I am asking a rare third question on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). She cannot be here for family reasons, but she wanted me to join in the important discussion on climate change. It gives me the opportunity to congratulate the Foreign Secretary directly not just for getting into the final two, but for being the only candidate who has the police outside his house for the right reasons. What he says is right. As was mentioned in an earlier question, we are responsible for only 2% of emissions, so the power of UK leadership is the power of the example that we set. That is why on these issues we have to ensure that we get it right.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Handling plastic waste is a key environmental challenge, as was highlighted earlier. Last week, I met Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir, who agreed on the importance of partnership between our two Governments to tackle the issue of unrecyclable waste illegally exported to Malaysia. Our high commission in Kuala Lumpur is already on the case. Will my right hon. Friend pass on to colleagues in the Cabinet the importance of reviewing penalties for subcontractors in the UK who are illegally mixing waste for export? This is not the sort of export that the Foreign Office or the Department for International Trade want to support.

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Mr Hunt: I talked very openly with President Trump about the fact that we disagreed. He also had extensive discussions with other people on his visit. I do not comment on royal conversations, but I do know he spent a lot of time with His Royal Highness Prince Charles. The point I would gently make to the right hon. Lady is that when we disagree with our friends we do have these conversations and it would be great if she did the same with people like Maduro and Putin as well.

US-UK Special Relationship

10. Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What recent progress the Government have made in strengthening the UK's special relationship with the US.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): As it happens, we are on the same topic. The state visit of President Trump was a tremendous success, although the absence of the Leader of the Opposition from the state banquet was noted but not regretted.

Stephen Metcalfe: I am sure my right hon. Friend will therefore agree that those who tried to disrupt and denigrate the recent state visit of the President of the United States were deliberately and shockingly trying to damage our special relationship and betray what the President has rightly called the greatest alliance in history.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Every day I walk up the Foreign Office staircase and pass a bust of one of our greatest Foreign Secretaries, Earnest Bevin, who was both a Labour Foreign Secretary and one of the founders of NATO. What a betrayal of his remarkable legacy to have a Labour leader who takes money from Iranian state TV and is a friend of terrorists.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): President Trump made it clear that the special intelligence-sharing arrangements with the UK might be cancelled if the British Government persisted with their compromised arrangements with Huawei on 5G. How have the Government responded to that threat?

Mr Hunt: By saying two things: we will never do anything that will compromise our intelligence-sharing relationship with the United States and we will take all such decisions in the British national interest.

NGOs: Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

11. Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that Human Rights Watch and other civil society organisations can conduct humanitarian and advocacy work in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison): We firmly believe that civil society organisations should be able to conduct humanitarian work in both Israel
and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and I saw some of that work in action on the ground during my visit last month. We are aware of reports of pressure exerted against NGOs, particularly those critical of Israel’s conduct in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. We continue to make it clear that a vibrant civil society is in Israel’s interest and encourage the Palestinian Authority to ensure that NGOs can work unimpeded.

**Andy Slaughter:** I thank the Minister for that refreshing answer, but I ask him to pursue the case of Omar Shakir, the director of Human Rights Watch, who has been harassed for two and a half years. Is the Minister also concerned by the wider hostile environment for NGOs, which has seen the Daily Mail pay £120,000 in libel damages to Interpal this month for impugning its humanitarian work in Gaza and by the summit taking place in Manama this week on the future of the Occupied Palestinian Territories that does not even have the word “Palestine” on the agenda?

**Dr Murrison:** There was a lot in that question; I will do my best to answer it. The Manama conference is in train right now, and that gives me the opportunity to say again, so that there is no confusion, that Her Majesty’s Government are fully behind the two-state solution, with Jerusalem as a shared capital. I hope that makes it clear.

The hon. Gentleman mentions Omar Shakir, the director of Human Rights Watch, and I share the hon. Gentleman’s dismay at what has happened to him. I note that his deportation has been stayed and I encourage that stay of deportation to be made permanent. It is important that Human Rights Watch continues to do the important things that it does in Israel and the OPTs. I very much encourage both the Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel to ensure that NGOs such as Human Rights Watch are able to continue doing what they do. It establishes credibility for both of them in the international community, and any attack on them, I am afraid, does them inestimable damage.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be well aware that numerous NGOs operate both in Israel and Palestine. Does he agree that NGOs that encourage Palestinians and Israelis to come together, such as the Parents Circle-Families Forum and MEET—the Middle East Entrepreneurs of Tomorrow—should be encouraged and that the refusal of Palestinian Authority to allow these NGOs to operate causes more dissension and concern?

**Dr Murrison:** My hon. Friend speaks from a position of some strength because he takes a great deal of interest in these matters. Dialogue is terribly important. When I have spoken to both my Israeli and Palestinian Authority interlocutors, I have made it absolutely clear to them that the only way forward for peace in the middle east is for dialogue to be facilitated and continued. NGOs of the sort that he has described are an important part of that.

**Nigel Dodds** (Belfast North) (DUP): The Israeli NGO, Save a Child’s Heart, which I had the honour to visit recently, just performed its 5,000th life-saving operation. The children come from all over, including Africa and the Palestinian territories. Will the Minister join me in commending and celebrating this fantastic achievement by this wonderful organisation?

**Dr Murrison:** It does sound like a wonderful organisation, and it is important to commend the activities of NGOs and particularly medical charities, large and small, that operate in this space. Too often, we hear about the large ones and not so much about the small ones. I am particularly conscious of those operating in relation to Gaza and the west bank and the difficulties that some are having, particularly with their patients gaining the access that they need. Organisations of the sort that the right hon. Gentleman describes are very important in that respect.

**International Economic Crime**

12. **Stephen McPartland** (Stevenage) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to help tackle international economic crime.  

**The Minister for Africa** (Harriett Baldwin): We are working with a range of countries to demonstrate UK global leadership by increasing our capabilities in the overseas network, including establishing joint serious organised crime teams in over 80 countries.

**Stephen McPartland**: The line between rogue nation states and terrorist organisations sponsoring organised criminal activity is increasingly blurred. They are attacking our national institutions and millions of residents in this country. Does the Minister believe that diplomacy is working?

**Harriett Baldwin**: My hon. Friend rightly draws attention to the importance, given that we are one of the world’s leading financial centres, of our being as rigorous as possible and taking a zero-tolerance approach. I am sure the House will welcome the fact that last December the Financial Action Task Force review took a close look at our system and concluded that the UK had the strongest anti-money laundering regime of the countries assessed to date, but clearly we cannot be complacent; there is much more to do.

**Venezuela**

17. **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the political and humanitarian situation in Venezuela.  

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas** (Sir Alan Duncan): The political stand-off in Venezuela continues and the humanitarian crisis deepens. We support initiatives by the Lima Group, the International Contact Group and the Norwegian-facilitated talks in Oslo to make progress towards a solution. We have committed significant humanitarian aid and are supporting the UN and the Red Cross movement operating in the region.

**Bambos Charalambous**: Will the Minister join me in welcoming the visit of the UN Human Rights Commissioner, Michelle Bachelet, to Venezuela and endorsing her demands that, whatever else needs to happen there, we must see the immediate release of all political prisoners being held by the Maduro Government?
Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, I am very happy to confirm that, but of course we need to see far more than that in Venezuela. Maduro has brought his own country to its knees. Millions of people have fled to neighbouring countries. The country has been ruined by the lunacy of one man, and we all, as the international community, need to work together to do everything we possibly can to restore the fortunes of that once great country.

Topical Questions

T1. [911564] Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): This might be my last Question Time as Foreign Secretary—or indeed it might not—but one important event that will happen before the result of the Conservative leadership election is announced is the launch of a major global campaign to protect the safety of journalists around the world. The UK has joined forces with Canada to spearhead this campaign, which I will be launching next month with Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland. It will be the world’s first ever ministerial summit on media freedom, here in London. We have 700 confirmed attendees from media and civil society across 98 countries and from 45 different Governments. Together we will shine a light on abuse and raise the price for those who would harm or imprison journalists.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the Foreign Secretary for announcing that conference. Whether he remains Foreign Secretary or becomes Prime Minister, or takes any other post, I hope that he continues consistently to champion human rights and media freedom.

I declare an interest in that last month I was part of a delegation with Medical Aid for Palestinians and the Council for Arab-British Understanding that visited the Palestinian refugee camp of Dheisheh in the occupied west bank. There we witnessed the vital work in education, health and other areas of humanitarian relief that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency does but which is now at risk because the US has threatened to defund and delegitimise the agency. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm that the UK intends to support the renewal of UNRWA’s mandate at the General Assembly later this year so that it can continue its vital work of protecting people and giving them a sense of hope?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her good wishes. She once bought me a cappuccino in Portcullis House, and I look forward to returning the favour in No. 10, if that is what happens. I can confirm that we will continue to support the renewal of UNRWA’s mandate and the vital work it does.

T2. [911565] Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Earlier this month, a school in the beautiful Israeli town of Sderot was hit by a rocket—one of 800 fired from Gaza this year. What message do the UK Government have for the innocent Israeli civilians living in constant fear of terror, and does the Minister agree that there will be no progress until terror groups stop prioritising the eradication of Israel over peace?

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison): As it happens, I recently visited a kibbutz very close to the Gazan border, and I saw for myself the effect that such attacks were having on the local population, despite Israel’s Iron Dome, which is good but not infallible. We condemn all rocket attacks from Gaza towards Israel. They are completely unacceptable. While they and other violence like that continues, there is no realistic prospect of peace being forthcoming in that part of our troubled world. We must see the cessation of rockets from Gaza into Israel.

T4. [911567] Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Disturbingly, medics dealing with the aftermath of the 3 June attacks in Khartoum have said that, as well as 100 people dying, about 70 women may have been raped. Many of my constituents who have links with Sudan have suggested not only that the Janjaweed should be internationally proscribed—even, potentially, as a terrorist organisation—but that we should apply sanctions to those responsible. Do the Government hear my constituents’ call?

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): The hon. Lady can tell her constituents, and indeed the people of Sudan, that we stand with them in their desire for a transition to civilian-led government. As she knows, there have been widespread reports following those horrendous attacks, and we encourage everyone to keep documentation of such atrocities. Justice will come eventually, but I summoned the Sudanese ambassador to express our disagreement with—our real abomination of—what had taken place on 3 June.

T3. [911566] Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): Last Friday, the Financial Action Task Force extended its deadline for Iran to commit itself to compliance with crucial financial anti-terrorism measures. Did that form part of the Minister’s discussions in Tehran, and does he share my concern about the extensive reports of Iran’s financing of international terrorism?

Dr Murrison: Of course I share my hon. Friend’s concern about Iran’s support for international terrorism, particularly through its proxy groups, which I discussed at length with my interlocutors over the weekend. I think it only fair to say that the Financial Action Task Force has recognised that there has been some progress in Iran but is disappointed that it has not been comprehensive, which is why it is felt that, on balance, it is right to extend the deadline to October 2019. I hope very much that the outstanding issues in the action plan will be addressed during the intervening time.

T6. [911569] Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Will the Foreign Secretary condemn the repeated expressions of Islamophobia from the President of the United States, including the sharing of a tweet by Katie Hopkins that attacked the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, referring to London as “Londonistan”?

Mr Hunt: I utterly deplore what Katie Hopkins said—I condemn it in the roughest terms—but I also support the view of the President of the United States that the Mayor of London needs to do more about knife crime.

T5. [911568] Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Over the weekend, the chief of the general staff of the Ethiopian army, the president of the Amhara region and several
Mr Hunt: I think the action that the Government have taken to address the Windrush scandal has been noted by the countries affected, and I think they understand that we see that an injustice was done and we are putting it right.

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that. India is a country that I want to visit at the earliest opportunity to strengthen our relations. I am trying to avoid the use of the phrase “strong and stable”, but I will say that that relationship with India is incredibly important to both countries, and we will do everything we can to further it.

Mr Hunt: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s excellence as a trade envoy between the UK and Ethiopia. Ethiopia’s trade has increased by some 80%, which must surely be one of the records among trade envos.

Mr Rishikesh Kardile has been in custody since a young son and family in my constituency and the matter involves such high-ranking Ethiopian citizens were murdered. Will my right hon. Friend join me in sending condolences to the people of Ethiopia and to its excellent Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed? He is trying to secure reform in that great country, but clearly there are those who are trying to oppose him.

Harriet Baldwin: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s excellence as a trade envoy between the UK and Ethiopia. Ethiopia’s trade has increased by some 80%, which must surely be one of the records among trade envos.

We are truly appalled by those killings, and our thoughts are indeed with the people who have been affected by them. We support Ethiopia’s progress in political and economic reforms, and we do not want such events to influence that agenda.

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that. India is a country that I want to visit at the earliest opportunity to strengthen our relations. I am trying to avoid the use of the phrase “strong and stable”, but I will say that that relationship with India is incredibly important to both countries, and we will do everything we can to further it.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My constituent Mr Rishikesh Kardile has been in custody since a business conference in Barcelona in February. Will the Minister’s officials ask the Indian Government to lift their extradition application so that he can return to his young son and family in my constituency and the matter can be resolved through the normal legal process?

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Further to my letter to the right hon. Gentleman last month, Mr Kardile has now been released from prison. He is required to remain in Spain, because he is the subject of an Indian extradition notice. It would be very difficult, and possibly inappropriate, for us to intervene, as this is a matter for the Spanish courts, but we are extending to Mr Kardile and his family the fullest consular support possible.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Nobody can criticise our Government’s reaction to atrocities committed against the Muslim community, or indeed Muslims around the world; however, given that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary seeks to lead this Christian country, has his Department not rather let him down in the way we have sought to protect Christians abroad?

Mr Hunt: I think that has been somewhat of a blind spot, but we are putting it right, and that is why I asked the Bishop of Truro to conduct an independent review into what more we can do to tackle the persecution of Christians, which accounts for about 80% of the religious persecution in the world. That report will be received next month.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Foreign Secretary not agree that whether it is the tear gassing and rubber bulleting of peaceful protestors in Hong Kong or the mass detention without trial in concentration camps of civilians in the United States by Trump, our hand is much weakened in upholding the fundamental values of human rights if we are under the pressure of seeking trade agreements with China on the one hand or the United States on the other, and therefore we are better off staying in the EU and having a final say on that?

Mr Hunt: This is the trouble with Labour, if I may say so: the United States supported the people of Hong Kong but Labour boycotted the state banquet of the US President but went to the state banquet of the President of China. What sort of priorities are they?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Foreign Office questions without the voice of Sutton Coldfield would be like dinner without a main course; we cannot have it.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Many of us hope that my right hon. Friend will continue his brilliant work as Foreign Secretary for many years to come, but may I take him back to his earlier remarks about Sudan and the present position of the long-suffering people of Sudan? Will he ensure that the British Government do all they can to make certain that, in line with the International Criminal Court indictment of General Bashir and Salah Gosh—two people who have been identified as perpetrators of mass atrocities in Darfur and elsewhere in Sudan—they are held to account and taken to The Hague as swiftly as possible?

Harriet Baldwin: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his assiduous pursuit of this agenda; he knows how closely we are working with both the ICC and other international forums to ensure that the situation in Sudan remains at the forefront of the international agenda and that we do everything we can to ensure a swift and orderly transition to civilian rule in that country. Clearly, accountability will not be forgotten by the international community.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Last week, the Minister for the Middle East suggested that we would have no ideas how to increase the pressure on Russia to stop targeting hospitals in Syria. He is wrong about that: we sent him a number of ideas just this morning. Will he meet us to discuss them, and will he consider those measures, including expelling the Russian ambassador for these atrocities?
Dr Murrison: I remember our conversation across the Floor of the House and look forward very much to receiving the hon. Gentleman’s helpful ideas. It is vital that the parties to the Sochi ceasefire are mindful of the obligations they signed up to in September. The events of 6 May and subsequently are deeply regrettable and stand the very real risk of causing a huge further humanitarian crisis with further internally displaced people. We have to avoid that at all costs. I therefore gently suggest that the parties get back around the table and ensure that as a safe first step they stop their hostile activities in north-west Syria.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I have just returned from seeing Richard Ratcliffe, who is on the 11th day of his hunger strike in support of his wife Nazanin, who still languishes in a prison in Iran. Given the current increased tensions with Iran, what more can we do to keep Nazanin at the forefront of the profile and make sure the message to get her released is not lost among the other discussions we must have?

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for visiting Richard Ratcliffe, who is a very brave man. I met him the weekend before last, and he is doing a remarkable job. I know that the whole House is thinking about Nazanin, about her five-year-old daughter and about that family. Our message to Iran is very simple: whatever disagreements you have with the UK, do not punish this innocent woman. It is not her fault. Let her come home.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Further to the earlier question about self-determination for the people of Kashmir, will the Minister confirm whether he has approached the United Nations to take a more direct and active role in recording, monitoring and reporting human rights abuses in Kashmir?

Sir Alan Duncan: Obviously, we oppose human rights abuses anywhere. I have only recently and temporarily assumed responsibility for that part of the world, but I take fully on board what the hon. Lady says and assure her that the Government pay full attention to any human rights abuses anywhere in the world, but particularly in the Kashmir region.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary update the House on the progress being made with the prevention of sexual violence in conflict initiative?

Harrriet Baldwin: The UK has shown leadership on that initiative relentlessly since 2014, and I can announce that this November, five years on, we will host a summit to document progress and to highlight the fact that the world needs to continue to focus on this important issue.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): There is considerable potential for trade and for increasing Britain’s soft power in developing our relationship with the Kurdistan region of Iraq. What more can be done to review the Foreign Office security advice on Kurdistan, and can it be viewed differently from the advice relating to wider Iraq?

Dr Murrison: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. As it happens, I met Minister Hakim, the Iraqi Foreign Minister, a few hours ago to discuss a number of these issues. He is keen to normalise the trade and commerce relationship between Iraq and the rest of the world at the earliest opportunity. We discussed a range of issues, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will discuss them further when he meets his Iraqi interlocutors later today.

One of the issues is, bluntly, the exchange of people and the establishment of a visa regime that facilitates the passage of people between Iraq and the UK. I know that that is an issue of great importance to Iraq as things return to some level of normality after a very troubled period.

The hon. Gentleman mentions Kurdistan. We hope that President Barzani will visit this country in the near future. I have no doubt at all that some of these issues will be returned to when he comes to London.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): This Foreign Secretary deserves credit for setting up an independent review into the persecution of Christians worldwide, but will he ensure that a lasting legacy is achieved, whatever the outcome of that review, by ensuring that diplomats who are sent to countries where persecution occurs receive training in religious literacy?

Mr Hunt: That is a very interesting suggestion, and I defer to my right hon. Friend’s great knowledge on these topics. I would like to wait for the Bishop of Truro’s recommendations, which we are expecting next month, before I consider that idea in the round, but it is certainly worthy of consideration.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I was incredibly moved to meet Richard Ratcliffe last week. A similar question has been asked today, but I do not feel that it was answered as well as it could have been. His wife is enduring an unjust incarceration in Iran, and I would like to know what the Government are doing specifically to provide us with an update on the steps they are taking to bring her home.

Mr Hunt: We have left no stone unturned. I went to Teheran on 19 November, and I have given Nazanin diplomatic protection. I have changed the travel advice to try to prevent this from happening to other dual nationals, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East raised the matter in Teheran at the end of last week. We are doing absolutely everything we can, because this is an appalling injustice.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Since the joint comprehensive plan of action was signed in 2015, there have been over 30 long-range missile launches from Iran capable of carrying a nuclear warhead. What are Ministers doing to tackle that aspect of Iran’s nuclear ambition?

Dr Murrison: It is vital that the JCPOA remains in place. It is also vital that we make progress with the E3 on the special purpose vehicle that we have designed to take this matter forward. At the weekend, I left my interlocutors in no doubt about our insistence that they maintain their commitment to JCPOA, specifically in
relation to the nuclear issue. They must also desist from their ballistic missile programme and their support for proxies that are destabilising the middle east.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Mr Speaker, you might be interested to know that Blowfish Theatre has a travelling show “Boris the Musical 2”, which will be performed in the forthcoming Edinburgh festival in the Gilded Balloon theatre. If the Secretary of State has not seen the show, I recommend that he does so. The Edinburgh festival is the finest arts festival in the world. May I ask what Her Majesty’s Government are doing to support the theatre groups that take part so they can perform overseas, which would offer a strong boost to the UK’s soft power and, better still, I say to my SNP colleagues, to Scottish soft power?

Mr Hunt: I was in Scotland at the weekend, and I had the most delicious fish and chips I think I have ever had. We do an enormous amount of work to support the Edinburgh festival, the Edinburgh Tattoo and all the incredible tourism opportunities in Scotland. We do so as the Government of the United Kingdom, because we are stronger together.
Point of Order

12.41 pm

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Kerry Foods made the sad announcement at 5 o’clock yesterday that it intended to close its production factory in Burton, leading to the loss of between 690 and 900 jobs. That is a clear blow to my constituency and the people employed there, and we looking to the Government to come together with a cohesive plan not only to see whether there are alternative people to take over the factory but, if not, to help those 700 back into work and come up with a proper plan for the use of the site.

Can you, Mr Speaker, advise me how I can use the House to bring together the necessary Departments—the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Department for Work and Pensions—to make sure that the employees of Kerry Foods get the help and support they need?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman, whom I thank for his point of order, is well able to advise himself, and he has advertised his concerns for starters today. In so far as he seeks my counsel, and I focus it on matters appertaining to the Chamber, I suggest that he seek to catch my eye at an early stage, perhaps in a Question Time session this week, in which he might be able to raise the matter at a very high level in question form. If thereafter he wishes a fuller consideration of the matter, he could always apply for an Adjournment debate.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. As the MP for the neighbouring constituency to Burton in South Derbyshire and as an HCLG Minister, I very much look forward to having further conversations with my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) about this issue, which is very important to our neighbouring constituencies.

Mr Speaker: That is extremely helpful. The hon. Gentleman’s cup runneth over, such is the plentiful supply of assistance and advice. I look forward to hearing further from him about this matter in the days to come.

Ground Rents (Leasehold Properties)

12.44 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to regulate ground rents charged on leasehold properties; to make provision for a cap on ground rents; to make property developers liable for the legal costs of leaseholders seeking to vary certain ground rent contracts; and for connected purposes.

Mr Speaker, imagine for a moment that you own a lovely one or two-bed apartment with your family, or perhaps even a recently built house. You have lived there quite happily for a few years, but you decide it is time to move, perhaps because of schools, for work or to move up the property ladder. You are primed and ready to go, but the estate agent asks for a copy of your leasehold agreement and there in the small print you get hit with the fact that you cannot sell your property—you are trapped. Tens of thousands of people across the country are in this position, and it simply cannot be right. This leasehold ground rent scandal needs attention right now. In many cases, developers have created leases with feudal ground rent clauses that have since fallen out of favour with lenders, leaving owners stuck with an unsaleable property because prospective buyers cannot get a mortgage to purchase the property.

In some cases, the ground rent doubles every 10 years. In others, it doubles just once. There are reports of lenders refusing to lend on what they deem as unreasonable or onerous ground rent clauses. Some will not lend if the ground rent exceeds 0.1% of the property value at any point during the lease. Leasehold campaigners argue that there are close to 100,000 people affected by terms that leave them with a ground rent in excess of 0.1% of the property value. I would argue that such circumstances are onerous. The result is an unsaleable property and, in many cases, the developer is long gone, having sold the freehold on to a distant investment company. They have, of course, made their money twice—not only from selling the leaseholds in the first place but from selling on the freehold.

Ground rents can, of course, be peppercorn or set at a reasonable rate, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government report shows that the market place is mixed, but it is important to clarify that ground rents have nothing to do with the maintenance of a building. They are simply an income for the freeholder. As the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), who has responsibility for housing and homelessness, told the MHCLG Select Committee:

“One of the things I do find utterly fascinating is that a building might be beautifully maintained at a peppercorn ground rent or poorly maintained at £500 ground rent. The amount of ground rent payable is no indication of the quality of the maintenance and services provided.”

There is nothing wrong with a freeholder taking a reasonable ground rent, but when that ground rent becomes onerous and stops someone selling their home it becomes a problem. The rights between freeholder and leaseholder need to be redressed.
As the Select Committee commented:

“Any ground rent is onerous if it becomes disproportionate to the value of a home, such that it materially affects a leaseholder’s ability to sell their property or obtain a mortgage. In practical terms, it is increasingly clear that a ground rent in excess of 0.1% of the value of a property or £250—including rents likely to reach this level in future due to doubling, or other, ground rent review mechanisms—is beginning to affect the saleability and mortgage-ability of leasehold properties.”

My Bill seeks to address this.

The result of developers selling on the freehold to investors is that some freeholders are remote and uninterested in helping their leaseholders. Those who are interested charge unfair fees and legal costs for what should be a simple solution. I know of one such scenario in which there is a £180 charge just to discuss terms with the freeholder.

The freeholder could of course just ignore the problem, or say no. There is currently no obligation on the freeholder to help to sort the problem out—except good will. It cannot be right that in 2019 we have leasehold properties unable to be sold because of ground rent clauses. Behind each problem is a person, an individual, a family, a couple or perhaps a small investor. They do not deserve to be forgotten and left high and dry, trapped indefinitely with their property.

What can be done? Currently, the law allows 50% of leaseholders in a block of apartments to get together to buy the freehold—quite a task, and a long and expensive process if you just want to sell your property. Leaseholders could try to extend the lease, but again there is an elongated process, with expenses running into thousands of pounds. There is also the possibility that the leaseholder negotiates a variation of lease with the freeholder. This is also costly, and there is no onus on the freeholder to do the deal. It is probably the simplest solution, but with prohibitive expenses and no obligation on freeholders to engage, we have a postcode lottery of failure and success.

The Select Committee noted:

“The options for leaseholders with onerous ground rents are limited. House owners are entitled to pay to enfranchise after two years of ownership, thus removing any obligation to pay ground rent, onerous or otherwise. However, this would only be possible if the cost of enfranchisement...is both reasonable and affordable for the house owner. Flat owners, similarly, are entitled to enfranchise, although this is a much more difficult process, requiring the consent of 50% of the owners in a residential block... Otherwise, leaseholders are reliant upon the benevolence of their freeholder to remove unreasonable terms.”

That is why I am proposing this private Member’s Bill.

I am aware that the Law Commission is currently contemplating a solution to the thorny issue of onerous ground rents on existing leases, but I propose simple solutions. First, we need to create a legal obligation on freeholders to grant a quick and simple lease variation to leaseholders where ground rent prohibits a sale. Secondly, it is important that ground rents are capped at the lower of £250 per annum or 0.1% of the property value.

I am also considering including an obligation on the original developer to foot the leaseholder’s legal bills in such situations. After all, why should families have to find a large sum to solve a problem not of their making? If the Bill progresses, I hope we will be able to shape it more specifically in Committee—I imagine that might be somewhat optimistic.

Systems and institutions are supposed to serve the public, and I hope we can all agree that we cannot have people unable to sell their property. Drastic and immediate action is required. I believe there is growing concern on both sides of the House about leasehold properties, and the Select Committee should be commended for its excellent report. I am also pleased to see that the Competition and Markets Authority has taken this issue on board and is looking at mis-selling in this arena. I hope both the Government and the Select Committee will keep this under further review.

I believe there is a wide cross-party consensus in Parliament on this issue, and the time for Parliament to intervene on the leasehold ground rent scandal is now. I hope hon. Members will help me to change the law to restore fairness in this sector and to stop people being trapped in unsaleable properties.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Eddie Hughes, Kevin Hollinrake, Mr Edward Vaizey, Bob Blackman, Teresa Pearce, Andrew Lewer, Matt Western, Siobhain McDonagh, Mary Robinson, Mohammad Yasin, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi and Neil O’Brien present the Bill.

Eddie Hughes accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 409).
Mr Gauke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks, and this Bill is by no means anti-marriage. As he rightly says, this Bill seeks to ensure that, in those unfortunate circumstances where a marriage comes to an end, it comes to an end in a way that minimises the conflict. The current requirement incentivises that sense of attribution of fault, which does nothing to ensure that the relationship between the two parents can be as strong as possible, and it is the children who lose out in those circumstances.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I have thought about this with care. Obviously, to practising Christians and those of other faiths, the end of a marriage is not to be taken lightly, but I am glad the Secretary of State has accepted the proposition put by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) that causing more conflict at the end does not help.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that in no other respects any of the protections for often the more vulnerable party to a marriage, the woman, will be affected by this measure, particularly in relation to financial arrangements and the custody of children, and that it simply removes the evidentiary requirement for a fault to be attributed to one side or the other?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee on Justice, is right. This is about the attribution of blame and fault, and no more than that. Indeed, the protections in place for the vulnerable party remain just as they are. It is often the vulnerable party who suffers most from the need to attribute blame, because that can be difficult. In the context of domestic abuse, for example, it is striking how the likes of Women’s Aid have been very supportive of these measures because of their concern that there might be women trapped in marriages who do not want to attribute blame because they feel that may result in a further deterioration in the relationship.

The truth is that when a marriage or indeed a civil partnership has sadly broken down and is beyond repair, it stops benefiting society and the people involved. At worst, continuing in a legal relationship that is no longer functioning can be destructive to families, and the law ought to deal with the reality of marriage breakdown as constructively as possible. The current law does not do that. The requirements of the divorce process at present can often give rise to a confrontational position, even if the decision to divorce is mutual. The incentive to make allegations at the outset, to avoid otherwise waiting for two years’ separation, becomes ingrained. Divorce is traumatic, and children are inevitably affected when their parents separate—that goes without saying. I agree that marriage has long proved its worth for bringing up children, but the reality is that not all marriages last. The law should deal with that reality as sensitively as it can. When a marriage has failed, we have to take a serious look at how to reduce conflict for everyone involved, not least for children. Research shows that it is conflict between the parents that has been linked to greater social and behavioural problems among children, rather than necessarily the separation and divorce itself.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I very much welcome the proposals in this Bill. Getting rid of the fault-based approach to divorce and the conflict is a good thing, as is ensuring that people do not have to wait for two years. Does the Secretary of State agree with me and with Resolution, the organisation for family lawyers, that we also need to provide earlier...
advice for cohabitees who believe that common law spousal rights might exist for them? Legal advice on whether such rights exist would be beneficial. Does he agree that including provision for early advice in the Bill would be welcome?

**Mr Gauke:** Obviously, this Bill's focus is on divorce for those who are married. There is a point about advice where we can have a wider debate. I will focus my remarks today on the contents of the Bill and the argument I am making about the problems with fault in the current divorce system, and I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support on that. Clearly, there is a debate to be had as to how we can provide support to couples, be that about reconciliation or in other contexts.

Whatever family structure children grow up in, they benefit most from stable, loving and caring relationships with parents and other close family members. We are clear that when parents have taken this difficult decision, children's best interests are served by minimising conflict during and after the legal process, to support co-operative parenting and positive parenting relationships. This Bill is in the best interests of children whose parents are divorcing. It will therefore remove the harmful requirement for wives, husbands and civil partners in England and Wales to hurl blame or to go through the waiting limbo of separate lives. It will help them move forward more amicably and constructively. It will make a genuine difference to many thousands of children and families who each year, sadly, experience divorce.

It is 50 years since the Divorce Reform Act 1969 gave rise to the law we now have, and few of us will have known anything else. Some among us will have divorced under this law. All of us will be conscious of the bitter experience of friends and constituents who have. Even so, the existing law is not always understood. It allows divorce only on the ground that the marriage has broken down irretrievably. The court cannot hold the marriage to have done so unless it is satisfied of one or more of the law calls “facts”. Three of the five facts—adultery, behaviour and desertion—relate to conduct of the respondent. The other facts are two years’ separation and five years’ separation, the difference being that two years’ separation requires both parties to agree to the divorce—the same applies to civil partnerships, except that the adultery fact is not available. But the fact someone chooses does not necessarily bear any resemblance to the real reasons the marriage or civil partnership broke down. Those reasons are often subtle, complex, and subjective. Who, if anyone, was responsible is a question that can be answered honestly only by the people in the marriage.

We are probably all aware of situations where a couple have sadly grown apart over time and jointly agree to divorce. The current law does not allow them to do so, unless they are first financially able to live apart for two years. They might be forced to present events in a way that serves the system; minor incidents become stretched out into a pattern of behaviour to satisfy a legal threshold, which then bleeds over into how a couple approach negotiations over arrangements for children and finances; or there may be a coercive relationship, where one partner is desperate to divorce but is too scared of the consequences of setting out the evidence of their partner’s unreasonable behaviour to the court. It should be enough that the relationship has irretrievably broken down.

I do know where people are coming from when they say the requirement to prove a fact is useful, because they think that someone must be held responsible for the break-up of the marriage and that this requirement lets the court determine blame for that. The court, however, cannot do so, and the law does not require it to. Instead, making allegations or having to live apart in a marriage introduces conflict or makes it worse—this conflict can continue far beyond the legal end of the marriage and hurt children's life chances. That is the reason for this reform.

**Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for the careful way in which he is taking us through these proposals and for his indication of support for marriage. Will he look, perhaps in the context of this Bill, at supporting marriages before they have broken down irretrievably and providing support where couples are under pressure, to reduce marital breakdown by intervening earlier?

**Mr Gauke:** The last two words, “intervening earlier”, are key. Once the point of a divorce is reached, it is likely—the evidence suggests this—that it is too late. The question is: can we provide support earlier? In all honesty, I do not believe that the Bill provides the vehicle to address that point, because if we try to provide that support in the context of the divorce itself, we will be too late. Clearly, however, there is an argument—one that I suspect is for the next spending review—as to what assistance can be provided to couples at an earlier stage in the process. I completely understand where my hon. Friend is coming from and I very much agree that the point is about earlier intervention, but where someone is going through the divorce process, making that process more difficult and confrontation is counterproductive.

**Mr Ivan Lewis** (Bury South) (Ind): Does the Secretary of State understand the circumstances where a resident parent turns children against the non-resident parent where no abuse whatsoever is involved? That causes estrangement for the child, often for many, many years. Is it not time that we found a legal framework—early intervention is important in this respect—to tackle this problem? I have only recently become involved in this campaign on parental alienation, and I was shocked that hundreds if not thousands of parents are estranged from their children because the resident parent seeks to manipulate the child against a non-resident parent for no reason whatsoever.

**Mr Gauke:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention on a matter that I suspect all of us have had experience of as constituency Members of Parliament as well as citizens. These circumstances are hugely difficult. To some extent, the existing divorce law can somewhat encourage that behaviour, because of the need to attribute blame, but he is right to suggest that this is a wider issue, one that is hard to address in the context of divorce. He is right to highlight the difficulties that can exist and how parents can be alienated from their children in what are difficult circumstances.

When I became Justice Secretary last year, I was able to take a deeper look at the issue of divorce. What became clear to me was that making allegations does
not serve any public interest. It needlessly rakes up the past to justify the legal ending of a relationship that is no longer a beneficial and functioning one. At worst, these allegations can pit one parent against the other. I remain deeply concerned that what the existing law requires can be especially damaging for children.

The law on divorce and dissolution is out of step with the constructive approach that family law takes in other areas and that practitioners take every day. It is time to change that. Resolution is the lead organisation representing family lawyers who subscribe to a non-confrontational approach. Resolution’s chair, Margaret Heathcote, has said that “because of our outdated divorce laws” practitioners have effectively been working “with one arm tied behind their backs.”

The Bill will change that.

At the beginning of my speech, I spoke about the confrontational position that the law sets up and about its harmful impact on children. That confrontational position undermines not only good co-parenting but any prospect of reconciliation. I understand concerns about people being divorced against their will. The reality is that under the existing law the court can refuse a divorce only if a legal requirement is not met, and never simply because one party wants to stay married. Only about 2% of respondents say that they want to contest the divorce. Hardly anyone continues contesting a divorce only if a legal requirement is not met, and never simply because one party wants to stay married. Only about 2% of respondents say that they want to contest the divorce. Hardly anyone continues contesting the divorce. Hence, the ability of a spouse to contest the divorce.

Let me turn briefly to the measures in the Bill: it does not create a new process, but instead retains the framework of the existing law and removes those aspects that are considered to cause conflict. The Bill therefore retains the two stages of divorce and dissolution orders. The Government believe that the need to confirm to the court that it may make the conditional order, and to apply to the court for the final order, means that a divorce or dissolution is never automatic and that the decision to divorce is a considered one, with opportunities for a change of heart right up to the last moment.

The reform will retain irretrievable breakdown as the sole legal ground for divorce and dissolution. It will replace the current requirement to evidence irretrievable breakdown through a conduct or separation fact with a statement of irretrievable breakdown of the marriage or civil partnership. For the first time, couples will have the option to make this a joint statement, to reflect some couples’ mutual decision to divorce. It will remove the possibility of contesting the decision to end the legal relationship, as a statement of irretrievable breakdown will be conclusive evidence to the court that the marriage or civil partnership has irretrievably broken down.

The reform will introduce a new minimum period of 20 weeks from the start of proceedings to the point at which the applicant—or applicants jointly—can confirm to the court that a conditional order may be made. I hope that that gives my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) some reassurance about that moment of reflection. Our proposal will make the court process towards a conditional order less rushed and give couples further time to consider the implications of the divorce. Between 2011 and 2018, around two thirds of cases reached conditional order in less than our proposed 20-week minimum period. That included approximately one in 10 cases within eight weeks, and four in 10 cases between nine and 16 weeks. The Bill also modernises language such as “decrees nisi” and “decrees absolute”, to bring terms in line with the more modern terms used in civil partnership law.

The reforms I have set out will deliver a system of divorce that is fit for the 21st century. It is time to end the blame game. The system we have now does not support the reality of marriage and civil partnership breakdown. It has been criticised as a system that “is, and always has been, a sham”. Those are the words of Sir Paul Coleridge, former family judge and chair of the Marriage Foundation, who, like all of us, believes strongly in marriage but sees that by reforming the law to remove from it unnecessary requirements that can fuel conflict, we will not undermine marriage and will support people to look to the future as they go through very difficult times. For that reason, I commend the Bill to the House.

1.16 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I welcome the Bill. Labour supports the introduction of a no-fault divorce procedure, which we committed to in our 2017 general election manifesto, and we are pleased that the Government have acted, especially in the light of the troubling case of Owens v. Owens. We will therefore vote to support the Bill if a vote is called at this stage. We will use our time in Committee to ensure that the Bill, if need be, to ensure that it is the best law possible for those who are already going through a difficult time in their lives.
The existing procedure and law managing divorce and the dissolution of civil partnerships is not fit for purpose and is in clear need of updating. A fundamental problem with the existing law, which is set out for divorcing couples in the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973 and for the dissolution of civil partnerships in the Civil Partnership Act 2004, is that it requires people who seek a divorce to prove that the marriage has broken down, either by establishing fault on the part of one partner, or by showing that the couple have lived separate lives for a number of years. In reality, for those who cannot afford to live in two separate households for years in order to prove that their marriage has broken down, the only option currently available is to establish fault on the part of their partner. That is one way in which the current divorce law discriminates against women, particularly those on a low income, by reducing the options available to them to a fault-based divorce.

Establishing of one of the three faults—adultery, unreasonable behaviour or desertion—can be difficult, and often heightens tensions at an already stressful time. We know the hurt that such heightened tension can all too often cause. There are widespread concerns about the increased risk of domestic violence faced by women who go through this fractious process. Surveys of people who have gone through the divorce procedure show that in excess of one in four people who go through a divorce have cited a fault that is not in fact true, and there can also be problems when people end up being advocates for themselves.

A conflictual process is deeply damaging to children’s life chances. Children will of course be better served by a divorce to prove that the marriage has broken down, either by establishing fault on the part of one partner, or by showing that the couple have lived separate lives for a number of years. In reality, for those who cannot afford to live in two separate households for years in order to prove that their marriage has broken down, the only option currently available is to establish fault on the part of their partner. That is one way in which the current divorce law discriminates against women, particularly those on a low income, by reducing the options available to them to a fault-based divorce.

Mr Ivan Lewis: I reiterate the point I made earlier to the Secretary of State, who rightly talked about the impact on children of an acrimonious divorce. We need to protect children from the risk of abuse—everybody would accept that—but if a resident parent turns a child against a non-resident parent, that can cause massive long-term damage to that child. The current legal framework does nothing satisfactory to tackle that particular problem. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that now is the time to look again at what can be done differently in respect of the whole question of alienation and the impact on children?

Richard Burgon: That is why we are very supportive of mediation in family cases in general, and why we have made announcements in relation to legal aid and early family law advice. I hear my hon. Friend’s point about the role of solicitors not always being helpful, but there can also be problems when people end up being advocates for themselves.

The need to apportion blame and ratchet up the acrimony is one of the main reasons that so many of us want to see an end to this fault-based law—not least because of the impact on children. For example, the present divorce ground of unreasonable behaviour requires allegations that are hardly ever challenged and can sometimes be exaggerated by one spouse against the other, which can exacerbate tensions between them. It also makes it more difficult to agree arrangements for children. Indeed, one of the most urgent reasons for these reforms is to alleviate the harm caused to children, including to their mental health, by acrimonious separations.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): There are very often issues with how the family courts go about these custody matters. I get lots of cases like this, as I am sure my hon. Friend does. It is an area that needs to be looked at. Equally, some lawyers—not all—can exacerbate the situation in the way they handle the case. I get lots of complaints about family courts, particularly with regard to who is right and who is wrong, and there is a lot of antagonism. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) said, this can be very damaging to children.

Richard Burgon: The recent case of Owens v. Owens highlighted a particularly iniquitous aspect of our existing divorce laws: the possibility for one party to attempt to refuse a divorce by defending it.

Eddie Hughes: Does the hon. Gentleman think this change will in any way lessen the seriousness of the marriage contract? Will people entering into it feel that they can do so more lightly because, from a purely contractual point of view, escaping from it is made easier by this legislation?

Richard Burgon: I know that marriage is technically a contract, but it seems strange to think of it that way when it is such a personal and emotional thing. I do not believe that this change in the law, which is welcome, will lead to an overall increase in the number of divorces in the long run. However, I do think that it will reduce...
the unnecessary tension, conflict, distress and damage to children in those divorces, which would take place in any event.

In the case of Owens v. Owens, the family court judge refused to grant a divorce to Mrs. Owens, who made the application for a divorce in 2015, despite finding that the marriage had in fact broken down. This was because she failed to prove, as required in the 1973 Act, that her husband’s behaviour was such that she could not reasonably be expected to live with him. Mrs. Owens’s appeal was dismissed at both the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court, leaving her unable to divorce her husband until 2020—a clearly unacceptable case. The judges who heard the case at both the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court expressed their dissatisfaction with the existing law, with Sir James Munby, the then president of the family division, suggesting that divorce law was based on a “lack of intellectual honesty”, and Lady Hale concluding that it was for Parliament to make any changes to the law. It is therefore right that Parliament is now able to take up this issue and make the reforms necessary to ensure that no one has to go through what Mrs. Owens experienced in this case.

The new divorce laws that we are considering today should aim to secure a number of desirable outcomes. They should ensure that people can separate as amicably as possible, keeping conflict to a minimum, so that the chances of reaching agreement are maximised and the risk of domestic abuse is as low as possible. Where there are children, their interests must be paramount, and a safe, secure and sustainable outcome for them should be promoted wherever possible. Unlike the existing system, these new divorce laws should not discriminate against women, especially those on low incomes. The new divorce and dissolution laws must also protect vulnerable and marginalised groups throughout the divorce process. In particular, they must not weaken the hard-won rights of LGBT people.

One issue that has been raised by charities working to support victims of domestic abuse is that the Bill as drafted does not remove the bar on petitioning for a divorce in the first year of a marriage. This can leave women who are suffering domestic abuse trapped in the abusive marriage during that year. Will the Secretary of State address that issue during the passage of the Bill, and will he tell us whether he has met Women’s Aid and other charities to discuss these concerns?

Since 2013, legal aid for divorce cases in England and Wales has been withdrawn by the Government—in most cases as part of a wider attack on access to justice that has had a very detrimental impact on family law cases. Groups including Citizens Advice have highlighted how legal aid cuts add to strain on divorcees, and more widely it is lower-income people and those with children who are more likely to be litigating in person than any other group. Resolution, which was mentioned earlier, has previously stated that providing legal aid for a single, initial meeting with a lawyer would provide separating couples with clear “signposts” about their legal options and encourage more people to use mediation as an alternative to courtroom confrontation.

Even with the welcome changes contained in the Bill, divorce will still be an often confusing legal process. There is a clear public interest in people being supported to achieve amicable resolutions to financial questions and arrangements for the care of children following a separation. Will the Government therefore commit to reintroducing legal aid for early legal advice for couples going through the divorce procedure?

In conclusion, bringing our divorce laws into the 21st century can form an essential part of the efforts to protect women from domestic abuse, limit the damaging impacts that fractious separations can have on children and encourage amicable separations wherever possible. For those reasons, I am pleased to support these overdue reforms.

1.29 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): I rise to support this proposed new legislation from the Government. It is a long overdue reform, and I certainly commend it.

Marriage is a very serious, lifelong commitment, and we all enter into it in that spirit. It is very clear that it is the best outcome for a stable family life and, indeed, delivers the best outcome for children.

But we live in the real world, and we know that every marriage has its ups and downs. Although it is not a matter for this Bill, many have talked about the need to give advice, but advice should be given before entering into marriage, not as it draws to a close. We all had relationship education at school, but, when it comes to marriage, what does that really mean in terms of a relationship, of finance and sharing the benefits and the burdens of our shared working lives, and of what we might or might not inherit? What does it mean for children? Have the couple discussed whether they want children? Is the lady going into this arrangement expecting that that is the norm while the gentleman does not have the same concept at all? Increasingly, marriages are not all about having children. Outside this Bill, we ought to look at that. If we do so, we will have better and happier couples who will stay married longer.

Some marriages, clearly, do not weather the storm. People change. We cannot deny that; we cannot expect people always to be the same. Events impact hugely on people’s lives. The impacts on people’s lives are many and varied as we travel more and as a result of the internet. When a marriage does irretrievably break down, the clear focus must be on good post-divorce relationships. That is not just about the children, although they are absolutely key; it is also about the relationship between the two people who were married. There should be a focus on mutual support for the children of the marriage. At this point, I should make it clear that we are not just talking about biological children of that marriage. Marriages today are quite complex, and there will often be a number of stepchildren and others to be taken into account.

Blame is not helpful. It is destructive and it impacts mental health. As we have heard, it can place children in very unpleasant situations where they are asked or expected to take the side of one partner or the other, or almost emotionally bullied into doing so. In some cases, children are even led to believe that the breakdown of the marriage is their fault. That cannot be right in today’s society. This Bill is absolutely a step in the right direction. It removes blame and it removes fault.

There is, however, more to do. I understand the Government’s caution in tackling the causes that need to be proved for divorce, but the financial arrangements on separation and divorce and for children do not work and must be readressed in the context of the modern
world, not the world as it used to be. The world is no longer about two people getting married and staying together for their lifetimes. It is not always about having biological children. Indeed, as I said, it is not always about having children at all.

When looking at finances and at the arrangements for children, the problem is that the courts are not well guided, because the original rules and regulations were set for a time that no longer exists and need to be reviewed. We have a common law system. We have a background of evidence that, to some extent, has evolved to help these newly changed situations.

Unless there is a readjusted start point, however, gaming comes in, whether it is about arguments about finance or about children. For many people, this creates a very unfair situation that cannot lead to what, for me, are the key objectives—good relationships between the parting parents and with the children. Indeed, the antiquated nature of the current legislation actually prevents marriages. Many will say, “Well done, Government, because at least we now understand that if things do not work out, there is a non-blaming way of parting ways.” We had not dealt with the acrimony and blame that goes with financial settlements and settlements for children.

The concept of a pre-nup is a great start, but the problem is that they create more discord between couples before they are married than is absolutely necessary. They can create great bitterness. There are still huge questions about whether they are legally binding. It might not be for this Bill, but we have to look at and consult on those matters again.

Not all marriages are about children. There may be no children produced, but there will be children in the marriage. Often there will be a mixture of biological children, stepchildren and step-grandchildren. Under the current system, the interests of all those parties and their relationships are not properly taken into account. As adults, we have to grow up and live with the consequences of the decisions we make, but for children who have built very close relationships with stepchildren or grandparents these situations can be devastating. All this really needs to be thought through again.

Too often, the parent who has the children has the opportunity to game the system and cast aspersions on the behaviour of the absent parent of such a vicious nature that the court is left with little option but to accept that the risk is too great and, as a consequence, that the individual making the accusations must be believed. This system does not work. It is often abused for financial advantage, it having nothing to do with the children. I strongly recommend that we look at this again and do the job better.

I support the Opposition’s request that legal aid be brought back into this area, because we have clogged up the courts with cases that are not going to deliver a good outcome for anybody. The court system is completely stymied because the judge finds himself or herself having to give advice to the litigants in person. That is not good for children, for parents or for anyone involved with the family in its broadest terms.

The issue of finances becomes a terrible wrangle about who is entitled to what. We start with the principal assumption of a 50:50 split. In the old days, when often one party worked and the other looked after the children, it was absolutely fair that the work involved in creating, bringing up and nurturing the family was valued. That would be a sensible starting point. Increasingly, though, both parties work, and both bring very different financial contributions to the marriage. We need to look again at how we assess the right starting point. We then need to assess what criteria will enable us to move away from that starting point.

The most important thing is the needs of the children. That should be the first thing taken into account. Secondly, there is the need for each of the spouses to make sure that they are still able to live well. However, it is unrealistic, for a number of reasons, for anyone to go into a marriage and assume that when it breaks up there is necessarily an entitlement to live in the same style as they did when they were married. Financially—usually—it is not affordable. While marriage is for life, increasingly individuals are marrying more than once, more than twice—indeed, three times—and therefore to make financial provision that assumes that that individual will be single for the rest of their life simply is not realistic.

We need a much more realistic approach to marriage, and to the financial settlement. We need to recognise that people will often marry more than once—and that is not a criticism; it is actually a good thing, because marriage, as we know, is a very good environment in which to bring up children. If we can make marriages happy, if they can deliver long term, and if there can be many long-term happy marriages, that is not something to eschew, but something to welcome.

This reform is very welcome, but the reality of how people marry—the circumstances in which they marry, and the circumstances around children—has changed so fundamentally that the law on financial settlements and on arrangements for the children must be fundamentally reviewed. Nevertheless, this is definitely a good start in the right direction, and I commend the Minister and the Government for introducing this Bill, which I will support.

1.40 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is very refreshing to see such widespread consensus; I take the fact that the Chamber is relatively empty this afternoon as a sign that we all know that the Bill is a very welcome step forward and that there is widespread consensus. As has been said, the Bill makes our legal practices around divorce fit for the 21st century, and the Liberal Democrats very much welcome the changes.

Divorce can be traumatising and affect whole families for years after the event. Up until now, the legal process by which divorce happens has further exacerbated that trauma, dragging out the process and forcing couples into conflict to assign legal blame. Currently, it is impossible to seek a no-fault divorce unless the couple have been separated for at least two years. To file for divorce more quickly than that, couples must claim unreasonable behaviour or adultery.

The impacts of such a system are devastating, especially for children. Divorce and family breakdown are considered an adverse childhood experience that has lasting impacts on the children. Recently, we have talked about adverse childhood experiences around knife crime, the penal system and policing. I hope and wish, because I am a
member of the all-party group for the prevention of adverse childhood experiences, that the whole approach—the trauma and fault approach—to a lot of services will be much better and more widely understood, and that all 650 MPs in this country will understand what trauma and fault mean. I encourage all hon. Members to attend at least some meetings of our all-party group. Family separation is an adverse childhood experience.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We are all very concerned about the impact on children. The reality of the damage of divorce is manifest, not just in the process, which we are discussing, but primarily in the separation of parents and the subsequent years in which children live torn between them. Does the hon. Lady agree that whenever divorce is granted, there must be greater focus on the children of the break-up?

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Throughout the years, we have understood how important it is that we take children seriously and focus a lot on their mental health and wellbeing. I totally agree.

Living through adverse childhood experiences hugely influences the likelihood that a child will end up serving time in our criminal justice system, have poor mental and physical health and find it very difficult to build stable, loving relationships. Our divorce legislation must take that into account and be trauma-informed.

People often come to the decision to divorce at the most chaotic times of their and their families’ lives. We must have a system that tries to restore order—not fuel further chaos—and we must absolutely support children throughout that process.

The new legislation, which would allow couples to file for no-fault divorce and complete the process in six months, would leave space for families to continue to function in very difficult circumstances. It would encourage couples to be mindful of their marriage and the impact of divorce, while not pushing them towards further conflict.

Each year, over 100,000 couples get divorced in England and Wales. In the years that have passed since the most recent significant family legislation, over 1.7 million people have assigned blame in the divorce process. Needless to say, this Bill is long overdue.

There is much more that can be done to bring our marriage laws into the 21st century, as the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) said. We must recognise that marriage and civil partnerships are not for everyone and that young people who do get married are doing so later and later. Our legal system needs to catch up with society, in which millions of couples choose to live together without making a formal commitment. The Law Commission suggests granting essential but limited legal rights to couples who have lived together for at least three years. Such legislation would complement the new divorce, dissolution and separation laws, and I urge the Minister to take another look at that proposal.

Family law defines millions of lives, young and old. We have an obligation to ensure that the law is up to date and empowers people, instead of holding them back. Changing the current legislation to focus on reconciliation, as opposed to conflict, is a very positive first step in the process, but there is more to be done.
Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): As ever, my hon. Friend is making a thoughtful and compassionate contribution to the debate. I agree with the tenets of the Bill and I slightly disagree with some aspects of her speech. We need to take confrontation out of the break-up process. I certainly agree with her that we need to signpost people towards relationship counselling services. In effect, as part of the trade-off in allowing a more simple, streamlined divorce process, we need to support those who wish to make a success of such counselling.

Fiona Bruce: Absolutely, and that is very much the thrust of what I want to say today. The Government need to do much more to help to strengthen family relationships.

Jim Shannon: I want to make a quick intervention because the hon. Lady mentioned the words “family relationships”. When the Conservative party came to power, one of the policies it pursued at that time—I supported this by the way—was to fix broken Britain. In relation to striking at the institution of marriage, does she feel that this divorce Bill, as it is coming forward, fixes broken Britain, or does it make it worse?

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting intervention because the phrase “broken Britain” came from a report by the Centre for Social Justice that was produced a decade or so ago. Sadly, relationship breakdown is even greater now than it was then. I do not believe that successive Governments have put in place policies and procedures to help to strengthen relationships, and this Bill will not do so either. In fact, sadly, I believe it will make divorce easier. Why do I say that? Simply because it will allow one party to walk away from the most important commitment they are likely to have made in their lifetime, without giving any reason at all and without their spouse being able meaningfully to object to their decision to do so. The removal of fault sends out a signal—I am particularly concerned about the signals sent out by the Bill to young people—that marriage can be unilaterally exited, on notice, by one party. Indeed, it is interesting that, in my law firm, I am now hearing the phrase “my current partner” coming into usage.

As I say, the removal of fault, without any opportunity to challenge, means that some who are genuinely wronged—it may be only a tiny number, as the Secretary of State has mentioned—cannot put anything on record on what they feel about the reasons stated for the divorce. The Bill simply says that a court must make a divorce order merely on the bald statement by one party that a marriage has broken down irretrievably.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for taking a further intervention and you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for letting me intervene. Does she accept this concern—I believe it is her concern as well? This change to the divorce law proposes irretrievable breakdown as a sole ground for divorce, but what is actually proposed is unilateral, no-reason divorce. That is what it is about.

Fiona Bruce: That is exactly the point I want to make. I am concerned that, if marriage can be seen as so easily exited, more and more young people will think, “Why bother entering into it at all?” Marriage rates may well, and likely will, further decline.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The hon. Lady has been incredibly generous with her time. She, like I, views marriage through the prism of our faith, but I hope that she recognises that not everyone who engages in marriage sees it that way. They do not see it as a covenant from God. They do not see it in the same way she and I do. May I ask her to reflect on why, where a marriage has broken down, the process should be elongated and why somebody should feel trapped in a marriage in which they are no longer invested? Would she also give some thought to the notion that, when somebody has to give a reason over and above irretrievable breakdown, it leads to the conflict she is seeking to avoid?

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman, whom I deeply respect, has made a number of points and I will address particularly the point about conflict in a moment. However, may I first respond to the point about where a marriage may have—so-called—irretrievably broken down? Despite what the Secretary of State said, I think these proposals will do even less than current procedures to help to promote dialogue and potentially therefore reconciliation. Currently, each year, approximately 10,000 divorces are started and then dropped. Many couples do give their marriage another chance. However, these proposals—in effect, promoting unilateral divorce on demand simply by serving a notice on the other person that the marriage has broken down, without having to give any reason at all and without the spouse being able to contest this should they want to—will, I believe, inhibit the dialogue that could promote reconciliation in some cases.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Fiona Bruce: It is a luxury to have the time to do so. I will give way to the hon. Lady first and then to the right hon. Gentleman.

Wera Hobhouse: The hon. Lady is very generous and we do have the luxury of a proper debate. Does she not accept that a marriage takes two and the tragedy is always when one side feels something has irretrievably broken down? It is a tragedy, but it is at the heart of why it is difficult to keep something going when one side clearly does not feel they can keep it going. For that reason, this change in the law is very welcome.

Fiona Bruce: I note what the hon. Lady says, but I am saying that we should give more support to the opportunity for dialogue and potential reconciliation—for example, through better mediation services than we currently have.

Sammy Wilson: Whether we view marriage through the prism of faith or simply as an arrangement in which people come together because they wish to be together, does the hon. Lady agree that, with no-fault divorce, the process by which a couple come to the conclusion that
the marriage has irrevocably broken down, has been made so much easier that the full extent of the considerations that ought to be taken before the marriage is broken up will not have been taken? That is why the Bill is flawed.

Fiona Bruce: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. It is that thoughtfulness that I am seeking to preserve. There is something also about the thoughtfulness that goes into preparing for the marriage ceremony, including—to pick up the point made by the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) about not all marriages being religious—secular ones. There is a thoughtfulness about that ceremony and the public commitment it entails, with the support of friends and relatives who witness it, all of which helps to strengthen the relationship and often enables people to weather the inevitable storms. I am concerned that the thoughtfulness the Bill will extract through the ending of a marriage will denude the necessity, importance or encouragement of the thoughtfulness at the start of and during the relationship.

It is deeply worrying, because at the end of the day, one of the most precious things in life that many if not most of us want is the fulfilment of a loving, enduring relationship. Is the fact that people construct a reason for applying for divorce, as the Minister mentioned, a good enough argument for abolishing altogether the requirement and the thought that has to be put into it?

I am deeply concerned that marriage rates are likely to decline further. Interestingly, that is the conclusion of research drawn on by the authors of “Finding Fault”—the paper the Government rely on heavily in promoting the Bill. The authors of “Finding Fault” choose to ignore that conclusion and instead rely on Professor Justin Wolfers’s study, which cites a 2004 piece of research on other jurisdictions where no-fault divorce has been introduced. They do not quote it, but I shall. The research showed that “the marriage rate declined by about 3 to 4 percent following the adoption of unilateral divorce laws.”

The likelihood of remarriage is also affected by such laws; according to the research, “unilateral divorce led remarriage rates of divorcees to decline by around one-third to one-half.”

Jim Shannon: I intervene to back up the hon. Lady’s argument. To make marriage a relationship that one can exit unilaterally simply by saying that one wants out will fundamentally change its nature and undermine the ability of marriage to bring stability to the lives of adults and children. Does she agree that the ethic of marriage embodied in the Bill prioritises individual freedom and liberty, rather than encouraging, as it should, self-giving, sacrifice and commitment?

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman makes a profound point. Without going too far into philosophy and theology, I will say there is something to be gained from the giving as well as the receiving within a marriage. It is difficult to understand why the Government are proposing legislation that will make the fulfilment that can be obtained from that harder to achieve. It is already hard enough for so many young people, with few role models of sustained relationships to look at and with media misconceptions about relationships so prevalent today.

What is truly tragic is that it is the poorest in our society who are not now marrying in great numbers and who are the least resilient when relationships break down. Marriage brings stability. Just one in 11 married couples split before a child’s fifth birthday, compared with one in three unmarried couples. As the Minister says, children benefit from stability. The well-off are still marrying and still benefiting. That is not social justice. Sadly, as the Minister acknowledged, many families will be affected by an immediate increase in divorce rates that even proponents of the Bill accept will inevitably follow the Bill’s passage, as those who currently wait for two or five years opt for a quickie divorce instead. I understand that it could take a decade for the spike to dissipate to our normal rates of divorce—already the highest in Europe—and the heaviest effect will be felt by the children involved.

It is especially concerning that the Government are ignoring the result of their own public consultation on the matter. Of those who responded, 80% did not agree with the proposal to replace the five current grounds for divorce with a six-month notification process; a mere 17% were in favour of the proposals in the Bill. No less than 83% wanted the Government to retain the individual’s right to contest a divorce; only 15% said that that right should be removed. What reason did the Government give for ignoring those responses? It was that the respondents who objected to the proposals did so as a result of a campaign to raise public awareness about the proposals. That is laughable—not just laughable, but deeply worrying. Why should the public bother responding to consultations if they are ignored in this way? Are we in this place not already being ridiculed for ignoring the public’s view on another grave matter?

The tragedy is that the premise on which the Bill is founded—reducing conflict—is a false one. Solicitors specialising in family law tell me that no-fault divorce is no silver bullet to reduce family conflict and acrimony. They say the real source of contention between spouses and ex-spouses is finance and the division of assets. The Bill will do nothing to change that. Indeed, the Government are missing an opportunity in the Bill to tackle some grave injustices in that regard, while creating others. One solicitor who has specialised in family law day in, day out for 25 years says of the Bill: “It will in my view lead to more not less divorce.”

The solicitor continues: “I have dealt with a lot of cases these last few years where people have done the divorce themselves” and says the Government are “trying to make it easier to exclude lawyers—but” the divorcing couples “have not sorted out the finances correctly, either by not getting a clean break order (therefore the former spouse can still make a claim years after the divorce) or not sorting finances at all, as a dominant party (usually man) puts pressure on the other to do nothing—often causing that other to be in financial hardship.”

He goes on: “The issue is and always has been finance in divorce, not the divorce process. No-fault divorce will not solve anything in my view. Instead they should look at ways to provide financial equality in the process of sorting divorce and finances, as it is still often one party who is more able to pay for good legal support. The Financial Services order is supposed to allow the other to
apply to court forcing the financially stronger to fund both lawyers but in reality the process is...difficult...restricted and doesn’t work.”

It seems the Government have missed the opportunity to address that problem, too.

Sadly, despite the Minister’s words, the proposals will do even less than the current procedures to promote dialogue and potential reconciliation. As I approach the end of my speech—as I said, it is a luxury to be able to speak at the desired length and to take as many interventions as people wish to make—I will quote from the explanatory notes on the Bill. They say:

“The Government’s policy intention behind the reformed law is that the decision to divorce should be a considered one, and that separating couples should not be put through legal requirements which do not serve their or the state’s interests and which can lead to ongoing conflict and poorer outcomes for children.”

Jim Shannon: Is the hon. Lady aware of a story in the press a month or so ago about a father and mother who were divorcing, and when it came to deciding who would have responsibility for the children, neither parent wanted it? Is she as dismayed as I was that neither the father of the children nor their mother wanted anything to do with them? Does that not disappoint her? It disappoints me.

Fiona Bruce: That is heartrending. Words fail me.

Returning to the more prosaic words of the explanatory notes, I remind colleagues of the statements that “the decision to divorce should be a considered one”, and that “couples should not be put through legal requirements which do not serve their or the state’s interests and which can lead to ongoing conflict and poorer outcomes for children.”

In my view, this Bill fails on every one of those counts. As I have explained, it will make divorce not a more considered decision but a less considered one, with no reason needing to be explained. It will do nothing to reduce the ongoing conflict that arises from financial disputes. It will increase divorce rates and reduce marriage rates.

The very recent Centre for Social Justice report on families leads me to the inevitable conclusion that the Bill will not serve the state’s interests and that it will lead to poorer outcomes for children. Time prohibits me from quoting much of the excellent and well-evidenced research in the report, but I will simply quote from it as follows. It concludes:

“Marriage leads to better life outcomes for children. Marriage promotes stability. Children of married parents are more likely to achieve at school, have better mental health, less likely to use drink and drugs and less likely to get involved in offending behaviour.”

As I said at the outset, there are always exceptions to every such statement, and I repeat that many single and separated parents do an excellent job. Having said that, however, divorce can be deeply hurtful and costly for those involved, for their children and for wider society. It is already at epidemic levels. The Bill will make it worse. The Government should be actively seeking to strengthen family relationships, not weaken them.

2.10 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker—Mr Deputy Speaker. That was, perhaps, a Freudian slip.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Move on!

Robert Neill: It is a pleasure, as always, to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). She made a heartfelt speech. I know that this is a matter on which she feels very strongly. It is an issue to which I myself have given considerable thought. It is sensitive and important, particularly for those who have a faith and regard marriage as a sacrament as well as a legal contract.

I look at this issue from the point of view of someone who happens to be a practising Anglican, as someone who has for 25 or 30 years been a practising lawyer—not predominantly in the field of family law, although I did practise family law to some degree in my earlier days—as someone who served as a councillor in a local authority, and as someone who has the honour of serving as Chair of the Justice Committee. I have had the chance to see the issue from a number of points of view and I have come to a different conclusion from my hon. Friend. I do not say that with any disrespect for the strength or genuineness of her feeling; I am just persuaded, on balance, that the Secretary of State is right and that the evidence points quite clearly to this being an appropriate and necessary reform.

As Chair of the Justice Committee, I have had the opportunity to engage with leading members of the judiciary, particularly, in this context, with those of the family division. It is the overwhelming view of family practitioners, including solicitors, barristers and senior judges, that the current arrangements, which require fault to be used as a proof of irretrievable breakdown, do not work satisfactorily and do not achieve what is ultimately the necessary objective of enabling people whose marriage has sadly broken down irretrievably—I suspect that none of us want that to happen when we embark on a marriage, but it does happen in some cases—to leave their marriage with a measure of dignity and to do so in a way that enables the important issue of financial fairness to be resolved, and, in the case of children, to enable civilised and caring arrangements to be made for them and their children. That, ultimately, must be the chief and principal objective.

Julian Knight: My hon. Friend gets to the heart of the matter: the fault aspect. What persuades me is that the requirement to assign fault can itself be a polluting element within the divorce or separation process. It may actually make what could be a more amicable separation more poisonous and more difficult when it comes to discussing other matters such as finance.

Robert Neill: I agree and that was certainly my experience as a lawyer. That is the experience of the majority of practitioners and the majority of the judiciary to whom I have spoken. When I started my practice at the Bar, the Divorce Reform Act 1969 was comparatively recent and the law was developing. There was an issue then and it has remained a constant. There is an underlying risk of tension and antagonism in the course of family proceedings, which spill on from the divorce itself into the proceedings thereafter, which, for the future, are
very often much more important. I very much take on board the point my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton makes about the value to society of stable marriages—indeed, the value to society of stable relationships of any kind. If I thought that the Bill would seriously harm that, I would take a different view towards it, but I do not think that and the evidence does not suggest that that is the case either.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I strongly support the thrust of the hon. Gentleman’s argument and I strongly support the Bill. I am very sorry I was not here for the earlier speeches. All the representations I have received from the legal profession support the Bill. I was a practising solicitor, but I did not do matrimonial law. My daughter does and she strongly supports the Bill. I think it is overdue and I will be strongly supporting it today.

Robert Neill: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I have to say that from my own limited experience and from speaking to those who continue to practise, no area of law is perhaps more sensitive or more emotionally draining—not just for the parties, but for the practitioners who seek to advise them and the judiciary who sit on these cases—than family work. It is inevitably stressful and we ought to have a system that reduces stress, rather than makes it greater.

The evidence from other comparators also shows that the Bill is an advantage to the overall social objective and that some concerns are not justified. It is suggested that the Bill imports into law a concept of unilateral no-fault divorce. That is not strictly correct. It is currently the case that after two years of separation with consent or five years without consent, divorce can be granted without any allegation of misconduct. The truth is, as I will refer to later and as Sir Paul Coleridge, the chairman of the Marriage Foundation and a former High Court judge of the family division himself observed, that that does not keep up to date with the way people now change and move on with their lives. It certainly does not reflect my experience, and the experience of most people, that the divorce petition comes at the end of the breakdown of a relationship, not the beginning.

Time and again, I have seen that with people who come to my surgery, with court cases I have been involved in or observed, and, as most of us have, with friends and acquaintances—people we know—where it has been the end of a sad and painful process that ultimately leads to the conclusion that the marriage is no longer sustainable and they want to move on. We ought to help them to be able to do that. My experience has certainly been that divorce is not undertaken lightly and I think the Secretary of State is right to recognise that.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman feel that the sacrament of marriage is made stronger or weaker by the passing of the Bill?

Robert Neill: As an Anglo-Catholic, I take the hon. Gentleman’s point about the sacrament strongly, but I do not believe, in societal terms, that it makes very much difference. In truth, many marriages are not in entered into in a religious context. The weight that is placed on the sacrament, even with those of faith, may vary. Perhaps it should not, but I think that is the reality. For those for whom it is important, it will be a difficult personal decision, as it has been for friends of mine for whom the end of their marriage was very difficult indeed. None the less, they thought it was appropriate to recognise what had happened and to make a break. It is a profound point for those of faith, but I do not think it is an argument against the Bill, as I think the hon. Gentleman agrees.

We also have to bear in mind the suggestion that there might be manipulation of a vulnerable party. I take that seriously and it has been raised by a couple of constituents of mine who think carefully and closely about these matters. However, my experience and all the evidence seem to suggest that the greatest risk of manipulation and pressure being put on a vulnerable party is during the period when the marriage has broken down and people have to wait perhaps for two or five years, especially if, as hon. Members have observed, they are obliged for financial or childcare reasons—or a mixture of both—to continue to live under the same roof. That is the point at which the vulnerable party is often most at risk.

It is perhaps significant that the study, “Finding Fault?”, points out that, at the moment, the system is to some degree “manipulated” by fault being used as a ground to speed up divorce. It is not that the marriage has not broken down, but that it is quicker for someone to get divorced if they allege fault than if they wait two or five years. That can have perverse consequences: people have to say hurtful things against the party with whom they are still living and attempting to bring up their children, so that they can speed up the divorce that they both know is inevitable. I cannot see how that benefits society or, for those of us to whom this is important, a Christian ethos for that family.

Julian Knight: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct and makes another persuasive point, because it means that a divorce is based on a lie. Frankly, we should not have any lies in a legal process. Years ago, I remember reading Evelyn Waugh’s “A Handful of Dust”, in which a character has to abscond to Brighton, seemingly with a woman, to provide the grounds for a divorce. This stuff is from 40 or 50 years ago and is nonsense. We need a bit more honesty in the process.

Robert Neill: I take my hon. Friend’s point. My pupil master, when I started at the Bar, had practised in divorce work under precisely those arrangements prior to the 1969 Act. They used to get what was called “ordinary hotel evidence”, which was an affidavit from the chambermaid or the waiter, who happened to have taken breakfast in bed to a couple. That was a pretty demeaning way of having to go through a legal process and it was rightly got rid of, but at the time, people genuinely thought that that might undermine marriage. It did not, of course, but that is the sort of thing that we have all recognised we need to move on from, and this is just a further adjustment.

There is another serious point about the inability of a party who feels aggrieved by the behaviour of their husband or spouse, who might have left them, to have the ground on the record. With respect, that misunderstands the legal test, which has always been, and continues to be, that the marriage has irretrievably broken down. That is not changed by the Bill. The question of behaviour and conduct is relevant only as one of the facts that is relied upon to support the ground for divorce, which is the irretrievable breakdown of the marriage. Moving to
a single approach to that—the service of the petition, or the application—simplifies that and does not change the legal test.

Although it is tempting to think that an aggrieved party can get their hurt and concern on the record, it is not relevant as a matter of law because there is no causal connection between the conduct and the ground for the dissolution of marriage, and there never has been since the 1969 Act came into force. It also has the detrimental effect of creating a much more antagonistic attitude, because, first, there is good evidence that people game the system and will exaggerate behaviour to speed up the divorce, and secondly, this clouds the subsequent relationship as parties work out the consequences of the breakdown for finance and families.

It is important that the financial protections for a vulnerable party are specifically preserved under paragraph 10 of the schedule to the Bill, which maintains the existing arrangements. For those concerned about this, it is worth noting that in making a determination on financial arrangements,

“the court must consider all the circumstances including...the age, health, conduct, earning capacity, financial resources and financial obligations of each of the parties to the marriage”.

The suggestion that the change in any way undermines the protection for a vulnerable spouse during a divorce is simply not borne out by that measure, which preserves in the Bill exactly the same test that we have in the current law. I hope that that reassures people who are understandably concerned about that point.

That leads me to my final point, which my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) rightly raised: we cannot really justify a legal process that encourages people to be untruthful. That is what is happening and what has been attested to by the judiciary at the highest level. The late, much missed Sir Nicholas Wall, the former president of the family division, spoke on this during his tenure in office. His successor, Sir James Munby, one of the most experienced family division judges of his time, has spoken very bluntly about a system that involved hypocrisy and a “lack of intellectual honesty”. To go back to my hon. Friend’s point, Sir James referred to the “‘hotel divorce’ charades” that had been played out in the past. If there is collusion, it is the collusion that is sometimes needed by parties to invent conduct to speed up the divorce rather than waiting two or five years. Somebody may, for whatever reason—because the marriage has been breaking down for a long time—already have a new partner and there may be a new family on the way. One may or may not approve of that, but it is a reality of the world, and we have to have a justice system that recognises it and enables the best outcomes for that world rather than creating an obstacle.

Lady Hale, the president of the Supreme Court, said that the system is misleading because, as she put it, the “fact used as the peg on which to hang the divorce petition may not bear any relationship to the real reason why the marriage broke down”.

If we are going to tackle marriage breakdown, as I believe we should, we should put the emphasis and resource into preventing much earlier to prevent the breakdown and not to involve a charade, in some cases, at the end of the divorce arrangements. I agree very much with the observations on that from my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris), who is not in her place. I would also make the case that if there is an area where funding can be made available to restore elements of legal aid, compelling evidence to the Justice Committee has suggested that early advice on family matters should perhaps be the highest priority for its use. I know that the Secretary of State is someone who will be driven by the evidence when he considers those matters.

The person who perhaps clinches it for me—this is important because of his background—is Sir Paul Coleridge, to whom I have already referred. For many years, he was a family division judge, who practised throughout his professional career in family division work. He is also a practising Christian. Against that dual background, he has come to the view that the law requires reform and that the removal of the fault requirement would be a positive benefit and an advantage. He supports the change on that basis. He said that nowadays, most regard the delays under the current system as

“an intolerable block on their ability to move on with their lives. So to get around the delay they invent allegations to satisfy the court and enable it to turn a blind eye to what is really going on.”

Sir Paul also tackles the issue of divorce rates. He says:

“Since 1970 the divorce rate has fluctuated”—he practised for a great deal of that time—

“For some periods it has gone up and for other periods, including now, it has dropped. There is simply no discernible connection between the type of divorce process and the rate of family breakdown. The two are unconnected.” I have been driven by the evidence to agree with him. I hope that we make much more effort to deal with family breakdown, but changing the process is not going alter that situation.

Sir Paul also says:

“We now have a system that drives people to lie to the court if they are not prepared to wait for two years or longer. That is wrong.”

That must be right. He ended what I think was a very thoughtful piece with the following remark:

“An intelligent process to end unsustainable marriage is good for the reinvigoration of the most important social arrangement yet devised for mankind.”

That is a broad and Christian view of the matter, and I commend it to the House. It is the reason I support the Bill.

2.30 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): This debate has seen considered and valuable contributions. There have been many points of agreement across the House—and obviously some differences.

I thank all Members who participated, starting with the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris), who is not in her place. She talked about the importance of marriage while recognising the challenges, issues and realities when people get married and things go wrong. She referred to the 50:50 rule for dividing property, about which there is some misunderstanding. As I understand it, from the many years I studied family law, the 50:50 rule applies to people with long-lasting marriages—30 or 40 years—and maybe several children. Often with short marriages, the rule does not apply. The crux of her argument, however, was that marriage is important but that things can go wrong.
The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) talked about the importance of the Bill and why the law needs to change.

I thank the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who earnestly talked about the importance and stability of marriage for people and children. I know she holds these views very dearly, as do many across the country and the House. I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his many contributions in the form of interventions.

Finally, I cannot finish without mentioning the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee, who, with all his different hats on, gave a very considered speech about why the Bill is necessary. He made the particularly important point that many people were having to exaggerate, lie or invent fault to be able to expedite a divorce. We should not be making our citizens do these things.

In an era when we better understand the complexities of human relationships and the freedom that people deserve to decide how they live their lives, it is clear to most of us that the old and outdated divorce rules need to change. That was crystallised and highlighted by the case of Owens v. Owens, to which the shadow Lord Chancellor and the Chair of the Select Committee referred. Mrs Owens asked for a decree nisi, which was not granted, even though the Supreme Court accepted that the marriage had irretrievably broken down. The law said that there had to be an attribution of fault to one of the parties, so the law as it stood did not allow the marriage to be finished. Subsequently, the then president of the family division, Sir James Munby, said that this aspect of law and procedure was based on “hypocrisy and a lack of intellectual honesty”.

The Supreme Court also said that it was not for the judiciary or the courts to change the law but for Parliament. I am pleased that Parliament is debating this and that the law will be changed for the betterment of all.

As the Nuffield Foundation put it, the reliance on fault and blame as a key pillar of divorce law is “at odds with the thrust of wider reforms in the family justice system, which have focussed on reducing conflict and promoting resolution”.

We understand that 1.7 million people currently use fault to get a divorce when fault is not the reality. Given that 90% of family lawyers represented by Resolution say that the current law makes it harder to reduce conflict between ex-partners and that 69% of the public are in favour of no-fault divorce, the time is right to change this archaic rule.

I would, however, like to raise some omissions from the Bill and to hear what the Lord Chancellor has to say. Divorce procedure is just one part of the wide tapestry of our legal system. As has been raised in debate with Ministers, this tapestry is fraying due to decisions made by their party over the past decade. The reforms we have discussed today are welcome attempts to reduce unnecessary conflict and prevent needless emotional stress for divorcing couples and their children, but in other areas of justice and family policy this does not seem to be an issue of concern for the Government.

The deep cuts to legal aid mean that the legal representation required to reach the right divorce settlement will be available only to those with the funds to pay for it. A lack of legal support makes it difficult for people to understand the intricacies of important changes such as these and therefore will reduce the positive impact of the no-fault divorce procedure, which we welcome today. Did the Lord Chancellor agree with the Law Society when it said the Government should, alongside these reforms, reintroduce legal aid for early legal advice to support divorcing couples and help them to reach the best possible settlements for themselves and their children?

Ian C. Lucas: I strongly support what my hon. Friend is saying to the Lord Chancellor. One of the major concerns I hear in my constituency surgeries is about individuals seeking advice concerning contact with children and matrimonial proceedings. It is a very emotive subject, as we heard earlier in the debate, and needs to be addressed.

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful intervention. I hope the Lord Chancellor was listening to that and to everything else we are saying on the Opposition Benches.

More could be done in the Bill to support the most-at-risk people seeking a divorce. The Bill does not remove the bar on petitioning for divorce in the first year of marriage, despite charities and campaigners pointing to the impact this will have on victims of domestic abuse. We know that big life events such as marriage or pregnancy are hotspots for abuse and controlling behaviour to begin or increase. That first year of marriage is for some not a honeymoon period but a nightmare. It is clear that in 2019 we should not be trapping people in potentially dangerous situations because of an outdated law that does not give people the agency to get themselves out. Can the Lord Chancellor explain the rationale for this omission?

Overall, we welcome the reform, but we urge the Government to put this progressive shift into the context of the wider changes required to our justice system. There is so much more to do to ensure that anyone going through a tough time, such as a divorce or other conflict, has a positive and fair experience while seeking justice. I hope that the Minister, when he responds, will deal with some of the questions we have raised. That said, this is a very welcome Bill, which is why the Opposition support it.

2.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): I am greatly encouraged by the quality of the debate that we have had today and by the broad support that the Bill has received from Members on both sides of the House. I particularly thank my hon. Friends the Members for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) and for Solihull (Julian Knight), the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) and the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for their support.

The Bill is intended to help to heal family relationships when division has become unavoidable. No one, of course, seeks such an outcome. Few stand at the altar, or before a registrar, contemplating an ending rather than a beginning—“till death do us part” remains the golden thread of marital aspirations—but such is the flawed and fragile nature of human relationships that it can never be avoided altogether.

I know that all Members have families’ interests at heart. I know, too, that we share a belief in the vital importance of the commitment that marriage and civil partnerships bring, not only to couples and their families...
but to the wider wellbeing of our society. However, I am keenly aware that we arrive at that belief on the basis of different views and experiences.

I recognise that some Members have misgivings about the Bill. I should confess, as a Catholic myself, that when the Secretary of State presented me with it six weeks ago, I took rather a large gulp. What could I, a good Catholic boy, do with a divorce reform Bill? But the more I studied the Bill and looked at it carefully, the more I saw a civil and human measure that sought to lessen acrimony and create space for reflection. The misgivings that people have, however, are no less a part of the debate, and I am grateful to the Members who have voiced their concern as well as those who have expressed their support.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Paul Maynard: I will happily do so, briefly.

Karl Turner: I am very grateful to the Minister, not least because I have only just come into the Chamber.

I congratulate the Government on introducing this incredibly important Bill. I also pay tribute to Philip Marshall QC, my colleague at the Bar, who has campaigned on the issue of no-fault divorce for many years. Does the Minister agree, however, that we must not only pass this important Bill, but reintroduce legal aid so that couples who are considering divorce can be advised by solicitors at an early stage? That saves a lot of money in the long run, and it is much better for the entire family.

Paul Maynard: I may well deal with that point briefly later in my speech.

It is worth pointing out that the breakdown of a marriage and the legal process of divorce that comes after it are two very different things. There was a time when the only legal exit from a marriage demanded an act of adultery, but that never stood in the way of anyone taking, including, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, the chair of the Marriage Foundation, Sir Paul Coleridge. The Bill will not, in my view, make divorce more common. It will not make divorce any easier, and it will certainly not make divorce any quicker: the 26-week period will remain in place. However, it may make divorce less acrimonious, and for that reason alone I think it is a worthwhile Bill on which to embark. Divorce and dissolution will happen regardless of how the legal processes effecting them operate, because the irretrievable breakdown of some marriages and civil partnerships is, unfortunately, inevitable. The Bill deals with that reality with the minimum of acrimony by creating the conditions that will allow people to move forward and agree arrangements for the future in an orderly and constructive way, and for that reason I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

DIVORCE, DISSOLUTION AND SEPARATION BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill: Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.
Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 4 July 2019.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Rebecca Harris.) Question agreed to.

DIVORCE, DISSOLUTION AND SEPARATION BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Lord Chancellor or the Secretary of State.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

VALUE ADDED TAX

That the Value Added Tax (Reduced Rate) (Energy-Saving Materials) Order 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 958), dated 21 May 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 21 May, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

The House divided: Ayes 247, Noes 209.

Division No. 424 [2.48 pm]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Barclay, Rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Rh Richard
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Breerston, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, Rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, Rh Nigel
Donelan, Michelle
Dowden, Oliver
Doye-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duguid, David
Duncan, Rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, Rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, Rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Evennett, Rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, Rh Nick
Gillian, Rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Rh Mr Robert
Gove, Rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Gray, James
Green, Chris
Green, Rh Damian
Grieve, Rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hall, Rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Rh Matt
Hands, Rh Greg
Harper, Rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harriss, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hayes, Rh Sir John
Heald, Rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hinds, Rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Rh Mr Philip
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, Rh Mr Nick
James, Margot
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keeghan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Leadsom, Rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Letwin, Rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, Rh Brandon
Liddington, Rh Mr David
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, Rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, Rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, Rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, Rh Anne
Mitchell, Rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Rh Penny
Morgan, Rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, Rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, Rh Priti
Paterson, Rh Mr Owen
Penning, Rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Benn, Hilary
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Amesbury, Mike
Allen, Heidi
Cooper, Julie
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gildon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Heron, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hobhouse, Wera
Hollem, Kate
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Laird, Lesley
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
Mclnnes, Liz
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Monaghan, Carol
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Owen, Albert
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Pickford, Laura
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma (Proxy vote cast by Mr Pat McFadden)
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruan, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobey, Alex
Soubry, rh Anna
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, rh Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Wishart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Woodcock, John
Wragg, Mr William
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeiichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Noes:**

Thangam Debbonaire and Jeff Smith

**Question accordingly agreed to.**
Petition
Closure of Heywood Crown Post Office

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) is very consumed by the graphic image on her iPad, but the more immediate matter is that of her petition.

3.3 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I do apologise, Mr Speaker. I was distracted.

I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Heywood and Middleton. The petition notes the vital services that Crown post offices provide to their communities, particularly in towns such as ours with only one surviving bank branch and where the post office provides vital access to financial services.

The Post Office proposes to move Heywood post office from its current location and to franchise the service to an as-yet unopened retail unit in a currently vacant shop in the town, leading to the fears that, should the new shop fail, the post office branch will also be lost. This petition, which has received 1,450 signatures, expresses concern that this move will adversely affect jobs, quality of service and accessibility, and will have a negative impact on Heywood town centre.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Heywood and Middleton, Declares that Crown Post Offices provide a vital service to their communities; further that Post Office Limited propose to close Heywood Post Office and to franchise the service to a local retailer; further that there is concern that this will adversely affect jobs, quality of service, and accessibility, and have a negative impact on Heywood town centre; and further that a local paper petition and online petition on this matter has received signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons should the new shop fail, the post office branch will also be lost. This petition, which has received 1,450 signatures, expresses concern that this move will adversely affect jobs, quality of service and accessibility, and will have a negative impact on Heywood town centre.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Heywood and Middleton, Declares that Crown Post Offices provide a vital service to their communities; further that Post Office Limited propose to close Heywood Post Office and to franchise the service to a local retailer; further that there is concern that this will adversely affect jobs, quality of service, and accessibility, and have a negative impact on Heywood town centre; and further that a local paper petition and online petition on this matter has received signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons

And thepetitioners remain, etc.

[P002479]
I support and welcome the guidance, but therein lies a problem. In Birmingham, there are 258 primary schools. Thirty-nine are in my constituency. Some are local authority-maintained, others are part of academy chains, but that is pretty irrelevant in the context of this debate. In many of the 256—not 258—schools, headteachers introduce pupils to what is in the Equality Act in ways that they believe meet the requirements of the guidance. Recognising that some of the nine characteristics may pose challenges for communities who have more conservative social attitudes, and taking into account the demographic composition of their own school, they have chosen to engage with their parents to explain the nine characteristics. They hold workshops about the individual characteristics and ongoing consultations with parents, showing them the type of materials that the school proposes to use, and they engage with parents about what age is most appropriate for the various characteristics to be introduced to pupils.

That seems eminently sensible to me, and it seems to be in line with references in the Children and Social Work Act and the draft guidance, which refers to “age appropriateness” in the context of religious background and the need for ongoing consultations. I unreservedly support and applaud those 256 headteachers, and parents are overwhelmingly supportive because there has been no appreciable backlash by parents at those schools.

At two schools, however, there has been a major reaction among parents that has become increasingly bitter and polarised. One of the schools is in my constituency, and the other is in an adjoining constituency bitter and polarised. One of the schools is in an area that is predominantly Muslim, and the other is in an area that is predominantly Hindu. The common theme that links these two schools is that parents at both schools were excluded entirely from the process, although the Equality Act is not an exam subject, for example, like English or mathematics.

I was asked about the reaction of parents in one of the schools. The headteacher made it plain that no consultation was going to take place and no collective meetings with parents were held. She said that she or her deputy would meet individual parents on a “one-to-one” basis to listen to their concerns, but when such meetings took place the same answer was always given—namely, that the school was only carrying out the Equality Act.

Ms Angela Eagle: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Godsiff: I have already given way on a couple of occasions. [Interruption.] Well, the hon. Member will have plenty of time to make a speech, because this debate could go on until 7 o’clock.

Understandably, some parents were unhappy with the response and felt that the school had no regard for their concerns.

Ms Angela Eagle: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Godsiff: I have made it clear that I am not giving way.

The parents therefore had their own meeting and, after asking the brother of one parent who is in the property business and is well educated and articulate, to be the co-ordinator, they began their protests, on which I will touch in a minute. The common theme that links these two schools is that parents at both schools were neither consulted nor involved in how the nine protected characteristics were to be imparted to children. Parents were excluded entirely from the process, although the Equality Act is not an exam subject, for example, like English or mathematics.

All schools call regular meetings of parents when they want to inform them about important issues. It is part and parcel of school life for regular meetings to take place with parents, but no meetings with parents were held at the two schools.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Will he give way?

Mr Godsiff: I will not.

The question that those who have sought to characterise the disputes at both schools as a clash of cultures should be asking is, what have the headteachers and their staff at 256 primary schools got right with the support of their parents, while in two schools it seems to have gone very wrong? I turn briefly to the protests outside the school in my constituency.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the hon. Member give way?

Mr Godsiff: No, I will not.

The school is in an area with a very large Muslim population. Nearly all the children who attend are from Muslim families. When the protests began outside the school in my constituency I did not take sides or make public comment. I took the view that parents of young children do not protest against their child’s school unless they have some grievance. Parents protest against many things, including the Government and the local council, but to protest against their child’s school is rare, and there has to be some particular reason for it.
I went and saw the headteacher. I asked questions and put suggestions to her. I have deliberately not put her responses in the public domain, because I believe that if I had done so it would have inflamed the situation, but I did tell the leader of the council what they were. Three officials from the Department for Education were present, and they took detailed notes, which presumably were conveyed to the Minister. I have known the headteacher for a number of years, and I respect her academic achievements at the school, which follow the excellent work initiated by the previous head, Anne Button, at the school. Before leaving the meeting with the headteacher, I did say that if she or her staff felt threatened by the protests outside the school then she should apply for a restraint injunction to get them moved elsewhere, and I explained to her the procedure for doing that. No such injunction was sought until more than a month later.

I then invited, through my Muslim assistant, the leaders of the protest to come and see me at my house. I was shown copies of letters written to the headteacher expressing their concerns, which were not replied to. I saw statements from parents saying that the headteacher would not have a parents meeting, but would talk to parents only on a one-to-one basis. I saw statements saying that, when such meetings took place, the individual parents were told that what the school was doing was the Equality Act. I saw letters and statements that, time and again, emphasised that the protesters—mostly young mothers—were not seeking to undermine the Equality Act. I saw letters and statements from parents saying that the headteacher for many years, and I respect her.
Mr Godsiff: I do not have children attending schools in Birmingham. My children are grown up, and I have a grandchild who is not in Birmingham. It is not for me to pass judgment on the concerns of parents.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Godsiff: I will not give way anymore. If parents say they have concerns, and if they have sought to raise those concerns with the headteacher and have not been allowed to do so, I believe it is incumbent on a Member of Parliament to articulate those concerns. That does not mean to pass judgment, but if they have concerns, they are entitled to have them addressed. So far as the parents at these two schools are concerned, there has been no engagement and no meetings, whereas 256 other schools in Birmingham are doing things differently.

What is this “homophobic hatred” that these parents are supposed to be spreading? That is massively serious. Let us look at some of the police witness statements. As I have said, the police were at every protest. These statements are not hearsay or recycled versions that have been fed to social media to feed the frenzy; they are legal daily reports by police officers who were present. They say the chants were repeated over and again, and what were those chants? “Our children, our choice.” “Listen to parents.” “Let kids be kids.” “We are not homophobic.” “Parent governor step down.” “Headteacher step down.” That is not nice for the headteacher or the parent governor, but I do not accept that as being homophobic.

Lilian Greenwood: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Godsiff: No.

Lilian Greenwood: This is on a point of information.

Mr Godsiff: No, I have given way on a lot of things.

Furthermore, the police who were present wore body cameras and were asked by the organisers of the protest to check whether any placards contravened the law. I understand that only one placard was deemed inappropriate at an early protest, and the people carrying the banner were told not to bring it again.

I make these points because I believe the parents have not had a fair chance to put their side of the dispute. They have been branded professional agitators, accused by a councillor of not having children at the school, called a “mob” and told that they are spewing out homophobic hatred. These mothers have been smeared, and the fact that the local Member of Parliament, having weighed up the evidence and listened to all sides of the argument, came to the conclusion that the people protesting had just reason to complain and protest merely added a target for the witch hunters and increased the lust for a sacrifice, irrespective of the facts.

I return to a couple of specific questions, which I supplied to the Minister before the debate. I ask these questions because I suspect many primary school headteachers watching this debate, like their colleagues in Birmingham, want to know whether they are inadvertently contravening the law in how they impart the nine protected characteristics of the Equality Act to their pupils.

As I have said, 256 of 258 primary schools in Birmingham are, in different ways, ensuring that their pupils know when they transfer to secondary school that any form of discrimination, victimisation, prejudice or bullying of other people who fall within the nine protected characteristics is unlawful. They do this by engaging with parents to explain the nine characteristics by having workshops about the individual characteristics, by having ongoing consultations with the parents and showing them the type of material they propose to use, and by engaging with parents about what age is most appropriate for the various characteristics.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Have you read the material?

Mr Godsiff: I will come to that point in a minute. The parents want clarification. First, they want to know whether it is permissible for headteachers to partner with parents to decide how the nine protected characteristics are imparted to pupils, bearing in mind that parents cannot have any veto over which characteristics are taught. Secondly, they would like to know whether the nine protected characteristics have to be taught all together, or whether they can be spread out and imparted to pupils throughout their time in primary school, taking into account at what age the head and/or parents consider it most age-appropriate for each protected characteristic to be imparted to the children.

I ask those questions because many primary heads are looking at what has happened at the two schools where controversy has arisen and do not want to be accused of discrimination, which is of course illegal, in the way they deal with the Equality Act and the nine protected characteristics. I would be grateful for clarity from the Minister, because this will affect the relationships education provision that comes in in 2020 and that can be introduced in September 2019, which is much more specific about the terms “consultation” and “age appropriateness”.

I have no opinion on the ages at which primary school children should be introduced to the provisions of the nine protected characteristics. For example, I attended a recent meeting held by the headteachers’ union here in the Commons, in Committee Room 9. A headteacher—he may have been a deputy head—from Manchester argued forcefully that the whole “age-appropriate” concept should be scrapped completely and that children aged two should be introduced to the provisions of the protected characteristics. If the parents of the children involved are happy with that, who am I to say it should not happen? But parents, who in international law have the prime responsibility for the upbringing of their children, have to be partners with schools in the making of such decisions.

Likewise, I have no prescribed views about what teaching materials should be used. I believe that schools and parents should make the decision after proper consultation, which is what is currently happening in most schools. In respect of the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) from a sedentary position earlier, yes, I have now read most of the books that my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) has given to me. Some of them are very good—“The Little Mermaid” is particularly good, and I have just got a copy for my grandchild—but my Muslim constituents would like to talk through some of the other books with the school to understand what the concepts are. They cannot talk it through with the school if the school will not have consultation.
I regret the controversies that have arisen around the two schools in Birmingham. I believe they could have been avoided if the schools had taught the provisions of the Equality Act in different ways and taken the parents’ concerns into account. For my part, I apologise unreservedly for any offence caused to any person of whatever sexual orientation by anything I have said or written. In particular, I apologise unreservedly to members of the LGBT community in Birmingham and throughout the country for anything I may have said or written that has caused offence to them. I assure you, Mr Speaker, that it most certainly was not intended.

3.40 pm

**Jack Dromey** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I had not intended to speak, but decided to do so in the light of what I have heard today. Let me first say that I come from an Irish Catholic background, so I know from experience what cultural conservatism can be like. I know some of the terrible things that happened in the Irish Catholic culture, going back over many years—at its most obscene, the Magdalene laundries. But ultimately that changed because brave Catholics challenged their own culture. Ireland is now a tolerant country with a gay Prime Minister; that would have been thought unachievable and impossible in decades gone by.

With regards to what has been happening in Birmingham, I am the first to respect cultures, including cultural conservatism. I believe that there should be engagement without hesitation, but I do not accept what has been said today—that there has been no engagement by the head, Sarah Hewitt-Clarkson, with parents. I think there has been engagement, but I also think we need to distinguish between two things: on the one hand, there are those who feel uneasy; but on the other hand, there are those who have been deliberately stirring this up.

This is not just happening in Birmingham. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) referred to what is happening in Cardiff, and we are seeing a network develop in a number of cities around the country. To be frank, that network is absolutely wrong because, as a very good Muslim friend and constituent of mine said, “Jack, if we go down the path of dividing and demonising, or in any way suggesting that we would ever do that, our country and our city are a poorer country and city.” I never want to see the day when we in any way feed the view that there is something wrong about two men living together or two women living together.

I remember a man who came out to me in the old Transport and General Workers Union many years ago. He was desperate, in tears and afraid to speak out. But now Birmingham is the city of pride—pride with a small p and Pride with a big P. We have tens of thousands marching in Birmingham, celebrating our diversity; our rich cultural diversity, our rich ethnic diversity and our diversity in terms of sexual preference. Long may that always be the case.

I stress again that I absolutely understand that one has to engage, listen and explain, but if there are forces on the march the kind of which we thought were history in our country, we have to say, “No, you’re wrong.”

**Several hon. Members rose—**

Mr Speaker: I hope it is reassuring to colleagues to know that you will all get in; don’t worry.
views in religions about the legitimacy of LGBT rights. It is only on the far extremist fundamentalist fringes that we get the kind of hostility that is being shown on some of the Facebook groups of these campaigners. I would like to know a lot more about the network that is behind this, because it is a deliberate, reactionary attempt to take back progressive advance and decency for children.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; she is speaking incredibly movingly. As somebody who lives closer, I think, than anybody else to the schools particularly in question and lives in the community amongst the people who go to that school, I want it to be said on the record that she is absolutely right in what she says about this being on the fringes, because I do not recognise the Muslim community that I live amongst as being part of that mob.

Ms Eagle: I thank my hon. Friend. She has a great deal of experience in this, not least because she lives amongst the community that is being portrayed in such a way.

We must not give in to this kind of organised campaign, which is effectively being organised from the outside. The Equality Act—which was passed in 2010, so has been on the statute book for nine years—actually says that schools have a duty not to discriminate against LGBT people. That includes discrimination against pupils who are LGBT—to be fair, that would probably not be very apparent at primary school level—pupils who are perceived to be LGBT; and pupils with LGBT parents, carers and family members. These are the diverse parents that we have in our communities now, and the children that they send to school, or the potentially LGBT children in school, do not deserve to be treated with anything other than equality and respect. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] All that is meant by the teaching on relationship and sex education is that this diversity needs to be represented. It is not propaganda and it is not trying to “turn people gay”, which I have heard mentioned—I am not sure it is possible to turn people gay; there certainly would be no gay people if you had to be taught about being gay to be gay. [Laughter.] What we are talking about is respect, their rights, their right to be equally welcome in school, not to bebullied or treated as if they are lesser, not to be made to feel that somehow there is something wrong with them, not to feel suicidal, not to be called “faggot” or “lezzer” in school and not to be humiliated. That is what we are talking about when it comes to relationship and sex education—plain, simple decency.

3.52 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour and a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), who made a very personal and passionate speech with which I wholeheartedly agree.

I was sorry that we even had to come here today to take part in this debate. I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff). I listened to his apology. I am always more than ready to listen to an apology, but much of his speech contradicted that, and indeed contradicted what he had said on that recording, which I have viewed.

I am glad that my hon. Friend has now read the books—at least some of them—and that my office was able to help with that. I find it unfortunate that he made comments and waded into this debate without having looked at the books, as they are at the heart of the issue. I have looked at the books; I have looked at the material that causes so much alleged offence, but there is nothing that I think could cause offence. In fact, along with many other inclusive educational and teaching materials and books, they teach about all the range of difference that we have in our lives, and they certainly do not get into the details of sex or anything biological; we are talking about things that are age-appropriate, that are directed at younger children. It is about understanding the world around them—that there may be children in their class who are Muslim or Jewish or black or white or a woman or a man or gay or lesbian or trans. This is the world we live in. This is the reality we live in. This is the country we live in.

I live in just as diverse a community as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green. I am pleased to say that at the weekend I went to the Grangegown festival in my community, and was able to visit the Pride Cymru stall, right in the heart of one of my largest Muslim communities; and there, mixing in that community, were the LGBT community different churches, different mosques, different Hindu temples, and different community organisations. They were all just getting on with their lives and making a difference to their community, supporting young people and running diversionary activities for those who might be caught up in knife crime, or other difficulties, in the community, and supporting each other, and working together as a community. They were not interested in dividing each other over the nature of their sexual identity, their sex, their race or their religion; they were all working and living together, so there is a different way we can live.

I have watched the scenes in Birmingham with horror. I believe that people have been whipped up into a sense of true moral panic about some problem that does not actually exist. It has become extremely unpleasant and extremely divisive, as we have seen, and that is spreading, as has been said, to other parts of the UK.

I want to draw the hon. Gentleman’s attention, and that of the House, to some of those who have been involved in instigating some of the language, protests and division we have seen. At least two of them have come down to Cardiff recently, one of whom, thankfully, was spotted and a talk was cancelled. A woman called Dr Godfrey-Faussett—in fact, she is being investigated by the British Psychological Society for her comments—said in a YouTube clip last year that there was a “totalitarian endeavour to indoctrinate our children in sexual ideologies.” She runs the so-called Stop RSE campaign, and has talked about a “war on morality”.

Another group is the so-called Islamic RSE, run by a gentleman called Ustadh Torofdar. I have seen for myself the guide—the handy guide—that can be handed to parents on how they should in effect infiltrate governing bodies or parent teacher associations, and on how they should influence activities in their schools by alleging a whole set of things that are going on in their schools—or, of course, no evidence is presented—and suggesting that parents may want to get involved and raise these concerns. It gives form letters to be sent to MPs, the media and
schools, with all sorts of wild and fanciful allegations about somehow trying to corrupt young people. I will not read out the letter: I have got it, but some parts of it I just find so offensive.

I had never received a letter of this nature in my constituency ever—I have been an openly gay MP for six and a half years in an extremely diverse constituency—or any of these things until the last few months. They are originating from these groups, which are collaborating. As has been said by my hon. Friends from Birmingham, they often involve individuals who do not even have children at these schools. This is the very nature of a moral panic, and it is a very good example of one. I think we need to look at what is really going on here, rather than any actual perceived problem or issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey spoke about the legacy of section 28. I grew up in a school in south Wales, and I certainly was not out about my sexuality at the time. Like me, many LGBT people struggle with these issues for their whole life, and it can affect when they come out, how they come out and to whom they come out, as well as all sorts of other things in their life. I do not want young people living today to go through these experiences—it is just simply horrific—but I know that things can change. Last year, I went back to a Pride parade in the town where I went to school, and that would simply have been unthinkable when I was at school 25 years ago, when I saw lesbian friends of mine being called “dirty lezzers” and everything else, with all sorts of homophobic abuse going on.

That relates to a time and a place, and to a set of attitudes and a set of laws, that I thought we had got well beyond, and I am sorry to see chinks occurring in different places. We have to remember that this is in the context of a wider debate, with deeply concerning comments being made, including, I am sorry to say, by some of the candidates for the Conservative leadership and, indeed, by newly elected MEP Ann Widdecombe. These are really horrific things that, quite frankly, should be from a bygone age. We have made such progress in this House on so many issues, such as marriage equality or the way we conduct ourselves here. Of course, we are the most LGBT diverse Parliament in the world, and we should be celebrating that. I very much hope that it is setting an example to young people in our country that they can be celebrating that. I very much hope that it is setting an example to young people in our country that they can be celebrating that. I very much hope that it is setting an example to young people in our country that they can be celebrating that.

We have to think about the other side of this. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green voiced concerns about the rights of parents and the rights of certain conservative religious communities, but there is no hierarchy in equality. All the protected characteristics are there alongside one another for a reason, and we should be promoting all of them, not just one, or selectively, or in certain circumstances, or only because it might not offend one constituent group or another. We have to remember that at the heart of this is the wellbeing and safeguarding of young people, including young people in the very schools the hon. Gentleman refers to.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): In 2001, in Holy Cross church in the Ardoyne district of north Belfast, there was a concentrated campaign not only against Father Aidan Troy, the priest there, but against that community. Recently, I met two girls who had been primary school pupils at the time, and they are still, 18 years later, suffering the trauma of that experience. Even if we can put aside for one moment the substantive argument, does my hon. Friend not agree that it is simply impossible and unconscionable that we allow primary school children to be subjected to this sort of concentrated mob abuse? That cannot be allowed, surely.

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree. It beggars belief that we may be creating situations that will continue to affect that cohort of children, not just at the schools we have been discussing, but plenty of others. The reason the wider LGBT community is so concerned is the signals that are sent when they see Members of Parliament and a teacher being subjected to abuse, when they see mobs outside schools and when they see the types of poster that have been displayed. It makes people feel that perhaps they cannot be who they want to be and live as they want. For young people in particular, that is a massive issue.

In this country, Stonewall was largely founded on the issue of section 28, and we will celebrate the 30-year anniversary at Pride this year. I am proud that one of the founders of Stonewall, Lisa Power, lives in my constituency and is a good friend of mine. I am deeply concerned when I look at the statistics that Stonewall has shared about mental health and the issues young people face: 84% of trans young people have deliberately harmed themselves; the figure for the LGBT community is 61%. Two in five LGBT pupils are never taught anything about LGBT issues and half of LGBT pupils in schools say there is no adult they can talk to about issues affecting them. That litany of self-harm, depression and, in the most extreme circumstances, taking one’s own life should be the concern of anyone in this country who cares about the wellbeing and safety of our young people.

Rather than focusing on some mythological and non-existent situation, we should be focusing on the actual issues that affect young people, because there will be LGBT Muslims and LGBT non-Muslims in those schools: there will be, because they are in our society. One of the saddest things is that every time I speak on these issues, I get emails, phone calls and messages, particularly from gay Muslim men, who tell me about horrific experiences they had growing up. I do not want anyone to go through that, and that is why I think it is absolutely right that the Government introduced the changes in the law, absolutely right that they carried them through and, absolutely right that this House overwhelmingly voted for them.

We heard a lot of legal references from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green, but little mention of the fact that this House—this sovereign Parliament—passed law stating that there should be LGBT-inclusive education in this country. That is what matters. It is the law. People are of course entirely free to believe and understand their scriptures and religions in any way they choose in their own private life. I might fundamentally disagree with them—I have had many scriptural arguments with fellow Christians who do not agree with my views on human sexuality—but in this country our state sets the law and the guidance. As you will remember, Mr. Speaker, I and my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) engaged in sometimes impassioned debates on equal marriage. As a gay Christian and one who believes fervently in my understanding of my own faith,
it is for me to argue with God and with fellow Christians, but the law of this land should protect all and it should protect all characteristics equally, not one over another at certain times, when certain people do not like it and a moral panic is whipped up by those from outside.

I hope that we can move on. That are many parts of this country with equally diverse religious communities and diverse understandings of life and how we should all live together. I want a country where we all live together in harmony, peace and respect for one another, not one where children and teachers are subjected to horrific protests outside their schools, and where some of the basic principles that this House has established over many years are questioned.

4.5 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). I rise to put one point to the Minister.

I welcome the fact that we are having this debate and I share my hon. Friend’s dismay at the scenes in Birmingham, but it is right that we talk about this issue and discuss the concerns that have been raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) is right to remind us that religion or belief is among the protected characteristics identified in the Equality Act 2010.

In the debate on the regulations on 20 March, I raised concerns that were being voiced, particularly by representatives of the Orthodox Jewish community. I chair the all-party group on faith and society. After the debate, I asked the Minister whether he would ensure that officials from his Department and from Ofsted attended a meeting to discuss the implementation of the regulations with representatives of a wide range of faith groups. I am very grateful to him for arranging that: the representatives came and the meeting took place.

One idea that emerged from the meeting, mentioned in a letter I copied to him, is a requirement to subject local plans for implementing the regulations in each area to consultation with the local standing advisory committee on religious education—the SACRE. I recognise that in some areas there may well be a question about the capacity of the committees to undertake such a consultation. In other areas, however, they are certainly well up for doing it. The SACRE is in most areas, I think, quite a wide and representative body that is currently focused purely on religious education. The suggestion that emerged was that its remit might be extended to take in local plans for implementing the relationships and sex education statutory instrument. I wonder whether the Minister will be able today, or separately, to respond to that specific idea, which came out of the meeting he very helpfully supported after that debate in the House.

4.7 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I represent a constituency where education is completely devolved, but I wish to enter into reflective mode for Members. I grew up in the west of Scotland in a Catholic/Presbyterian Irish Catholic household. Like many other Members with similar backgrounds, I attended a state denominational school at both primary and secondary levels. I went to a school where being heterosexual was the only way you were allowed to be. No other opportunity was permitted, so the very idea that there is any question that people are going to be “forced to be gay” does not reflect the reality of those who lived in a situation where we were told we could be nothing but straight. That is an historic reality. However, reflecting on history, times do change.

Unlike many Members on the main Opposition Benches, I represent a constituency that is profoundly un-diverse. It is profoundly white. It is also profoundly Christian: half and half between the Roman Catholic faith and the national Presbyterian Church of Scotland. We know, and I am sure many Members will know, what religious intolerance can breed. It is called the Reformation. It reminds us of the role of religion, and the separation of religion and the law. Only last year in Scotland, we celebrated 100 years of the Education (Scotland) Act 1918—the Catholic Education Act. I admit that I have only recently returned to the faith of my ancestors. I am a person of dubious faith, and anyone who says that they are fundamental in their beliefs—no matter how or who they worship—seriously needs to look at themselves and give themselves a good talking to because, without doubt, there can be no question but that you cannot fully understand the diversity of humanity around you, and especially parliamentarians who seek to understand the people they represent. I say to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) that I hope that they also reflect on the young gay men and women entering that school today, the ones who may vote for them or who may not vote for them, and how they understand this debate.

There is also the role of parents. I was brought up by a single parent. Did he make me gay? I do not think so. Did he make me like whisky? I think he did. He also made me question—

Stephen Pound: Did he support Celtic?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Well, I will leave that one. He also made me question how we defend the rights of those who are minorities—he always did. I want to reflect on my personal experience. The only reason I wanted to speak today was that I, as a Scottish constituency MP, can add something to this debate—we have heard from hon. Members from Wales who are concerned about the targeting of certain emails, and I heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) that she has received emails about this debate and how it reflects on the Scottish education system. In Scotland, we have the Scottish Government’s LGBTI Inclusive Education Working Group. It should be noted that the Roman Catholic Bishops Conference of Scotland is clear that it could never again see a situation in which a pupil leaves his school in Scotland having had prejudice-based bullying, and it fully signed up to the Scottish Government’s Inclusive Education Working Group.

If anything is to be gained from this debate, we need to reflect on the lived experience of young gay men and women entering your schools. Their parents may not like the fact that they will grow up to be gay. That is a reality. We cannot detract from it, whether they live in a closet or openly as young Christian gay people or young Muslim gay people—or Hindu, Jew or secular. We cannot enable them to go back into the closet knowing that we believe, as elected representatives,
that they should not have a place in the education system. We are not enforcing gayness on folk. That is a ridiculous proposition. We live in a majority heterosexual normative world. That is the reality. What we are really not doing to these young men and women is that we do not want them to be bullied, be prejudiced, to self-harm, to take their lives, to go into lives filled with alcohol and drugs, or to kill themselves. That is what we do not want and, if anything, we should offer them a listening ear today and not a judging one.

4.12 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I was always taught as a child, by my parents and at all the schools that I went to, not to judge somebody according to the colour of their skin, what school they went to, what accent they spoke with, whether they were a man or woman, whether they were rich or poor, or, for that matter, whether they were straight or gay. I was taught simply to judge them according to the strength of their character, which would be evinced not by the words that they used, but the things that they did in their life. I approach this debate presuming that that is what all education should be. It should be about teaching people to judge people according to the strength of their character, what they stand for and what they do with their lives, and not some part of their personality, which is almost certainly indelible and which was not acquired by—I don’t know—watching Graham Norton, passing through the aftershave department, or whatever prejudice people may have about how people come to be gay.

I have never wanted a tolerant society; I hate the idea of being tolerated. It feels like people are saying, “Oh yes, all right, if you have to—if you really have to—you can live with somebody else and love them.” I have always wanted a world and a society that was based on respect. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) is absolutely right to say that when all of us in this Chamber were growing up—a lot of people are a lot younger than me, including you, Mr Speaker—it was not a world of respect for people’s different sexualities. It was a world where people would shout “Faggot”, “Queer”, “Shirt-raiser”, “Bender”, and all these kinds of things at you.

What was particularly difficult was that you brought it into yourself—you sort of believed it—and it took a terrible struggle for many people to be able to tell another single human being. You might be thinking this other person might be gay and that they might have feelings for you, and then you suddenly find oh, my God, no, you’ve completely and utterly got it wrong, and then you end up being beaten up. Or it might be because you are terrified of what your parents might think. When I told my mother, she said she should always have known because I walked oddly. [Laughter.] You’ll all check later, won’t you? She didn’t mean it in a mean way at all; it was just the reactions people had in a different era.

I want to talk about why I am so proud of being a member of the Labour party—this is not a criticism of people who are not members of the Labour party. There was a man, Edward Carpenter, who campaigned for homosexual freedom in a generation when you got sent to prison and given seven years with hard labour for homosexuality. On his 80th birthday, every member of the Labour Cabinet in the 1920s sent him a birthday card. I feel proud of being part of a Labour movement that has always wanted to do right by people who are gay.

There is a little story of a young man in the 1920s from the Rhondda. He worked on the railways. His name was Thomas. I don’t know his surname. He was arrested in London and taken to court for soliciting—“importuning” was the word that was used at the time. There did not have to be any proof of anybody having touched anybody. The only proof that he might have been homosexual and committed an offence was that he had a powder puff in his pocket. He said it was his mother’s, but the police did not believe him, and he was carted off and charged and he went to the magistrates court. Again what I am proud of is that the local MP for the Rhondda stood character witnesses for him. This was in the 1920s.

I take enormous pride in the fact that we have tried as a movement to build through the years that sense of respect and eventually were able to change the law in many different ways. We brought in civil partnerships. Many young people who were gay throughout the 20th century thought they would never be able to live with another person, let alone be able to publicly acknowledge that they were entering into a union for life. The Conservative party then had the opportunity to bring in equal marriage as well, which is a matter of enormous pride for the whole of this Parliament. There are very few people now in this Parliament who oppose any of those measures, or adoption for gay couples or individual gays. If we go to a secondary school these days, we will see kids who are openly gay at school, and it is not a problem. Some will be camp; some will not be camp—it is not a problem. That is a source of immense joy.

But I have an immense fear, too, and this is why today’s debate really matters. I want to say in generosity, I hope, to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) that the reason this debate hurts so many of us is that we had hoped we had made progress that would never be pushed back. We have only to look at Berlin in the 1930s. It was the most liberal place in the world for gay men, and then people were sent to the concentration camps, and thousands of them died in the late 1930s and 1940s. Some of us fear that all this could be rolled back. We will fight—not physically, of course; we will do it probably with drag queens and feather boas, and all the stereotypes you can gather—and with rugby players and football players one day, please God. We will fight to make sure this is not rolled back.

Part of the fight is, of course, with religion. I say this as somebody who was ordained a priest. I hope that the former Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, now a Member of the other place, will forgive me if I remind him that two weeks after he ordained me, which involved the laying on of hands, he was asked by a newspaper what he thought about homosexuality in the Church. He said that he had never laid hands on a homosexual, and I just had to say to him, “Well, you did—the very first one you ordained, in fact.” He is now a magnificent man: he came to my civil partnership, and I have deep affection for him.

We have had this battle in the Church of England, and it is an ongoing battle in the Catholic Church. I think that there are many more open minds than there
were 15 or 20 years ago. The Pope himself has a more liberal mind on these issues, and he would be furious at the idea that Catholicism, and the name of Christ, could ever be invoked to lead to bullying or to people not valuing themselves because of their sexuality.

Incidentally, just as people cannot “catch” homosexuality, I do not think they can be cured of it. [Laughter] I know that we smile and laugh at that, but terrible pain has been brought to so many individuals by the whole gay conversation therapy theory, and I truly hope that it will never be a thing of the future.

I know that this is a difficult issue for many who are Muslim. As it happens, my constituency is not diverse at all; it is more like the constituency of the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire—

Martin Docherty-Hughes: West Dunbartonshire.

Chris Bryant: I mean the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes). I am sure that there is no segregation between the two.

In fact, despite my having been ordained, my constituency is, according to the last census, the second least religious constituency in the country, but there are people of faith among my constituents. I often speak to them, and I think that, in the main, they have found a profound generosity in recent years, but this is still a difficult issue for many Muslims. There are those who struggle to find new, liberal ways of expressing Islam in a modern world. Many Catholic Members of both this House and the other place have often voted for equality although their Church has voted in a different way, so my biggest hope is that Islam will find a way of reconciling itself with the modern era—with the things that we know, which, I would argue, our God has taught us to understand in the last 100 or 200 years about ourselves, about humanity and about human sexuality.

I hope that Muslims will be campaigning outside all those schools to make sure that every child knows that sometimes there are two daddies and sometimes there are two mummies. They may not be your parents, but they may be the parents of someone else in the family or someone else in the school, and you should not spit at them, and you should not denigrate them, and you should not laugh at them, and you should not call them names, and you should not bully them.

In the end—and here I use a religious term again—equality is a seamless garment. The tunic worn by Christ on the cross was a seamless garment, which is why the soldiers could not tear it apart when He was taken down from the cross. The equality that we demand for people regardless of their religion, or their political allegiance, or the colour of their skin, or their gender must also apply in equal measure—in full and equal measure—to our sexuality.

4.23 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow so many moving and powerful speeches. I did not come to the Chamber intending to make a speech; I had hoped to ask my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) a couple of questions, but having heard what he said, I was moved to rise to make just a few points.

My hon. Friend sought to characterise what has been happening outside Anderton Park school as an issue of consultation. I have to say, on the basis of what I have seen, that the message that comes across from those protests is not principally about consultation. Yes, the issue of consultation is in there, but the protests are actually about an objection in principle to LGBT-inclusive education. If that is not the case, how else can we read a placard that says, “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve”? What is that if not an objection in principle to LGBT-inclusive education?

However, it is not just the fact that those views are being expressed, but the aggression with which they have been expressed, that has upset and profoundly offended so many people of, I believe, all races and all religions in Birmingham. The level of abuse that the headteacher has suffered—the things that have been said through megaphones not just at Anderton Park but before that at Parkfield school—is utterly outrageous, and I think we have a responsibility in this place to stand up and say that that is simply not on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green has said that if he has upset or offended anyone then he apologises, and I am grateful he has said that and welcome that, but I do hope he will reflect on whether when on camera he turns to one of the leaders of those protests—a man who does not even have a child at that school—and says, “You are right; no more nor less, you are right,” those words were wisely chosen, because I do not believe that the message that that gentleman has given is right.

Dialogue between parents and schools is obviously a good thing in any part of the curriculum, but there are also some principles at stake here and they deserve repeating. Sometimes this issue is talked about is if it is about sex education, but it is not; it is not about sexualisation at all. It is about relationships education, and to me there is one word and theme that has come up several times in this debate so far and that is absolutely central to all relationships education, and that is the importance of respect. I am sorry, but I disagree with my hon. Friend: I do not think that there is any age-appropriate threshold for respect. I believe that from the word go children should be taught to respect other people, whoever they are and whatever they are. I do not believe we would be right in adopting a curriculum or an approach which implies to young people that if they go to school with a friend who has two daddies or two mummies, instead of one daddy and one mummy, somehow he or she or his or her parents are less deserving of respect than the other child’s parents.

I just think that that is a principle which should be taught from the word go. We should have no problem in upholding that principle. It is a principle on which I will not compromise, and it is the reason why, I am afraid, on this issue I am on the other side of the fence from my hon. Friend.

4.27 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I grew up in a relatively white, and middle-class we could say, suburb of Brighton: a town called Lewes. The people of Lewes would hate me calling it a suburb of Brighton, but it is. And I could have lived my life as a child never really interacting with people of different faiths, and never really interacting with and learning
about different kinds of family units. I grew up in a family of a mum and a dad who were married before I was born and who remain married now, but the reason why I understand that there are different family units and people of different religions is that from the very get-go at school we read books and were told stories about different families. When the school was going to introduce a book about a child who was perhaps Muslim, it did not call an all-parents meeting to consult and say, “We’re going to be introducing a book which will introduce a character this semester or term who might not quite look like the kind of characters that you see every day in Lewes.” No, the school got on with it, and parents accepted it because leadership was shown not just by schools but by many people in the community making it clear that that was the right thing to do.

These are often rather mundane books. Many of these stories and educational methods are pretty mundane and may be about a mermaid or two penguins, or whatever the particular story is about; they are not actually that exciting. When they are being introduced, do I expect the headteacher to have to call an all-parents assembly to consult on that particular fiction book that is going to be introduced, and which is at the right reading level and of course is generally appropriate for those children? No, I do not. Actually, I think it is rather dangerous to expect teachers to have to teach on that basis. It would be ridiculous if they had to call an all-school assembly every time they wanted to introduce something new in biology, for example, or if they were going to teach arithmetic this month rather than just equations.

The approach that we need to adopt in treating this issue is one of talking about all the different ways the world works through storytelling and narrative telling. This is not about telling individuals what goes in and what goes out; it is about talking about what love means. That is also important for keeping our children safe. If we do not teach children the basic facts about what appropriate relationships are, what friendships mean by comparison with loving relationships, or how relationships between adults differ from relationships between children, we allow them to be vulnerable to predators, either at that young age or later on in life.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a really excellent speech. My daughter has just come back from school—the Scottish schools finish up pretty soon—with a whole bundle of things that she has learned in primary 1. A lot of that is about relationships and it is pretty basic stuff. Does he agree that if some children in a class are not taught the same things as all the others, they will find out about them from the other children in the class anyway? They might as well all get the same information and a good, responsible education from their teachers.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Quite! We all know how the game of Chinese whispers works, and the danger is that if children learn things second hand, the message will have been garbled or lost by the time it reaches the third child down. If we are going to teach our children about these ideas of respect and if we are going to keep them safe, we need to do that in a whole way.

I was taught by my parents that of course it did not matter who you fell in love with. I can remember as a child hearing nursery rhymes about falling in love with different groups of people. That is the kind of family I grew up in, and I feel very proud to have had parents who introduced those concepts. My sister is a happily married heterosexual, and she had those songs sung to her as well when she was young. They did not make me gay, but they made me feel comfortable with who I was. Let us be honest, however. Parents are loving, but there is no qualification to be a parent. There are some good parents and some bad parents. My mother is a linguist and an English teacher, but she knows absolutely nothing about physics or maths—she dropped out of science at GCSE—and if I had been taught science by my mother, I would not have been able to go on to do my physics and chemistry A-levels, as I did. We understand that parents are the primary lovers of their children, but they are not always the best people to give them a holistic, rounded education, because they have not experienced all the different elements and aspects of the world.

People in positions of responsibility, whether they are teachers or Members of Parliament, have a responsibility in these debates to show leadership. It was the Labour Government between 1997 and 2010 who showed leadership. If we had followed the mob and listened to what the opinion polls were saying at the time, it is unlikely that we would have made much progress at all on LGBT rights. We would not have made progress on abolishing section 28, for example, because Brian Souter was busy ploughing money in to garner public opinion in one way. We as politicians have to recognise that public opinion can be whipped up by dangerous forces, and we have a moral responsibility to sometimes make a judgment, not on whether there has been consultation—that was a totally vacuous argument that had no content to it—but on the content of the objections, to analyse and review them. That is something that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) has failed to do in this debate even once. Not once did he articulate the problems with the content of the curriculum.

Lilian Greenwood: Like many Members in this debate, my hon. Friend is making a powerful and moving speech. Does he share my concern that although lots of parents are perfectly satisfied with what is being taught in schools and perfectly happy that their children are being taught about respect and about different families, the kind of protests we have seen could result in those parents feeling unable to express that view because they feel intimidated and unable to stand up for the things that they would like their children to be taught about and that children themselves want to be taught?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree. It is even more important that a Member of Parliament, and I would not want to tell anyone how to do their job, should not go and plonk themselves down on one side of the debate without analysing—my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) gave resources to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green—the content of what is being discussed. It is extremely dangerous not to show that leadership, and that is why the debate was wrong from the beginning. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green has been deeply wrong in how he has handled the issue. Pandering to the mob is never right. It is always easy for an MP to do, but we go in the wrong direction if we do it.
Let us remember that one of the things that instigated section 28 was the book “Jenny lives with Eric and Martin”. It is a pretty mundane and boring book: Jenny goes and has an ice cream; Jenny has a book read to her by one of her fathers. It is hardly high literature. There was a backlash against a backdrop of rising right-wing tension—[Interruption.] I thought you said something, Mr Speaker. Of course, that led to the introduction of section 28. I do not think that we are on the verge of section 28 being introduced again, but we must be vigilant about bringing people along on that journey.

I shall conclude with two points. First, there is a place for parents on that journey, not to consult them on whether something should be included in the curriculum or not but, to some extent, to make up for the fact that we had section 28 for so long. Many parents failed to receive that level of education and understanding. There is a purpose in reaching out to the community.

Secondly, before I became an MP, I wrote an education resource for the Council of Europe on how we talked to educated children under 10 about sexuality and different generations endured. As the hon. Member for Rhondda, with a powerful and moving section 28. I do not think that we are on the verge of section 28 being introduced again, but we must be vigilant about bringing people along on that journey.

We have not really received an apology. What we heard was a defence of the position taken by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green, with a little apology at the end. I wish that he had just been honest about having real problems with the content of the teaching or said that he had not decided to take one side or the other. What we now have is a very disappointing outcome.

4.38 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): This has been an extraordinary Adjournment debate and, Mr Speaker, worth your waiting 10 years in the Chair to hear, I would argue.

There were powerful speeches by the hon. Members for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), with a powerful and moving speech by the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), who was right that we were not going to allow another generation of children to go through what previous generations endured. As the hon. Member for Rhondda said, what is wanted is not to be tolerated but to be respected or, as the hon. Member for Wallasey said, plain, simple decency.

There were well argued and persuasive speeches by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), and the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle). I listened carefully to the speech by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff), who opened the debate.

This Government agree that parents, as the primary educators of their children, should be involved in their child’s education in schools. The Government trust schools to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum that will prepare pupils for life in modern Britain, and we firmly believe that proper dialogue between schools and parents supports mutual understanding and ultimately benefits the progress of pupils. Schools should in particular consider whether aspects of their curriculum may be sensitive to the parents of their particular cohort and, if so, should ensure that they have properly engaged them on this content. But we must also remember that schools have been given the responsibility to educate, and ultimately it is for schools to decide what is taught, and how.

Equality for all is written into our laws. The Equality Act 2010 provides a legal framework to protect the rights of individuals and advance equality of opportunity for all. It provides Britain with a discrimination law that protects individuals from unfair treatment and promotes a fair and more equal society. Schools are required to comply with the relevant requirements of the Equality Act. Chapter 1 of part 6 of the Act applies to schools. As an example, part 6 of the Act makes it unlawful for a school to discriminate against, harass or victimise a pupil or potential pupil in relation to admissions or in how the school is run. The content of the school curriculum is exempt from the duties imposed on schools by part 6 of the Equality Act. Excluding the content of the curriculum ensures, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green pointed out, that schools are free to include a full range of issues, ideas and materials in their syllabus and to expose pupils to thoughts and ideas of all kinds, however challenging or controversial, without fear of legal challenge based on a protected characteristic.

Schools are, however, subject to the public sector equality duty in section 149 of the Act, which means that in discharging their functions they must have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act, and have due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it. Relevant protected characteristics are age; disability; gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation.

We know that many schools choose to teach pupils about the Equality Act and the protected characteristics in the context of duties on schools, such as the requirements to promote fundamental British values and the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of their pupils. Schools are perfectly entitled to teach about the Equality Act in this context, and the Department thinks it is right that pupils leave school with a proper understanding of the importance of equality and of respecting difference. To answer the question on age appropriateness asked by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green, schools that choose to teach about the Equality Act and protected characteristics should of course consider the age appropriateness of all elements of this and plan their curriculum accordingly.

That crucial need to respect difference would of course be a simple expectation of members of our society were all differences easily compatible. The true test of the concept of respect for difference lies in cases where our differences may appear to bring us in direct conflict with others. The fundamental expectation that we respect other people is therefore at times hard to achieve and all the more crucial for it. This has been seen in action in recent months, as some differences have seemed to
divide us. We have seen protests from parents relating to the teaching of equality in our schools, with a particular focus on teaching lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender content. The media would like to portray this as religion versus LGBT. I do not doubt that some people on both sides of the debate, without links to the schools involved, are exploiting the situation due to their own lack of tolerance for the other side, but I truly believe that, for the majority, there is a real respect for their fellow citizens who are different from them.

Central to this debate are deeply held views on what is right to teach children about LGBT people and relationships at different ages.

**Ms Angela Eagle:** Is the Minister as worried as I am about the emerging evidence of an organised campaign to disrupt the introduction of RSE in schools, which is now spreading from Birmingham to other places? Will he reassure us that his Department will crack down on those attempts with the utmost determination?

**Nick Gibb:** This Government, supported by Members on both sides of the House, introduced the regulations making RSE compulsory in schools—an amendment to the Children and Social Work Act 2017 introduced that requirement.

Today, we are publishing the final version of the guidance, which was put out for consultation. We are determined to press ahead with this policy, which has been carefully crafted with help from across the House. Individual Members helped us to devise and write the policy: Ian Bauckham, an experienced headteacher from Kent, helped us to draft the guidance; and, of course, officials from the Department for Education worked extremely hard in crafting the guidance. We will, of course, press ahead with the policy.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I apologise for not being here for the earlier part of the debate, but I am pleased to have arrived in time to hear the hon. Members for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who encouraged me to stay to the end. I have a specific follow-up question on the point raised by the hon. Member for Wallasey. What, precisely, are the Government able to do to counter what appears to be an organised campaign? For instance, can the Minister provide materials to Members of Parliament, such as me, who are now getting representations on this issue from, in my case, a local mosque?

**Nick Gibb:** We will certainly be providing materials to schools, together with the guidance published today, on how to consult and engage with parents on this issue. At Education questions yesterday, the Secretary of State made clear his view on the importance of teaching about LGBT issues in schools, including primary schools, and I have written articles, and so on. We will continue to make the case for the importance of RSE.

**Chris Bryant** rose—

**Stephen Doughty** rose—

**Nick Gibb:** I am moving slightly leftwards in giving way to the hon. Member for Rhondda.

**Chris Bryant:** I think we are all excited by the Minister moving slightly leftwards, and I am grateful to him. Is it not also worth pointing out the irony that many parents who are particularly concerned about their children growing up might want to know that good sex and relationships education nearly always leads to children delaying their first sexual experience, making fewer risky decisions when they do so and making more informed choices? Surely that can only be in the interests of every single child.

**Nick Gibb:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and he puts it better than I could. He will have seen the guidance, which was published in draft and is now in its final form, and it sets out the important aspects of all the issues he has cited and what we believe should be taught in our schools.

**Stephen Doughty:** I press the Minister a little further on the points raised by my hon. Friends about the organised campaign against the introduction of guidance. As I mentioned in my speech, I have seen a guide from an organisation called Islamic RSE that advises parents to get into governance bodies and tells them how to handle headteachers and how to do this and that in a quite cynical way. I have also seen a deeply misleading form letter attacking the Government’s entire policy.

Does the Minister have any plans to issue guidance to schools about this orchestrated campaign and, indeed, to work with the Welsh and Scottish Governments, who will undoubtedly experience this, too? I have raised this with officials in my own city.

**Nick Gibb:** I am happy to work with the hon. Gentleman. Of course, we work with the devolved Administrations on this and other issues in relation to education. The guidance was carefully crafted to build the widest possible consensus for this policy, which is why it went through this House with an overwhelming majority and the other House without a Division. Those people who are opposed to it are at the other end of that consensus. I am afraid that it is unlikely that we will bring those extreme ends of the debate into that consensus, but I am very content that we have secured the support of the Catholic Church, the Church of England and organisations such as Stonewall for the guidance we have created.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I thank the Minister for describing the people who have objections as being at the real fringes. The difficulty is that if there is a requirement on headteachers to consult, and that opens the door for these fringe elements to hijack and disrupt, how should headteachers respond? Will the Department issue guidance to prevent that from happening? Will he ensure that even when consultation happens, it is not consultation with a veto by those fringe groups, but consultation to bring people along, as this is happening and it is not a question of if, when and how; this is just so that everyone can understand how. That is what we mean by consultation in this case. This is a bit unclear.

**Nick Gibb:** I will come to these points later in my comments, but let me say that consultation is not a vote. Ultimately, the decision about the content of the curriculum is for schools, and as I have said, we are today issuing materials, with the final version of the guidance, to schools to help them in the process of engaging with
parents. But I listened to the comments about campaigning and standing up to the campaigns against RSE, and we will consider what hon. Members have said in this debate.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Will the Minister be taking any guidance from Nazir Afzal, the former Crown prosecutor in the north-west, who I understand has been brought in to mediate over the protests outside the schools? He is a practising Muslim. He is a very sensible man; he is the chair of the governors at Hopwood Hall College in my constituency. I wonder whether the Minister will be taking any of his advice.

Nick Gibb: I will take the hon. Lady’s advice, under advisement. Our senior officials are working on the ground, daily, for both schools involved in this dispute in Birmingham and with Birmingham City Council in trying to find a solution to this problem. We are working hard to try to assuage concerns, but ultimately we will be on the side of the headteacher in making these decisions, because we believe the content of the curriculum is a matter for schools.

Central to this debate are deeply held views on what is right to teach children about LGBT people and relationships at different ages—not because of bigotry or intolerance, not to push an agenda, but because they believe they know best for the children involved. This reveals the truth about equality and respect: sometimes it is hard. And when opinions differ, we should talk; dialogue is what moves us forward. That is why we are strengthening the requirements on schools to consult parents. From September 2020, all primary schools will be required to teach relationships education and all secondary schools will be required to teach relationships and sex education—RSE. We have set out the regulations for these subjects that schools will be required to consult parents on their relationships education or RSE policies. That requirement means that the dialogue we consider so important in reducing misunderstanding and getting this teaching right will be happening in every school.

It is important to note that relationships education is not about sex, as was pointed out by the hon. Member for Rhondda. It is about learning the importance of kindness and respect for others, and providing children with the foundations to understand difference and be able to build constructive relationships with those who may appear different from them. We are encouraging as many schools as possible to start teaching the new subjects from September 2019. Whether or not schools do so, we recommend they start planning their consultation with parents now, to ensure this is done in good time and effectively. As I have said, we are publishing supporting materials to help schools to get this right.

Schools are not required to consult parents on any teaching they choose to give about the Equality Act. However, when such teaching involves young children, and when schools know that their pupils’ parents have strongly held beliefs related to the content, it is absolutely right that schools engage with parents, listen to their views and reflect. To answer the question from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green, I think it would be appropriate for a school to work with parents to determine how Equality Act teaching is delivered in the school, if that works for them. That does not mean that headteachers should spend excessive time consulting parents or that consultation should go on in perpetuity. Schools are well practised at consulting and engaging their parent bodies on aspects of their activities, and if they have good practices in place, they can and should be used to consult parents on this topic. If schools feel that their current engagement processes are not effective, the introduction of the new subjects is a good opportunity to learn from good practice in other schools and to improve.

Consultation does not mean that parents can veto curriculum content; it means sharing a proposed approach, seeking views and using those views to inform a final decision. It is not a vote. Consultation does not mean abandoning teaching about respect for difference. I do not believe that is what parents would want and it is not what schools should feel they must do. Consultation certainly does not mean that schools should be on the receiving end of intimidating behaviour, protests or bullying. The Department has been clear that protests outside primary schools are unacceptable and should stop.

The RSE legislation is clear that it is parents whom schools must consult. We do of course encourage schools to recognise and reflect on their important foundational role in local communities. If schools consider it useful to engage members of their wider community on any of their activities, including the teaching of relationships and sex education, we would support that activity. Consultation does mean the consideration of whether the strongly held views of a school’s parent body should lead it to adapt when and how it approaches certain topics with pupils. It is only right for parents to be able to share their views on how and when their child will be taught topics that are sensitive to them. Schools should consider those views and balance them with their views on the needs of pupils and the wider school community. Ultimately, it is for schools to decide their curriculum, having taken these views on board.

Stephen Timms: Does the Minister agree with the point I made earlier, which was that it could be helpful in quite a number of local areas to include the local SACRE in the discussions he is describing?

Nick Gibb: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising that issue—I was going to respond to his earlier question—and we will consider his suggestion. That is not a promise, but we will certainly consider and take seriously what he has put forward.

As the Secretary of State set out in his recent letter to the general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, schools must have the flexibility to respond to events. For example, following consultation with parents on equality teaching or relationships education, a school may decide that for its pupils it is right to introduce teaching about LGBT people and relationships in the later years of primary. That would be an entirely reasonable decision. Subsequently, however, events may mean that that decision has to change. For example, if homophobic, biphobic or transphobic bullying becomes a problem in the school, the headteacher may reasonably decide that some teaching about LGBT issues at an earlier stage is required to ensure pupils understand that such bullying is not acceptable. Alternatively, a
pupil with same-sex parents may join the school in an earlier year group. In those circumstances, it would be right for the pupil’s peers to understand about families with same-sex parents—

Several hon. Members rose—

Nick Gibb: I will give way to all Members in just a moment.

As I was saying, it would be right for that pupil’s peers to understand about families with same-sex parents, to ensure that the pupil feels included and that their peers understand and respect their family. We can all agree that in those circumstances, the school would be right to change its approach and to teach the issue earlier.

Lilian Greenwood: Many of my colleagues will have anticipated what I am going to ask, which is: how will schools know whether they have pupils with an uncle or aunt in a same-sex relationship, or with a friend who has same-sex parents? Surely, it is appropriate that every child, from the earliest age, should know that there are all sorts of different families—some with one parent, some with two parents, and some with two mums or two dads. The school is not going to know everybody’s experiences, and everyone should know that it is right to respect difference, irrespective of where we come across it.

Nick Gibb: As I said, we consulted very widely on the content of the draft guidance and brought in experts such as Ian Bauckham—a very experienced headteacher—to help us draft that guidance. We wanted to form the widest possible consensus on landing this policy, and that is what we have achieved very successfully, and it is something that Governments of the past have not achieved. It is important that we try to get that consensus, which means leaving to schools the decision about when these issues should be taught. It is important that schools decide when it is appropriate to teach these very sensitive issues in their community, but what is clear from the guidance is that it is a requirement that children will learn and be taught about LGBT issues at some point during their school career. This is the way to ensure that the policy has the widest possible consensus—although we cannot bring into that consensus those at the polar ends of this debate.

Mr Godsiff: I thank the Minister for his measured and clear response to the questions I put to him. Although what he has said today may not be acceptable to other Members in this House, it will be hugely beneficial and helpful to the teachers in 256 schools in Birmingham who are now reassured that what they have been doing is, in fact, correct. I thank him for that.

Nick Gibb: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, but I also believe that what is being taught in the remaining two schools is lawful and correct.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Thank God for devolution! To provide clarification for some of my colleagues from English constituencies—and for my own mind—can the Minister tell us whether single parents who happen to be homosexual will now need to self-identify to members of staff from schools across the length and breadth of England to ensure that their children get access to equal, inclusive education?

Nick Gibb: No, what I am saying is that we need to leave these very sensitive decisions to the teachers on the ground and to the headteachers of the schools themselves, because they are best placed to make decisions that cannot be made at a national level and that will apply to all schools in all communities. What we are clear about is that children must be taught about LGBT relationships, and that they must be taught the relationships curriculum. No other Government have delivered such a policy. It is the right policy, but I strongly believe that it needs to have the consensus of the religious organisations, as well as Stonewall, to enable it to land effectively in our schools; and I believe that it is landing successfully in our schools.

Chris Bryant: I agree with the Minister to the extent that it should, of course, be up to the school and the teachers to make the decision about what is age-appropriate. However, he seemed to be suggesting that it was only once homophobic bullying had arisen in a school that a school would start talking about respect for gay people and that it was only once a gay couple who are parents of a child appeared in the school that this subject should be taught. I am sure that that is not what he really means. I hope he can clarify his point.

Nick Gibb: I was trying to give an example of a situation where, after consultation, a school may well want to change their policy because of events that have happened in the school. It might be that the school had, ab initio, decided to teach about LGBT issues at an earlier stage in the primary school curriculum. Schools are perfectly entitled to do that. If a school wanted to change its policy, it might consult parents. It would then be the policy of the school going forward, regardless of whether any of those issues arose and regardless of whether the school knew or did not know about the parental background of its pupils.

Stephen Doughty: I have to say that I share the concerns that have been expressed. If the Minister is being praised by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) on this, then I do worry about where things are headed. The problem is that if we create loopholes or opportunities for very, very radical activists—as we have seen in this case—to try to undermine headteachers, to intimidate and to undermine the overall Government guidance, then they will take those opportunities. I want to be assured that the Minister will provide full backing in ensuring that all children, regardless of their age, are getting this education—that it is not, for example, being done on the last day of year 6 or through some other way of circumventing the law, because I am sure that that is what, in some circumstances, these people will try to do.

Nick Gibb: The law is very clear: these issues have to be taught. We will support schools very strongly in delivering this curriculum. We are saying that they need to consult parents, but then, having done so, it is not, as I said, an election-style decision like voting an Act of Parliament through this House. Once the school has gone through that consultation and taken on board the views that have been expressed, it is then for it to decide, in its best judgment, what it thinks is the right material to be taught and when. We will stand by the schools that take that decision.
Ms Angela Eagle: Until we got to that passage in the Minister’s speech, I thought I understood what the situation was, but he seemed to be saying that he is going to give very radicalised fundamentalist-type campaigns options to make as much fuss as possible to prevent the teaching of LGBT equality and relations until it is easier to do it. I fear that what he said a few minutes ago—I hope that he will be able to put me right on this—is almost an open invitation to these organisations that are already spreading disruption across the country to do even more of it. We cannot compromise with such organisations, and if he does not stand up to them now, he will regret it.

Nick Gibb: I think that the hon. Lady is being unjust in how she is interpreting what I have said. I made it very clear that the school should consult parents. I made it very clear that the school is not bound by a vote of those parents—that ultimately the decision on the content of the curriculum, and how and when it is taught, is a matter for the school—and that we will support the school in that decision once it has been reached. We have also made it very clear that we do not support protests outside schools that require young children to—to use her phrase—run the gauntlet of screaming and shouting protesters. We absolutely do not support those protests. We supported Birmingham City Council in taking out the injunction against those protests. I think she is being slightly unfair in the way that she has heard my speech.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I am slightly concerned that we are getting caught up in the wrong way about age-appropriateness. The Minister referred to the times when this education would be introduced, full stop—in other words, it could be brought forward or delayed. My understanding is that this education around being safe, around safeguarding of children and around what are appropriate relationships should start from the very beginning of school and go all the way through. Age-appropriateness is about what is age-appropriate at each level and how we address it at each level, not about whether it is introduced at each level. We need to be clear about this, because there was a danger that he started to sound like some of the few fanatical bigots that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) sided with rather than the people with progressive morals that we want to side with.

Nick Gibb: Relationships education is required to be taught from the very beginning of primary school, but of course it does have to be age-appropriate. It is about friends, and sharing, and learning about the importance of family. [Interruption.] No, there is no intention of delaying the introduction of relationships education. What is a matter for the school is when more sensitive issues are taught. That really is ultimately a matter for the school to decide. In doing so, it should consult parents, but that does not mean that parents have a veto on the decisions that it takes.
Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—Leaving the EU: Manufacturing

1. Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect on manufacturing in Wales of the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The manufacturing sector is of vital importance to the Welsh economy. The UK's modern industrial strategy plays a key part in supporting industry. We want to get a deal with the European Union to give a smooth and orderly exit.

Stephen Doughty: The Secretary of State says that he wants to get a deal, yet he is backing a candidate for the Conservative leadership who advocates no deal. With the news from Ford, Airbus, Honda and Nissan, and from so much of Welsh manufacturing industry and the steel industry, how on earth can he, as Secretary of State, justify that position? Or is he simply trying to keep his job?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman is highly selective in what he cites. If he heeds the calls of some of the employers he mentioned, he will know that they supported the deal that came before Parliament and urged him to vote for a deal. By definition, his voting against the deal made no deal far more likely.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the opportunities for manufacturing in Wales when we leave the European Union will be to supply the rest of the United Kingdom with goods and services?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Manufacturing in Wales is more productive than the UK average, so is well placed to take the new opportunities both in the UK and globally that will arise as a result of our leaving the European Union. Like both leadership candidates, I would prefer to have a deal than not to have one.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): How many Welsh exporting manufacturers are moving workers to the EU27 to set up front offices, distribution centres and so forth, and what help are the Government giving them to export Welsh jobs?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for providing me with the opportunity to highlight the Welsh economy's export record. Exports are now at £17.7 billion—that is a 7.5% increase, which highlights how the Welsh economy is exporting strongly and at record levels.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As someone who started his working life at Ford in Bridgend, may I ask the Secretary of State what he is doing to ensure that high-quality, high-value manufacturing jobs are going to continue to pay on that excellent site, which has such good rail and road connections?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; with his local knowledge, having worked at the plant, he truly understands the value of the skills that the people there bring. Those skills are a real incentive to attract further investment. Along with the Welsh Government, we have set up a joint taskforce that will be led by Richard Parry-Jones, an industry expert who is best placed to make recommendations to the Government. We look forward to receiving that report shortly.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Given the almost daily news of business closures in Wales as a result of Brexit uncertainty, and the real prospect of no deal, how can the Secretary of State justify his support for a candidate to be Prime Minister who is prepared to sacrifice thousands of manufacturing jobs in Wales to further his own personal ambition? Does the Secretary of State think it is a “do or die” Brexit?

Alun Cairns: I am disappointed that the hon. Lady looks to undermine the Welsh economy. She needs to recognise that unemployment is at record low levels, economic activity is at record high levels, exports are growing and manufacturing is prospering. When it comes to Brexit, she also needs to recognise that when she voted against the deal on 29 March, she was the one who increased the prospect of no deal.

Christina Rees: The last thing I would do is undermine Wales. I am proud of my country and I am proud to have represented Wales many times. When you pull on that red jersey, Mr Speaker, there is nothing like it.

I will try again; given the Secretary of State’s apparent support for a no-deal Brexit as a price worth paying to keep his own job, what can he possibly say to people in Wales who stand to lose their manufacturing jobs as a result of his Government’s catastrophic mishandling of the Brexit negotiations?

Alun Cairns: I highlight the fact that manufacturing is doing well in the Welsh economy, with 12,000 more manufacturing jobs in the economy now than there were in 2010. There are now 4,000 more manufacturing jobs in the Welsh economy than there were last year. Manufacturing employers would like to see a deal with
the European Union; perhaps the hon. Lady should explain why she has voted against a deal with the European Union. Furthermore, she needs to explain why she is rejecting the will of the Welsh people, who voted in stronger numbers than the UK average to leave the European Union.

EU Withdrawal Agreement: Welsh Economy

2. Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment has he made of the potential effect on the Welsh economy of the withdrawal agreement on the future relationship between the UK and the EU.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The Government are clear that the best outcome for Wales and the Welsh economy is that the UK leaves the European Union in an orderly manner with a deal. That is why I voted for one on three separate occasions.

Geraint Davies: The Secretary of State knows that, if we stay within the EU, British people will get a 20% uplift in structural funding to £440 per person. Will he ensure that, in the event of our leaving with a deal, that money is sustained completely with a new UK prosperity fund? If we have a no-deal outcome, there will, quite simply, be no structural funding and we will hit a cliff edge, and more firms like Tata, Airbus and Ford will leave on his watch.

Alun Cairns: I do not recognise any of the hon. Gentleman’s comments. Let me ask him this one question: does he recognise that Swansea voted to leave the European Union in higher numbers than the national average, and, if so, why does he reject the will of his constituents?

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Many Welsh businesses will be able to cope with a no-deal Brexit, but one sector that the Secretary of State and I know will not be able to cope is sheep farming. Will he confirm whether he has had any discussions with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about an income protection measure or a compensation package for hill farmers when their industry gets decimated under a no-deal Brexit?

Alun Cairns: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important point and highlights the importance of the agriculture sector, specifically sheep farming, to the Welsh economy. Clearly, it is our will to protect that sector in every possible way that we can, but the best way to protect it is to get a deal with the European Union. I have voted on three separate occasions for the deal. I think that Opposition Members need to explain why they have voted against a deal, because, by definition, that creates a higher chance of our leaving the European Union without a deal. They would need to explain that to their constituents.

12. [911500] Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, I met a managing director of a local manufacturing company who imports most of his goods through ports. He is stockpiling raw material at the moment, which is affecting his cash flow and his future plans. The Secretary of State went to Holyhead in April and spoke about the importance of ports, saying that we needed a deal. Now he has said recently that we need to prepare for no deal. I must tell him that his comments have deeply concerned that chief executive officer. If we do end up with a no deal, what would he say to him?

Alun Cairns: I want a deal with the European Union. I have voted for a deal with the European Union on three separate occasions. I suspect that the employer to whom the hon. Gentleman has spoken would have supported a deal with the European Union. Perhaps he should have explained why he voted against that, because that has clearly increased the uncertainty, which is not good for anyone. He needs to look at himself and his colleagues and consider why they voted to block the deal.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Along with the Secretary of State, I supported the withdrawal agreement the three times it came before Parliament because of the impact that it will have on my constituency, and particularly on the sheep farming industry. Will the Secretary of State go to the Royal Welsh show and explain to the farming unions that he, I and both of the candidates who might be Prime Minister are very supportive of reaching a deal with the European Union that will protect the future of my constituency and the sheep farming industry in particular?

Alun Cairns: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his strong record in this area. Yes, I am looking forward to my visit to the Royal Welsh show. That will give me an opportunity to continue my ongoing proactive dialogue with the agriculture sector and with the farming unions in particular. I have spoken to both leadership candidates, and both recognise the importance of agriculture to the UK economy and the significance of the agriculture sector in Wales. They believe that it is best to leave the European Union with a deal, but will take positive steps to protect those industries in the absence of a deal.

14. [911502] John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): Brexit has serious implications for Welsh farmers, with an average of 80% of a farmer’s income in Wales coming from direct payments received through the EU’s common agricultural policy. The Secretary of State is backing a contender for Prime Minister who, during the referendum campaign, promised farmers that their subsidies would remain as they are after Brexit. Can the Secretary of State give a guarantee that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) will not pursue any Brexit policy that harms the lives and the livelihoods of farmers and that impacts on agriculture?

Alun Cairns: I am excited about our prospects outside the European Union—clearly having had the privilege of travelling internationally. A deal on beef exports was agreed last week between China and the UK, and we continue our dialogues in relation to other products and foodstuffs. That demonstrates the markets that are available. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that it is better to get a deal with the European Union, because that would give us a smooth and orderly exit, but if he will continually vote against the deal with the European Union, by definition he will increase the chances of a no deal.
Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Secretary of State is easy about a no-deal Brexit, which threatens to create a perfect storm for sheep farmers in Wales—and his Government are going to have to own it. Tariffs of 46% are set to kick in on 31 October, to coincide exactly with the season when mountain lambs come to market for export. There is a mar in Bala on 31 October. Will he join me there and tell farmers to their face why the value of their lambs has gone through the floor?

Alun Cairns: I remind the right hon. Lady that farming unions in Wales strongly supported the deal agreed by the Prime Minister and the European Commission. Would she stand at their mar, look them in the eye and tell them that she voted against their wishes and for a no-deal position? That is exactly what she did on three separate occasions.

Liz Saville Roberts: So that is the Secretary of State failing to take responsibility, then. He talks up the threadbare benefits of his insular Union while denigrating the real rewards of the European Union. The majority of Tory party members would sacrifice the United Kingdom for Brexit. Will he therefore tell me which is closest to his heart—his beloved Brexit, on which his career depends, or his precious Union?

Alun Cairns: There is no doubt that Wales prospers fantastically through being part of the United Kingdom, and there are great opportunities for the United Kingdom outside the European Union. I want to maintain a very close trading relationship with the European Union, which is why I would strongly prefer to have a deal. As a passionate Welsh lady, the right hon. Lady will recognise that Wales voted to leave the European Union. We are trying to honour the outcome of the referendum and maintain a close trading relationship so that farmers, manufacturers and service providers in Wales can continue to trade with the European Union and globally.

**Industrial Strategy**

3. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Welsh Government on the effect of the industrial strategy on the Welsh economy.

4. Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) the Welsh Government on the effect of the industrial strategy on the Welsh economy.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): We continue to work closely with colleagues across both the UK and Welsh Governments to ensure that the industrial strategy continues to deliver for Wales. We have already made funding available for a number of projects for Wales, including recently providing a further £1.4 million to support innovative battery technology through the Faraday battery challenge.

Liz McInnes: Will the Minister confirm that by refusing to invest in major opportunities such as the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, the UK Government are denying the Welsh steel industry a significant opportunity to innovate and create quality jobs that would support a new industry with global growth potential?

Kevin Foster: I am afraid I do not recognise that description, given that the National Infrastructure Commission supported our decision. It is worth noting that the tidal lagoon project would be three times more expensive at producing electricity than other alternatives.

Ian Mearns: In the light of the very concerning news about the number of jobs that could be lost at the Ford engine plant in Bridgend, and reports of the impact that similar announcements by Nissan in my region and Honda will have on the supply chain companies in Wales, what assessment has the Minister made of the impact that Brexit is already having on the automotive sector in Wales? What discussions has he had with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to provide support to the sector in Wales via the industrial strategy?

Kevin Foster: It is worth saying that Ford has said that the decision is not linked to Brexit; if Opposition Members are interested in the views of Ford, it said to vote for the deal on Friday 29 March. Let me be clear that there is positive news. Only this month, Aston Martin started production of a new line of vehicles in St Athan in south Wales—in the Secretary of State’s constituency. That shows what can be done when there is positive work on behalf of local people.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): The design of the shared prosperity fund will be crucial to Wales’s industrial strategy. Communities and business shareholders are clear on what the fund should look like—not a penny less, nor a power lost for Wales. The consultation on the fund was in the 2017 Conservative manifesto, and was mentioned in a written statement in July last year and by the Secretary of State at the Dispatch Box last October. Can the Minister confirm that this consultation has now been withdrawn?

Kevin Foster: We continue to work on the shape of the UK shared prosperity fund that will come forward after Britain leaves the European Union. We look forward to providing more information in the spending review later this year.

**Infrastructure Resilience**

5. Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the resilience of infrastructure in Wales.

10. Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the resilience of infrastructure in Wales.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): We have regular discussions with the Welsh Government’s Minister for Economy and Transport on a range of matters, including infrastructure in Wales. We are committed to ensuring that Wales prospers on the back of a strong and resilient infrastructure base, supported through our modern industrial strategy and national infrastructure delivery plan.

Chris Bryant: The Assembly Government have good plans for the Treherbert line, which serves Rhondda Fawr, but people who live in Rhondda Fach and at the
top of Rhondda Fawr who need to go over the Rhigos road to get to work, or indeed to the maternity unit at Prince Charles Hospital, need significant investment in the roads. It must surely be unfair that it takes many people in Rhondda, including expectant mothers, four buses to get the hospital, which might mean that a woman would not get there in time to deliver safely and that babies might not live.

Kevin Foster: I recognise the strength with which the hon. Gentleman has put forward his constituents’ case. Roads and highways are obviously in the devolved space, but I would certainly be more than happy to meet him to discuss what we can do to support his cause.

Wayne David: The European regional development fund has made a huge contribution to the development of infrastructure in Wales. Will the Minister give a commitment that resources from the new shared prosperity fund will be allocated on the basis of need and not through competition?

Kevin Foster: We will decide on the future of the UK shared prosperity fund, which I touched on earlier, through consultation and through the comprehensive spending review later this year. What would make a huge difference to roads in south Wales would be getting the M4 relief road back on track. If that was our decision, Wales would now be on the highway to the future; sadly, as it is a devolved one, it is now on the road to nowhere.

9. [911497]Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Two years ago, there was no broadband at all in the Dysynni valley in Gwynedd, in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). Now, there is fibre going direct to premises, delivering a minimum of 75 megabits per second download. What more can the United Kingdom Government do to deliver high-speed broadband to rural Welsh businesses?

Kevin Foster: At the autumn Budget, we announced £200 million for the hardest to reach areas, and Wales will be included in the first phase of this work. Tomorrow, I will be in Wales with my counterpart in the Welsh Government discussing the north Wales growth deal, and digital connectivity is a key part of that. In addition to the funds in the growth deal, there will be £8 million from the local full fibre networks challenge fund to support increased connectivity.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Ports infrastructure is essential to the economy of Wales and the United Kingdom. Holyhead port is a gateway from the Republic of Ireland. What discussions has the Minister’s Department had with the Irish Government to ensure that there are adequate facilities in place before Brexit, because the Irish Government are planning to detour freight direct to mainland Europe?

Kevin Foster: I am aware of the hon. Gentleman’s concern. Gentleman will be pleased to know that there are ongoing discussions with the Irish Government to ensure that whatever scenario there is for Brexit, there will not be so much disruption at Holyhead. He will also be pleased to note that potential investment in Holyhead port is part of the north Wales growth deal, which I will be discussing tomorrow.

Steel Producers

6. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What recent steps the Government have taken to support steel producers in Wales.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The Government are extremely supportive of the Welsh steel sector. Since the European Commission blocked the Thyssenkrupp joint venture, I have met unions and management to discuss the challenges and opportunities.

Tom Pursglove: As well as the success of the industrial strategy in supporting UK steel making, and the adoption of the new UK steel charter, what more can we do to support and promote the whole UK steel supply chain through the GREAT Britain campaign?

Alun Cairns: I again pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his role in supporting the steel sector in Corby. He will be well aware that five major steel producers have come together on this. In addition, the Government are supporting a sustained manufacturing hub led by Swansea University that will not only be of direct benefit to the steel industry in Wales but will have a significant impact on the steel sector in his constituency. That demonstrates the great strength of the industrial strategy.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Tata’s Cogent Power in my constituency has huge potential to develop electrical steel in the automotive industry and electrification, but it needs Government support to help to develop the supply chain, which I wrote to the Secretary of State about recently. Will he come and see for himself by visiting the Orb plant?

Alun Cairns: I would be happy to support the hon. Lady and Orb in Newport. It is an important site that employs 350 people. As the manufacturing sector is doing well in Wales, I think there is a great future for the plant.

Ford in Bridgend: Welsh Economy

7. Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): With reference to the closure of the Ford plant in Bridgend, what assessment he has made of the strength of the Welsh economy.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I am extremely disappointed with Ford’s intention to close its Bridgend plant in 2020. However, this bad news is not a reflection of the Welsh economy as a whole.

Karin Smyth: No wonder the Secretary of State does not want to answer the question, because the Government are being totally complacent. I have no doubt that the closure of the Ford plant in Bridgend will have huge consequences along the M4 corridor, damaging our economy, including in Bristol South. Just when will we see the start of any kind of industrial strategy? Right now, with continued closures and the impact of this closure on the supply chain, we are going backward, not forward, and that damages the economy in Bristol South.

Alun Cairns: The manufacturing sector is extremely important to the UK economy and Wales specifically. There are 4,000 more manufacturing jobs in the Welsh
economy now than there were this time last year, but that is not to undermine the importance of those Ford jobs. The Welsh Government and I are working closely together. We have commissioned Richard Parry-Jones to come up with recommendations on how we can best promote the plant, but I am encouraged by the early discussions we have had with potential investors. Some of those discussions are more mature than others, but the hon. Lady should recognise that they are private and confidential at this stage.

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. The UK’s industrial strategy has invested £1.5 billion in automotive research and development, to ensure that we maximise the opportunities of the shift from petrol and diesel engines to electric vehicles. A great demonstration of the success of that is that 20% of electric vehicles sold in Europe are manufactured here in the UK.

Former Phurnacite Works, Abercwmboi

8. Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of redeveloping the former Phurnacite works in Abercwmboi; and if he will make a statement.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady, who Member for Bristol South (Karim Smyth) in their deep disappointment at the closure of the Ford factory in Bridgend. Does he agree that there is huge potential on the M4 corridor for the development of electric cars and automotive technology of all kinds, right down as far as my constituency in Wiltshire?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. The UK’s industrial strategy has invested £1.5 billion in automotive research and development, to ensure that we maximise the opportunities of the shift from petrol and diesel engines to electric vehicles. A great demonstration of the success of that is that 20% of electric vehicles sold in Europe are manufactured here in the UK.

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8. Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of redeveloping the former Phurnacite works in Abercwmboi; and if he will make a statement.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady. Lady for the proactive approach she is taking to redeveloping this site, which has been an outstanding issue for decades. I was pleased that we were able to bring together the current owners of the site with her to come up with a positive plan for the future.

Ann Clwyd: I thank the Secretary of State for coming to the area and knocking heads together in a way that we have waited for for 30 years. The people of Abercwmboi have lived in dirt and dust on the site of what was the worst industrial polluter in the whole of Britain. I am grateful for the interest he has taken and the way he has managed to knock heads together.

Alun Cairns: I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady, who has highlighted this issue for some time. I am keen to work closely with her to bring the landowners together and see what plans can be made. The local authority is a key partner. We need to establish a clear plan of action, and we are well on our way to delivering that.

Mid-Wales Growth Deal

11. Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): What recent discussions he has had with (a) businesses, (b) local authorities and (c) representative groups on the mid-Wales growth deal.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the constructive approach he has taken to working with all partners involved in the mid-Wales growth deal. My ministerial colleague in the other place has undertaken extensive engagement with local authorities and the private sector in mid-Wales, most recently at Welshpool on 26 May 2019.

Ben Lake: The University of Aberystwyth and the internationally acclaimed Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences—IBERS—are both key partners in the mid-Wales growth deal, and the facilities at the new Gogerddan innovation campus will cement their place as leaders in the areas of agri-food and biotechnology and allow the area to become a centre for expertise in controlled environment agriculture and vertical farming. The benefits that this would bring to agriculture are significant, but rather than take my word for it will the Minister visit the Gogerddan campus so that he can see for himself the world-leading research being undertaken in Ceredigion?

Kevin Foster: That is certainly an invite any Wales Office Minister would find hard to refuse; we will try to co-ordinate. It is vital that the mid-Wales growth deal focuses on sectors such as agri-tech, where there is a significant opportunity to introduce transformational economic change. We encourage our partners to work closely with research institutions such as IBERS to put together a compelling case to both Governments.

Mr Speaker: Order. Blurt it out, man!

Mr Dhesi: What representations has the Secretary of State personally made to the Chancellor and the Department for Transport to support this scheme?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman was meant to say “Question 13”, but he was so overcome with excitement that he neglected to do so. Never mind. We will take it as part of Question 11.

Kevin Foster: As the hon. Gentleman will know, I am quite a fan of the potential benefits of the western rail access to Heathrow, which could unlock more growth and opportunities across the area served by Great Western. Regular representations are made, and I am sure the Chancellor, who is now on the Front Bench, will have heard those the hon. Gentleman has just made.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The reality, with the potential closure, is 1,700 jobs gone at Ford and between 6,000 and 7,000 in the supply chain. It is no good the Secretary of State saying manufacturing is buoyant, with all these potential job losses coming. We need economic stimulus packages from the UK Government in support of the Welsh Government. What is the Minister going to do about it to protect these jobs?

Kevin Foster: The Government are active in ensuring economic development in Wales, but the hon. Gentleman may wish to reflect on what was said by a Welsh Government Minister yesterday in relation to how they know what is going on.
This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. Later today, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and I will travel to Japan for the G20 leaders summit. With the threat of climate change putting future generations at risk, vile terrorist propaganda continuing to spread online and rising tensions in the Gulf, this summit is an opportunity to address global challenges affecting all our nations.

Thangam Debbonaire: As the thousands of people demonstrating outside would tell the Prime Minister, tackling climate change and biodiversity makes the world safer, more beautiful and sustainable for our children and grandchildren. Does she agree that one of the first acts of the next Prime Minister should be—urgently—to introduce a new environment and climate change Bill putting into place all the recommendations of the Committee on Climate Change to meet net carbon zero, making the world a more beautiful place?

The Prime Minister: We are introducing an environment Bill as a Government. We have introduced a 25-year environment plan—I think the first time any Government have done that. We have committed to net zero emissions by 2050. That has gone through this House, but the question the hon. Lady needs to think about is, why is the Labour party in the House of Lords trying to block the net zero 2050 legislation?

Q5. [911578] Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): One of the biggest restraints on what is a very positive economy in York and North Yorkshire is the lack of progress on devolution. Following the rejection of the One Yorkshire proposal, does the Prime Minister agree that we need a more local approach, such as a York and North Yorkshire deal to rival those of the big urban centres?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely recognise, as we do across the Government, Yorkshire’s enthusiasm for and dedication to devolution and the potential seen there for harnessing local people’s sense of identity with Yorkshire. We share the ambition of doing what is best for Yorkshire, its people and its businesses. My right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary has now met Yorkshire leaders. Discussions are continuing about a different localist approach to devolution, and officials are having initial meetings with councils, including York, and will be interested in hearing their ambitions for devolution.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I hope the whole House will welcome today’s mass climate lobby, which is coming to Parliament. We should be proud of it. This House, after all, became the first Parliament in the world to declare a climate emergency. I want to pay tribute to the young people and young climate strikers who have done so much to raise awareness of this issue. I hope Members will take the chance today to meet those who are coming to lobby and learn from them, because they feel very passionately on the issue.

I acknowledge that it is Armed Forces Day—celebrations are going on this week—and I think we should be concerned about the welfare of both serving and former serving members of our armed forces.

I join the Prime Minister in congratulating the Lionesses on reaching the quarter finals of the women’s World Cup and wish them well tomorrow night against Norway.
I welcome the judgment of the Court of Appeal last Thursday against UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia. The Court found that the Government had "made no concluded assessments of whether the Saudi-led coalition had committed violations of international humanitarian law... during the Yemen conflict, and made no attempt to do so".

Does the Prime Minister dispute that finding?

The Prime Minister: We continue to operate one of the most robust arms export control regimes in the world and we take our responsibilities on arms export licensing very seriously. Indeed, in the words of the 2017 judgment, the Government engaged in "anxious scrutiny—indeed, at what seems like anguished scrutiny at some stages". We are disappointed that the Court found against the Government on one ground, and we will be seeking permission to appeal this judgment.

Jeremy Corbyn: Germany, as an EU member state, has banned arms exports to Saudi Arabia, so has Denmark, and both the US Senate and House of Representatives have voted to ban arms exports as well.

The UN describes the situation in Yemen as "humanity's biggest preventable disaster", but the Government see fit to continue selling arms to Saudi Arabia, so may I ask the Prime Minister a very simple question? Does she believe there are serious ongoing violations of international humanitarian law by Saudi Arabia in Yemen—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman knows very well that we consider these issues very carefully when we are dealing with these arms export licences, as has just been quoted by the Court, but he references the situation in Yemen. This cannot go on. We need a political settlement in Yemen.

I would remind the right hon. Gentleman that the Saudi-led intervention was at the request of the legitimate President of Yemen following a rebel insurgency, which overthrew the internationally recognised Government, and the intervention has been acknowledged by the United Nations. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary held a Yemen Quad meeting on Saturday, expressing concerns at escalating tensions, but what do we see the Labour party do? One of the right hon. Gentleman's MPs was inviting rebel leaders of the insurgency into the House of Commons—yet again, Labour on the wrong side of the argument.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister does not appear to understand the depth of feeling at the UN, Parliaments around the world or even the US Senate and the House. The UN itself has warned that by the end of 2019, if the war continues, 230,000 people will have lost their lives, of whom 140,000 are children under the age of five. The UK and EU law state that the Government must "not grant a licence if there is a clear risk that the items used might be used in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law."

The Government said they had used the following criteria to judge "an understanding of Saudi military procedures; continuing engagement with the Saudis at the highest level" and "Saudi public commitments to IHL".—[Official Report, 20 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 375-6.]

If the Saudi Government say they are respecting human rights, do we then ignore all evidence on the ground in Yemen and continue to sell weapons to the regime, which has led to this appalling death toll already in this conflict?

The Prime Minister: First, as I have made clear, we are seeking permission to appeal the recent judgment. The judgment is not about whether the Government made the right or wrong decisions, but about the decision-making process and whether it was rational. We are considering the implications of the judgment, alongside seeking permission to appeal, and while we do that we will not grant any new licences for exports to Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners that might be used in the conflict in Yemen. The right hon. Gentleman talks about the conflict in Yemen. As I have just said, let us remember what happened and why we are seeing this conflict in Yemen: it was the overthrow of the internationally recognised Government by rebel insurgents. We are all concerned about the humanitarian situation in Yemen. [ Interruption. ] The shadow Foreign Secretary might like, as this is an area of concern to her remit, to actually listen to what the Government are doing.

Mr Speaker: Order. The questions must be heard and the answers must be heard.

The Prime Minister: We are all concerned about the humanitarian situation in Yemen. That is why, since the start of the conflict in 2015, our total commitment to Yemen now stands at £770 million. We are one of the major contributors to support for the humanitarian effort. Ultimately, the only way to resolve this issue is through a political settlement. That is why we are supporting the efforts of the UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths.

Jeremy Corbyn: If that is the case, why are the Government appealing the judgment instead of promoting a peace settlement in Yemen? Since 2016, for three years, UN experts have been saying that the Saudi coalition has violated international humanitarian law in Yemen. This air campaign has killed tens of thousands of people, and injured and displaced many more. The Government say: "there can be no military solution to this particular conflict. There can only be a negotiated and political solution."—[Official Report, 20 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 380.]

If that is the case, why have they already pumped £4.6 billion of military equipment into this brutal bombardment?

The Prime Minister: What we do believe, as I have just said—I said it in answer to the right hon. Gentleman's last question and I said it, I think, in answer to his first question—is that the only way to ensure the security and stability of Yemen for the future is through a political settlement. That is why this Government are supporting the work being done by the UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths, and that is why we are continuing to use our diplomatic efforts, including, as I said, the Foreign Secretary holding a Yemen Quad on Saturday to encourage others around the table. We are very clear that we support the efforts to secure the agreement by the parties to the conflict to implement the Stockholm
agreements. That is an important part of the process leading to peace and a political solution. That work is essential so that progress can be made at the next round of these talks and so that the humanitarian supply lines can be opened up.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Trade Secretary said there could not be a military solution to this conflict. Surely the Government should think on this and stop the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia. Just last week, the UN special rapporteur, Agnes Kalamar, said that there is credible evidence that the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and other high-level officials are personally responsible for the horrific murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Does the Prime Minister accept that assessment?

The Prime Minister: We do want to see accountability for this horrific murder. I raised the death of Jamal Khashoggi with King Salman at the Sharm summit—the second time I have done so. I raised it with the Crown Prince at the G20 last year. I have stressed the importance of those responsible being held to account and of due process being followed. We expect Saudi Arabia to take the action necessary to ensure that such violations of international and national laws cannot happen again. The right direction—the right way—to take this is through a judicial process, and we are obviously closely following the continuing investigation. We expect it to proceed in line with internationally recognised legal standards.

Jeremy Corbyn: There is overwhelming evidence that war crimes are being committed in Yemen by Saudi Arabian forces—a state that flouts every human rights norm at home and abroad. Its Government believes that it can kill with impunity journalists or civil rights campaigners, Yemenis or Bahrainis. It funds extremism around the world, but the UK has supplied it with over £4.5 billion-worth of deadly weapons. UK weapons have been used in indiscriminate attacks on civilians in which over 200,000 people have been killed, and hundreds of thousands more stand on the brink of famine, starvation and death from wholly preventable diseases. Surely the Court of Appeal judgment should be a wake-up call to the Prime Minister and the Government. Instead of appealing the judgment, why not accept it, stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia now, bring about peace in the Yemen and save those lives?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman says to me, “bring about peace in the Yemen”. That is exactly what we are working with our international partners to do through the United Nations and the Yemen Quad. He talks about our relations with Saudi Arabia. That relationship has saved lives of British citizens in the past, but let us look at some of the relationships the right hon. Gentleman supports. When people were killed in Salisbury, his sympathies were with Russia. When terrorists were killing our people, his sympathies were with the IRA. And in the recent tanker attacks in the Gulf, his sympathies were with Iran. He never backs Britain and he should never be Prime Minister.

Q6. [911580] Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I am a firm believer that youth work is part of the answer to so many issues in our society and has a huge role to play in my constituency, but we are currently at risk of losing vital youth work qualifications. The review of those qualifications was announced on 1 April, but funding has been delayed in the system. If it is not secured, we are in danger of seeing universities and colleges drop the qualifications from 2020, so will my right hon. Friend ensure that the funding is signed off immediately and we can continue to train amazing youth workers?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, including the importance of the proper training of youth workers. We are absolutely committed to a properly qualified and trained youth sector. Subject to a business case, we have committed to renewing funding for these qualifications and reviewing the youth work curriculum. I know that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is in very close contact with the National Youth Agency, is aware of the timing issues and hopes to make an announcement in the near future.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister’s remarks about reservists?

I am happy to be sporting a badge today in support of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I hope that in the days that the Prime Minister has left in office, she will do what she can to secure Nazanin’s release from jail in Iran.

I hope the Prime Minister will join many of us outside Parliament today in support of the climate justice activists. I have to say to the Leader of the Opposition that the Scottish Government were the first Government in the UK to declare a climate emergency; I hope that the UK responds to the leadership that Scotland is giving on this issue.

“Do or die, come what may”—those are the words of the Prime Minister’s likely successor. The truth behind the Brexit chaos in the Tory party is encompassed in those words. The Tory dream is to drag us out of the European Union, no matter what the cost. Prime Minister, before you exit office, will you pledge never to vote for a successor willing to impose a devastating no-deal Brexit on all of us?

The Prime Minister: I have to remind the right hon. Gentleman—yet again—that he is due to ask me questions about my responsibilities as Prime Minister. I remind him—yet again—that as Prime Minister I voted three times in this House to ensure that we could take the UK out of the European Union with a deal that was good for the whole of the United Kingdom, and he voted effectively for no deal.

Ian Blackford: My goodness, it is no wonder she is leaving. That was no answer to the question. The Prime Minister is showing gross cowardice. On the one hand, the Tories are asking people to put their faith in the most incompetent Foreign Secretary in a century—a man who has made a career out of lying, and who has spent the week avoiding the media, staging photos and playing to the extreme delusions of the Tory shires. On the other hand, we have the most incompetent Health Secretary in our history, a man who writes books on privatising our NHS. [ Interruption. ] The Conservatives clearly do not like the truth. Someone so desperate for a chance at his 30-year Downing Street fantasy that he—[ Interruption. ]
Mr Speaker: Order. I think the right hon. Gentleman has concluded his inquiry. [Interjection.] Order. If he has not, he needs to do so in a single sentence. [Interjection.] Order! Mr Cowan, I am sure you are a well-intentioned fellow, but I require no counsel from you. One sentence—we have a lot of questions to get through.

Ian Blackford: In the Prime Minister’s last days in office, will she finally act in the best interests of these islands, not of the Conservative party, and admit that neither of the candidates for office should ever be elected Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that either of the candidates for this high office would do a darned sight better job than anybody sitting on the Opposition Benches.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con) rose—

Hon. Members: More!

Sarah Newton: Seldom have I had such a welcome in this House. I have to do this more often.

I very much welcome the announcements that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions made yesterday, Will the Prime Minister update the House on those plans, and how she feels that they will enable more people living with disabilities and health conditions to play their full part in our society?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for the work she did as Minister for disabled people; she did a lot of the ground work for the announcement that we were able to make on the disability strategy. Many disabled people in our society would love to be able to get into the workplace. One of the key issues underpinning that strategy is support to enable people to take their full role in society, to get into the workplace, and to ensure that they have access to the support that they need. I am very proud of the fact that about 950,000 more disabled people are now in the workplace, thanks to the actions of Conservatives in government. There is more for us to do; the disability strategy sets our path to do that, and to do enabled disabled people to play their full role in our society.

Q2. [911575] Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): Almost every infrastructure project across the UK requires British-made steel. The contracts for the next five years alone are worth £1 billion, but UK Steel and members of the Community trade union were yesterday asking me whether the Scunthorpe steelworks will still be working in five days’ time. Will the Prime Minister guarantee that, a month from now, before she leaves office, the Scunthorpe steelworks will still be open?

The Prime Minister: We are concerned about the situation relating to the Scunthorpe works and British Steel, which is why my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary is actively engaging with the official receiver. Obviously, the official receiver has responsibility in relation to this matter, but we are doing all that we can, as a Government. I was pleased to meet—as the right hon. Lady knows—a number of Members of Parliament who have steel interests in their constituencies to talk about the real impact that the closure of the works would have on people, and it is because of that impact that we are working so actively to try to ensure that we can retain employment in the area.

Suella Braverman ( Fareham) (Con): I am due to give birth any day now. I am hoping that there will not be an emergency in the Commons! [Laughter.] May I put on record my thanks to you, Mr Speaker, to the former Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), to the Government and to cross-party MPs who have delivered the proxy voting scheme, which will enable my constituents to be represented during my maternity leave?

Eleven-year-old Ruby Lloyd, who is at Hook-with-Warsash primary school, is campaigning for a pedestrian crossing in Warsash Road to encourage more pupils to walk to school, thereby improving road safety and air quality. Hundreds of local residents support her campaign, as do her headmistress and her councillors. Will my right hon. Friend get behind Ruby’s campaign for safer roads in Fareham?

The Prime Minister: We wish my hon. Friend the very best for the upcoming birth. I feel a certain satisfaction, having played a little role in ensuring that she and her husband got married, as she has acknowledged.

As for my hon. Friend’s point about Ruby, it is very good to see young people caring passionately about their local area and campaigning for it, and it is vital that children go to school in a safe environment. This is, of course, an issue for the local authority, but I wish Ruby the very best for her campaign.

Q3. [911576] Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Universal credit is causing great hardship in my constituency. It is driving up debt and increasing food bank use. It is making people who are out of work worse off, and making people who are in work worse off. In her final weeks in office, will the Prime Minister act to halt the roll-out of this failed policy, or will she simply leave the injustice burning?

The Prime Minister: What lay behind universal credit was the need to change our benefits system. Under the legacy system that we inherited from the Labour party, more than 1 million people were left on benefits for nearly a decade. What universal credit does is help people into work, and ensure that when they are in work they are able to earn more. As a result of universal credit, 200,000 more people are in work, 1 million disabled people are receiving more money, and 700,000 people are receiving the benefits to which they are entitled. This is a policy that is working.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): We are approaching one of your favourite times of the year, Mr Speaker. Wimbledon starts next week, and many Members have already been enjoying hitting a few balls on the court in New Palace Yard. Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to wish all the British players the best of luck in the championships, and will she also welcome the Lawn Tennis Association’s announcement that £250 million will be provided for 96 new indoor tennis centres that will open up the sport to 3 million more people across the United Kingdom?
The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue in such a timely fashion. I certainly wish the very best to all the British players who will be participating in Wimbledon, and I congratulate Andy Murray on his win in the doubles at the Queen’s Club over the weekend. I understand that there is a tennis exhibition here in Parliament today, and that pupils from Paddock School in Putney will be taking part. It is very good to see young people having that experience and that opportunity. I welcome the fact that the LTA is directing funding across the country to where it is needed most to grow the sport from the grassroots up.

Q4. [911577] Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): A recent YouGov poll on Islamophobia in the Conservative party revealed an astounding level of racism. Nearly 50% of those polled would not want a Muslim Prime Minister, while only 8% would be proud if there was one; 67% believe racist myths about Muslim communities, yet eight out of 10 do not think that it is a problem. In the light of that, and as one of the final acts of her premiership, will the Prime Minister finally agree to commission an external inquiry into Islamophobia within her increasingly “nasty party”?

The Prime Minister: We take any allegations of Islamophobia very seriously in the Conservative party. Every allegation is properly investigated. We have seen my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), the chairman of the Conservative party, take swift action. We have seen people suspended from the party; we have seen people excluded from the party. I would just say to the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman that that is in direct contrast to the way in which the Labour party deals with antisemitism. Indeed it is easier to be kicked out of the Labour party for voting Liberal Democrat than for being antisemitic.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): There is a risk that complex conflicts thousands of miles away sometimes appear deceptively simple at Westminster. Does my right hon. Friend share my surprise that the Leader of the Opposition did not mention that Human Rights Watch said last week that Houthis drones targeting civilian targets in Saudi Arabia was a potential war crime? The World Food Programme has recently suspended aid in Houthi-controlled areas because of aid workers not being allowed into Houthi areas and aid being diverted to enrich Houthi forces. Is it not best to recognise the horrors of war on all sides and concentrate not on being one-sided but on getting fully behind the tireless efforts of Martin Griffiths to seek peace in Yemen and support those efforts and bring this conflict to an end?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right Friend; with his experience in the Foreign Office he has seen and knows the complexities of these issues. He is absolutely right: it is important that we look at what is happening in Yemen and recognise the actions that the Houthis have been taking as well. That is why it is so important to bring both sides around the table to ensure we can get that agreed peace settlement and support Martin Griffiths, the UN Special Envoy, in his efforts to bring the parties around the table.

My right hon. Friend references humanitarian aid. I mentioned earlier the extent of the humanitarian aid we have given. One of the great problems we have had to address is the fact that it is not always possible to get aid to the people who need it most, not because of our inability but because of the insurgents—the way in which the Houthis are preventing that aid from getting to the people who need it most.

Q7. [911581] Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Brexit uncertainty is hitting manufacturing businesses in my constituency. Local managing directors have told me that no deal would be absolutely catastrophic for them and for their exports to Europe, and that it will put local jobs at risk. One firm has already put workers on short-time working temporarily. Does the Prime Minister accept that her Government—and I include in this statement either of her likely successors—have made a catastrophic no-deal Brexit a more likely outcome?

The Prime Minister: I wanted to deliver Brexit with a deal. I brought a deal to this House and the hon. Lady and her colleagues voted three times against that deal.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): On Monday 160 years of food production on the same site in Burton ended with the announcement of the closure of the Kerry Foods plant in my constituency, affecting 900 jobs in Burton and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler). The Prime Minister will obviously have great sympathy for all those workers who are concerned about their future—concerned about paying their mortgages and for the holidays they have booked and their families. Will she commit to a cross-departmental taskforce to try to ensure we not only get those 900 people back into work but find a new use for that plant in Burton?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend says, I am sure this is going to be a very worrying time for the employees of Kerry Foods and their families. I understand that Ministers from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy are speaking to my hon. Friend to discuss the situation and that they will work with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to explore the various options. We will also want to work closely with businesses and local partners to ensure those affected are well supported and indeed to explore options for the future of the site. Our thoughts are with those who will obviously be very concerned at this time.

Q8. [911582] Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Seven-year-old Talia Belaid, who is the daughter of my constituent, Gosia Szymanowicz, was abducted by her father and taken to Libya in 2012. The father returned here without Talia, and she remains in Libya with his mother. He was jailed but released on licence in 2017, and he has now absconded and is not reporting to the Home Office. All Gosia’s legal avenues have been exhausted and she is really desperate. Will the Prime Minister please use every channel available during her final weeks in office to secure Talia’s return to her mother in the UK?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has outlined this case here in the House and I will ensure that the matter is looked into properly by the Department concerned.
Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): On the Yemen-Saudi catastrophe that is taking place, is it not the case that Britain should move to a position of far greater neutrality and support a comprehensive ceasefire? While Britain is absolutely right to condemn the Houthi attacks on Riyadh and Jeddah, should we not also condemn the night-after-night bombings by Saudi aircraft, which are killing innocent civilians and radicalising tens of thousands of young Yemenis?

The Prime Minister: We have called for a ceasefire and we have supported the efforts that have been made for a ceasefire. We supported those efforts around Hodeidah, which is a very important port for getting in humanitarian relief. This is why it is so important that we continue to work with our international partners and with the UN special envoy to bring about that ceasefire and to enable the parties to come round the table to get a political settlement, which is the only way to ensure the future security and stability of Yemen.

Q9. [911583] Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): On Friday, a 14-year-old girl with autism and a learning disability was placed in a secure mental health unit 150 miles from home. Her mother has already had to stop work and her parents are trying to scrape together the money to find temporary accommodation there, so that they can be near their child. Does the Prime Minister not agree that we really need decent, trusted facilities for distressed children in every community, so that families do not have to go through this?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes an important point. The emphasis in the national health service that we are putting on dealing with mental health and on improving the support that is available is a part of this issue. I held a roundtable to look at the outcomes of our review of the Mental Health Act 1983, at which the types of circumstances in which people are provided for were raised. The NHS is looking at this matter very carefully, and we are ensuring that funding is available for further facilities to be provided.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): This afternoon, I will meet my Cheadle constituents who have travelled down to Westminster as part of the Christian Aid climate change lobby. With her world-leading commitment to a net zero target by 2050, the Prime Minister has shown that we are already leading the way. As we leave the EU, will she urge her successor to put the environment at the heart of the Brexit negotiations?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, which was put with his normal and natural theatricality in the Chamber. As he will have seen, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has heard his question. Obviously we want to ensure that people who are entitled to benefits actually receive them, but this Government can be proud of our record on what we have done for pensioners. Through the triple lock and in various other ways, pensioners are £1,600 a year better off under this Government.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Today’s mass lobby is about sustainability, but there can be no economic health or communal wellbeing as long as soulless supermarkets make places ubiquitous while exploiting my Lincolnshire farmers and growers, and while heartless internet giants crush their small competitors. Will the Prime Minister use the tax system to redistribute power away from those heartless, soulless corporate monoliths to all that is small, eclectic, local and particular—for, as you know, Mr Speaker, Schumacher said, “Small is beautiful”?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point about the importance of small businesses and of local, independent shops on our high streets. We want to see those businesses supported. That is why we have taken steps already, for example in relation to our high streets. We want to see those businesses supported. That is why we have taken steps already, for example in relation to business rates. It is also why, for those who are concerned about the internet and the way it is being used to undermine some of those small businesses in the retail environment, we are of course taking action in relation to those digital companies.

Q11. [911585] Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): While the Conservative party leadership candidates tour the country offering unicorns, the Prime Minister may be thinking about her legacy. Will she please listen and act on the entirely reasonable demands of all those affected by Grenfell-related issues, and finally commit to fund the retrofitting of sprinklers in all residential buildings and others where vulnerable people live or work; give clarity on the installation and upkeep of external building insulation; adequately fund our fire and rescue services; and set up a social housing regulator with teeth? The public may thank her for it.

The Prime Minister: Obviously, we are looking across the board. A number of issues have been raised as a result of the terrible tragedy that occurred at Grenfell Tower that we have already acted on, and we are continuing to work, as I indicated in response to the Leader of the
Opposition last week, and to look at issues such as social housing. While many people focus on the issue of cladding and building standards, it is the fact that people’s voices were not being heard from that social housing that is of particular concern. Ensuring that we have the right approach in relation to regulation is important. On sprinklers, the recommendation after Lakanal was not that every property over a certain height should have sprinklers retrofitted. It is important to be clear about that.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): On 15 May, my right hon. Friend welcomed a decision by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to allow the drug Spinraza, which is for spinal muscular atrophy, to be prescribed, including, we thought, to my constituent, the grandson of Mrs Ogborne. NICE has now written to Mrs Ogborne to say that it accepts that the news story that appeared on the NICE website was not clear enough. That is code for saying that my constituent’s grandson will not receive this drug. When NICE says something, can it be ensured that it does it, and that bureaucratic flannel does not raise people’s hope then to dash it?

The Prime Minister: I am very concerned to hear the case that my hon. Friend has brought before the House of his constituent and Spinraza. I will ensure that it is looked into. If NICE says that Spinraza is available, then obviously it should stand by its word.

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Gentleman does not get a result, and he wants it to be debated again before the summer recess, let me tell him: it will be debated. He can be quite certain of that.

Q12. [911586] Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): In a recently aired BBC Scotland documentary on medical cannabis, the chair of the British Paediatric Neurology Association, Finbar O’Callaghan, said that the NHS will not pay for life-changing medical cannabis for epileptic children, by saying, “Even if you prescribe the product, the NHS isn’t going to pay for it.” Is his statement correct, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I have answered questions on this matter in the past, including, I think, from the hon. Lady. The Government have changed the law. Specialist doctors on the General Medical Council specialist register can now prescribe cannabis-based products for medicinal use where there is clinical evidence of benefit. NHS England and the chief medical officer have made it clear that cannabis-based products can be prescribed for medicinal use in appropriate cases, but obviously we need to trust doctors to make clinical decisions in the best interests of patients.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): In Thursday’s Adjournment debate I described the barbaric treatment that my father-in-law received at a clinic in Barbados, which ultimately led to his death. It shows the influence of this Chamber that I have now been contacted by many people from around the country who want to talk to me about similar issues. This morning, I was contacted by a resident of Barbados who told me that the practices that go on in Dr Alfred Sparman’s clinic are far more horrific than we recognised.

Will either my right hon. Friend or the relevant Department meet me so that I may inquire how we can work with the Barbadian authorities to shut this man down and ensure that what happened to my father-in-law cannot happen to any other citizen?

The Prime Minister: I remember the conversation with my hon. Friend after this terrible tragedy involving his father-in-law. I will certainly ensure that Ministers from the proper Department sit down with him to explore this issue.

Q13. [911587] Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Figures released today show that £973 million of arrears are currently owed under the Child Maintenance Service. Although the new enforcement powers are welcome, CMS’s bark continues to be worse than its bite. The UK Government must clamp down on the non-payment of child maintenance, and they must do it now. Will the Prime Minister agree to launch a full root-and-branch review of CMS to ensure that we have a new strategy, in which maintenance payments are properly enforced, to lift these children who, in many cases, are in poverty due to a lack of maintenance payments?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right that we want to ensure maintenance payments are made for those children. Normally the payments are made by fathers but, in some cases, they can be made by mothers, and we need to make sure they recognise their responsibilities and take them seriously. This is a difficult area. For many years, efforts have been made by different Governments to ensure that we get this right and that maintenance payments are made.

I am sure every Member has had constituency cases in relation to this issue. The simplified system introduced in recent years has been working better than the previous system, but I will ensure the relevant Department looks at this issue.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): In my Harlow constituency, many horses and ponies are tied up and tethered by the roadside, maltreated and put in dangerous locations, often without access to food and water. Will the Prime Minister work to end the suffering of these beautiful animals and to amend the outdated Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the code of practice on the welfare of horses to clarify the Government’s powers and the duties of local authorities to intervene? And will she urge the RSPCA to treat this as a major concern?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises an important issue, and I will certainly ensure that the Department looks at the definitions in the legislation. I would hope that the RSPCA took this as seriously as it takes the ill treatment of other animals.

Q14. [911588] Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Last week, a brain tumour ended the life of Sarah Wands from Markinch in my constituency. Sarah was 44 years old and a brilliantly gifted young mathematician and statistician, tiny in physical stature but a towering giant as measured by any qualities that matter. Does the Prime Minister share my hope that funding for brain tumour research will be increased to bring forward the day when other families are not affected as the Wands family have been?
The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises a very, very sad case. A life full of great promise has been sadly cut short, and our thoughts and prayers are with the family of the individual concerned.

We have been putting more money into research on brain tumours, which is an important area and one in which my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), the former Health Secretary, started extra work within the NHS. That work continues.

The hon. Gentleman raises a very important issue and, as I say, our thoughts and prayers are with all those affected by this case.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): One in two people in the UK now develops cancer at some point in their lifetime, and around 60% of them will require radiotherapy as part of their treatment. We do not have a single linear accelerator in West Sussex, meaning that my constituents travel long distances every day for treatment. That is not only costly but, of course, gruelling for people who are feeling so unwell. Will the Prime Minister outline what steps the Government are taking to ensure that my constituents have the same access to medical care as others in adjacent counties?

The Prime Minister: I fully recognise the concern that my hon. Friend has raised. Looking at how we treat cancer is one of the issues in the NHS long-term plan on which the NHS is focusing. I recognise the concern for those who have to travel long distances to receive such treatment. As she said, it is not just expensive, but can be difficult and gruelling in their state of health. It will be looked at as part of future programmes for the NHS.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Prime Minister and the whole House will be aware of the long-standing campaign for justice and compensation by victims of the Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism in Northern Ireland and throughout the UK. US citizens have been compensated by the Libyan authorities but UK citizens have not. Some £12 billion in frozen assets is held in the United Kingdom and £17 million in tax has been recovered on that money in the last three years. Will she undertake to use that money to help the victims, and will she ensure that the special representative who has been appointed works closely with the victims to obtain the justice that they rightly deserve?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of the justice that those victims deserve. I have raised the issue myself with the Libyan Government in the past, and I will certainly ensure that the special representative is able to make every effort to ensure that the victims get that to which they are entitled and that he works with them in doing that: it is important that their voices are a crucial part of that.
Speaker’s Statement

Mr Speaker: Before I take points of order, I have a small number of announcements to make, the first of which draws upon and indirectly relates to something that the Prime Minister said about her good wishes to the England female football team. I think that the House will want to know of the activities of the women’s parliamentary football team, which are regularly communicated to me, not least because I am the president of said team. I hope that the whole House will join me in wishing the women’s parliamentary football team well at the weekend in its Guinness world record attempt for the number of female footballers playing a game, an initiative being undertaken in collaboration with Equal Playing Field, whose mission is to challenge inequality in sport, particularly for girls and women globally.

Secondly, I remind the House that today marks the 40th anniversary of the House’s decision to endorse the proposal from Norman St John-Stevas, an extremely distinguished Leader of the House, to establish the system of departmental Select Committees. Since that momentous decision on 26 June 1979, those Committees have grown and developed into a key—I might almost be tempted to say “the key”—means by which the House holds Ministers to account in detail for their conduct of government. I hope that colleagues will agree that it was a decision that we should all celebrate.

Finally, as I know concern about human rights is widespread in the House, I hope that colleagues will welcome to our proceedings the Sikyong of the Central Tibetan Administration, Lobsang Sangay. He has been here before and he is here again. In a very important way, he represents the people of Tibet. We identify with you, sir; it is a pleasure to see you again, as colleagues will agree; and I look forward to seeing you later today. Please continue your good and important work, even in the face of considerable pressures.

Points of Order

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving me notice of it. I was advised yesterday that the plan to move the writ yesterday had been aborted. Instead, I was advised that the plan was to move the writ today. However, I was informed earlier that the plan to move the writ yesterday was held up because an issue with Powys Council, specifically the returning officer, was delaying the process. Powys Council confirmed within a matter of hours that that was not the case, and that it was waiting for the writ to be moved. ITV Wales’s political editor, Adrian Masters, has speculated that the Government have not moved the writ for the Brecon and Radnorshire by-election not because of problems in Powys but because they could not guarantee that Powys would not—as would be its right—hold the election on 23 July, that being of course the first full day of the new Prime Minister’s premiership.

Can you confirm that you have had notification that the Government intend to move the writ today, or will they continue to miss their own deadline and make highly questionable excuses for sparing the blushes of a new Prime Minister by delaying moving the writ?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. She is correct that the writ was not moved yesterday, but I was informed that the plan was to move the writ today. However, I was informed earlier that the plan to move the writ yesterday was held up because an issue with Powys Council, specifically the returning officer, was delaying the process. Powys Council confirmed within a matter of hours that that was not the case, and that it was waiting for the writ to be moved. ITV Wales’s political editor, Adrian Masters, has speculated that the Government have not moved the writ for the Brecon and Radnorshire by-election not because of problems in Powys but because they could not guarantee that Powys would not—as would be its right—hold the election on 23 July, that being of course the first full day of the new Prime Minister’s premiership.

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Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Many of us have visited Richard Ratcliffe, who is now in his 12th day of hunger strike in support of his wife, Nazanin, wrongly jailed in Tehran. The number of messages, flowers and visitors shows that the House and the country are strongly in sympathy with the Ratcliffe family’s long ordeal. Is there anything that you can do to spread the word that other Members visiting him would be extremely welcome?

Mr Speaker: I agree with the hon. Gentleman: it would be very welcome if Members had time and felt inclined to visit Richard Ratcliffe. I am not in the business of announcing my travel plans, and the hon. Gentleman would not expect me to do so, but I have heard what he has said and I have my own thoughts on the matter. I have indicated that I think it a very good idea, and it would be very welcome if Members from across the House, simply as human beings to another human being, felt inclined to demonstrate solidarity and support. I agree unreservedly with the hon. Gentleman and I rather imagine I will be having another conversation with him at a later date to tell him more.
Gentleman’ s point of order is on the same matter—
in order for Members to accuse others of lying? Would you please guide me on whether it is heard an allegation that a Member has made a career allegation of bad faith in the Chamber, and today we Mr Speaker. I am always troubled when I hear any it should not otherwise be done.

That is the long-established procedure in the House and allegation should be made on a substantive motion.

be an allegation of dishonesty against a Member, that great deal of noise in the Chamber—is this: if there is to on that which I hear there and then, and there was a judge to be disorderly. What I would say to the hon. Gentleman—apart from that obviously I can rule only that I did not hear it. I heard used another that I did not hear that. If there was an allegation of dishonesty, I did not hear it. If there was an allegation of bad faith in the Chamber, and today we Mr Speaker, you have done great things to make the proceedings of the House more intelligible to the public beyond, and websites such as TheyWorkForYou have done likewise, yet because there was no Division on Monday, the unanimous support for that legislation will go unrecorded by TheyWorkForYou. At a time when the public think that our politics is hopelessly divided, do you agree that at moments when the House is unanimous in its support for such legislation, TheyWorkForYou should record that, not just the occasions on which we disagree?

Mr Speaker: We here are not responsible—the Chair is certainly not responsible—for the modus operandi of TheyWorkForYou. If memory serves, there will have been wording at the end of the debate saying that the question was agreed to, which is itself revealing. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is a pity, to put it no more strongly, if a situation of consensus in the House is not regarded as noteworthy. I think that is noteworthy. I do not have an immediate solution, but knowing the perspicacity—indeed, the indefatigability—of the hon. Gentleman, I feel sure that he will now beetle back to his office and pen a note or, better still, send an email to TheyWorkForYou, drawing attention to his efforts in the Chamber and imploring them to up their game.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am always troubled when I hear any allegation of bad faith in the Chamber, and today we heard an allegation that a Member has made a career out of lying. Would you please guide me on whether it is in order for Members to accuse others of lying?

Mr Speaker: I did not hear any allegation of dishonesty. I did not hear that. If there was an allegation of dishonesty, I did not hear it. I heard used another that I do not think was particularly tasteful but that I did not judge to be disorderly. What I would say to the hon. Gentleman—apart from that obviously I can rule only on that which I hear there and then, and there was a great deal of noise in the Chamber—is this: if there is to be an allegation of dishonesty against a Member, that allegation should be made on a substantive motion. That is the long-established procedure in the House and it should not otherwise be done.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I have given an answer. If the hon. Gentleman’s point of order is on the same matter—

James Heappey indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: It is on a totally unrelated matter.

James Heappey indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: Very well, I am happy to hear it, but that is the answer to the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts). Such allegations should be made on substantive motions and not otherwise. That is the answer. As far as each individual situation is concerned, the Chair obviously has to deal with the circumstances as he or, in the case of one or other of my deputies, she finds those circumstances.

James Heappey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Monday, we passed legislation to set net zero by 2050 as our decarbonisation target. It is a hugely important thing to have done and our constituents are very interested in the matter. Mr Speaker, you have done great things to make the proceedings of the House more intelligible to the public beyond, and websites such as TheyWorkForYou have done likewise, yet because there was no Division on Monday, the unanimous support for that legislation will go unrecorded by TheyWorkForYou. At a time when the public think that our politics is hopelessly divided, do you agree that at moments when the House is unanimous in its support for such legislation, TheyWorkForYou should record that, not just the occasions on which we disagree?

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BILLS PRESENTED

**ANIMAL WELFARE (SENTENCING) BILL**

_Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)_

Secretary Michael Gove, supported by the Prime Minister and David Rutley, presented a Bill to make provision about the mode of trial and maximum penalty for certain offences under the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

_Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 410) with explanatory notes (Bill 410-EN)._
Football Regulation

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

1.3 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish an independent regulator of football clubs; and for connected purposes.

On 9 March this year, supporters of Blackpool football club went to watch a home match for the first time after a four-year boycott of home fixtures. The reason for their protest was the mismanagement, as they saw it, of the club by its owners, Owen and Karl Oyston. It was more than simply mismanagement, though: the fans believed that the Oystons had been bleeding the club dry; not just failing to invest but taking large sums of money out. Indeed, a High Court judgment found that the Oystons had “illegitimately stripped” £26.77 million from the club.

Previously, as Nick Harris reported in the Daily Mail, Mr Oyston senior was the highest paid person in English football in the 2010-11 season, when Blackpool were in the premier league, receiving an eye-watering £11 million, with only Wayne Rooney reportedly coming close to similar remuneration, yet there was nothing the supporters could do within the existing structures of the game to force a change of ownership and stop their club being ransacked. Unable to prevent the mismanagement by the Oystons, the supporters had to take things into their own hands, and eventually launched a boycott of home games to deny Blackpool’s owners their money. The supporters received support from fans of other clubs and from the national supporters’ organisations, but little support from the football authorities. To get to the point at which the club is now being sold, it has taken four years of their not doing the one thing that binds them together and defines them: watching the football team they love.

If this was a one-off, I would feel sorry for Blackpool fans, pleased that they have almost won their campaign, and move on, but it is not a one-off. Coventry City fans are in an even worse situation. Who can forget the 1987 cup final, with players such as Micky Gynn, Brian Kilcline, Keith Houchen and Steve Ogrizovic, and manager John Sillett dancing on the Wembley turf with the great Nat Lofthouse. How can the club of the Lion of Vienna now be resorting to food banks as it is run into the ground?

This is not a recent phenomenon. In 1997, the owner of Brighton & Hove Albion closed the old Goldstone Ground, without making any alternative provision, so that he could sell off the site and make millions from property development. My own hometown club, formerly Chester City football club, was driven into the ground by a succession of owners who used it either as a tax-dodging scheme or in one case—it has been alleged—as a front for laundering ill-gotten gains from criminal activity. The club dissolved and was reborn as a fan-owned club, which has been challenging at times, but those challenges have never included deliberately running the club down and syphoning off cash.

The concern for supporters is that they are only ever one bad owner away from these types of problems, and that they have nowhere to turn for help. The FA and the leagues have an owners and directors test, but this might be relevant only in the case of, for example, previous criminal convictions. A group like Sisu can turn up at Coventry and bleed the club dry, with no intention of investing in its future, and the FA can do nothing.

I have given just a few examples of clubs with question marks over the way they are being or have been run. We can currently add to that list Notts County, Gateshead and Bury—last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith) petitioned the High Court on behalf of supporters in his constituency—and in the recent past Portsmouth, Hartlepool, Charlton Athletic and more. There are too many to be isolated cases, which suggests there is a broader problem that needs to be addressed.

When I served on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, I raised this issue with Greg Clarke, the chairman of the FA and a decent man who I believe genuinely wants to do his best for football. I asked him whether there was nothing the FA could do about unscrupulous owners; Mr Clarke replied that it can look into the backgrounds of potential owners—he was referring to the owners and directors test—but cannot do anything about a person who is simply bad at running a football club. The FA has devolved such matters to the leagues, but the leagues are membership organisations, and any rules or regulations have to be voted in by their own members—those very same club owners. The worst sanction is a points deduction for going into administration, but that is hardly relevant in the cases I have described.

Football needs independent regulation—that is, regulation independent of the owners, who have a vested interest. The making of rules or regulations about football clubs, and decisions on their application, should not be the task of the professional football clubs or the people who own and manage them. That regulation could and should be done by the Football Association, in the interests of the game as a whole. A regulatory body, under the auspices of the FA, adequately funded and suitably staffed, with effective regulations and the power to enforce them, could restore faith in the running of the game.

Of course, there are ways in which the owners and directors test can be improved, but it will never be foolproof. Not all bad owners start out bad. A regulator
should be there to educate, advise and support. Punishment and sanctions should be the last resort. The good owners should have nothing to fear; they should benefit from reflective improvements throughout the game. This Bill would bring into being an independent regulator with the powers to undertake independent and forensic audits of clubs’ directors and financial activities, where sufficient concern has been expressed about the management of the club, to report to the FA with recommendations for action, to address any deliberate financial mismanagement, or, of course, to decide that there is no case for further action.

There would be limits. I remember, for example, going to The Valley in November 1998 to watch Everton play Charlton. As I arrived there, I was horrified to learn that the then Everton chairman, Peter Johnson, had just sold our totemic striker Duncan Ferguson to Newcastle, behind the back of the manager. I wanted Johnson out, but a bad decision such as that would not necessarily require independent scrutiny. I am concerned about consistent behaviour to run a club into the ground. Similarly, I recall one previous owner of Chester City, an American, who sacked the manager and started to pick the team himself. That is bad management, as referred to by Greg Clarke, but it is not destructive management, using the club for nefarious means, and is unlikely on its own to fall under the scope of the regulator described in the Bill.

Ideally, it would be the Football Association that would undertake these activities, but in the absence of action an independent regulator is needed so that the scandals of Brighton, Blackpool, Coventry and Chester City are a thing of the past and supporters have somewhere to turn to in their desperation. Perhaps now the Football Association will take the opportunity to consider bringing forward proposals of its own to address this problem. I urge it to consider the suggestions of the Football Supporters Association, which I have consulted closely in preparing the Bill.

Although the directors of a football club may be the legal owners, they are surely only the custodians on behalf of the whole family of supporters of each club. If they are unable to act in the best interests of the club and the team, and are seen to be acting in their own interests to the detriment of the club, that cannot be allowed.

If I do not like Tesco, I can go to Sainsbury’s. If I am still unhappy, I can go to Asda, Waitrose, Aldi or Lidl, but we cannot do that with a football team. Football supporters have a profound sense of loyalty, identity and belonging to a club, which cannot be transferred at the first sign of trouble. In my case, I am the fourth generation of my family to support Everton, I was born into that tradition—you cannot manufacture it. Most supporters would say exactly the same of their club.

Football is a great unifier, bringing the nation together—that applies equally to each of our four home nations—in great moments of unity, as well as being something that we can talk about to complete strangers and bond over in the pub or by the coffee machine. That is why, when we have so many other critical issues to consider in this House, this Bill is important. Football matters to so many people. At a time when our country is so divided, football, in common with all sports but perhaps more than any other sport, can bring our country together again. When fans such as those of Blackpool, Coventry or Bolton Wanderers are treated as abysmally as they have been, while their owners bleed the clubs dry, there has to be a mechanism for giving them an outlet to redress their grievances, because at the moment they have nowhere to go. I would prefer the Football Association to do this, and hope that it will do so, but if it cannot we must support the supporters with a tough and independent regulator. The Bill does that. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Christian Matheson, Damian Collins, Mr Marcus Jones, Mr Jim Cunningham, Colleen Fletcher, Gordon Marsden, Jo Stevens, Alison McGovern, Justin Madders, Ian Mearns, Chi Onwurah and Chris Heaton-Harris present the Bill.

Christian Matheson accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 411).
Opposition Day

[UNALLOTTED HALF DAY]

Immigration

1.14 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I beg to move.

That this House regrets that the outgoing Prime Minister’s legacy will be her hostile environment policy and her unrealistic and damaging net migration target; calls for a fundamental change in the Government’s approach to immigration, refugee and asylum policy to one based on evidence, respect for human rights and fairness; welcomes the contribution made by migrants to the UK’s economy, society and culture; rejects regressive Government proposals to extinguish European free movement rights and to require EU nationals in the UK to apply for settled and pre-settled status; and recognises that a migration policy that works for the whole of the UK will require different policy solutions for different parts of the UK, particularly given Scotland’s demographic and economic profile.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to introduce this debate on what is such a crucial subject—the urgent need for Parliament to draw a line under a dismal decade of dreadful and sometimes disgraceful migration and asylum policies. It is sad, but the plain truth is that the Prime Minister takes a massive share of responsibility for those policies, which were driven by her awful net migration target and her ramping up of the horrendous hostile environment policies—the twin pillars of her drastic reign at the Home Office. Rather than tackling burning injustices right across the field of immigration and asylum policy, her policies created them. Yet Parliament must also take its share of the blame, because too often MPs not only failed to oppose her but actively cheered her on, and, collectively, we should put that right today.

Pretty much everybody in this Chamber knows that the net migration target is a load of utter baloney. It was a number plucked from thin air. It was utterly unachievable and undesirable from the outset. It created a numbers-obsessed Home Office pursuing ever more restrictive policies, regardless of the damage to families, our higher education system and our economy. Tens of thousands of couples were split apart and children divided from their parents. Universities were put at a competitive disadvantage not just by more restrictive immigration rules, particularly regarding post-study work, but by the message that was sent right around the globe. Small and medium-sized businesses were effectively excluded from recruiting from beyond the EU. The net migration target and its relentless failure problematised and politicised immigration to reach an arbitrary number. We must never return to those days.

It is good that the Home Secretary wants to ditch the net migration target, but it makes sense to ditch the hostile environment along with it, as the two are inextricably linked as a package. If one does not make sense, neither does the other. Alongside endlessly restricted visa rules, the hostile environment was a truly wicked means by which a net migration target would be achieved. However, as the independent chief inspector has pointed out, the Home Office never lifted a finger to monitor the impact that the hostile environment was having.

I want to focus on one key component of the hostile environment: the right to rent scheme. These measures have “a disproportionately discriminatory effect, and I would assume and hope that those legislators who voted in favour of the scheme would be aghast to learn of its discriminatory effect”.

Those are not my words, but the words of Mr Justice Martin Spencer in the High Court, who in ruling the whole scheme unlawful went on to say:

“Even if the Scheme had been shown to be efficacious in playing its part in the control of immigration, I would have found that this was significantly outweighed by the discriminatory effect...In these circumstances, I find that the Government has not justified this measure, nor, indeed, come close to doing so.”

That is a hostile environment in a nutshell: no evidence that it achieves anything positive, hugely discriminatory, totally unjustified and illegal. I trust that legislators who voted in favour of it are aghast. We should tell the Home Office today to accept that ruling instead of appealing it on the shameful grounds that the discrimination can, in some way, be justified.

It is fair to say that we were all aghast when we saw the hostile environment at its most vicious—the utter scandal of Windrush. Yet here we are still waiting for the lessons-learned review and waiting for it to be published in the very near future. As I have said before, it would be charitable to the Home Office and to the Prime Minister to say that they were reckless about the effect that the hostile environment would have. At worst, they took a conscious policy decision in the knowledge that there would be collateral damage, but deemed it acceptable. Warnings from the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants and many others went unheeded. Concerns expressed by high commissioners from the Caribbean were ignored. The impact assessment for the Immigration Act 2016 did everything but use the term “Windrush children” when explaining its likely negative impact. The Government ignored every single one of these warnings. The outgoing Prime Minister simply pressed on with ramping up the climate of checks at every turn, fully aware that it would be often close to impossible for many Windrush children, and others, to prove their legal position. Jobs and homes were lost; people were detained and removed. Statues and annual Windrush celebrations will not wash. A more fitting response would be to end the hostile environment that caused so much harm and hurt to the Windrush generation in the first place.

Contrary to what we have heard from too many on the Government Benches, this was not just one sad and isolated administrative error that could be quickly rectified. The disastrous impact of the hostile environment—essentially a half-baked, back-door ID card—does not
start or end there. Its victims are a huge and varied group: the 9 million British citizens without a passport who struggle because 43% of landlords and landladies say they are less likely to rent to such citizens now that the hostile environment has made them petrified of getting right-to-rent checks wrong; the thousands of children who are unable to afford the citizenship they are entitled to or the leave to remain that they qualify for; the children who do have leave to remain but who are brought up in families with no recourse to public funds; the hundreds—perhaps thousands—of Eritreans who were wrongly refused asylum on the basis of the Home Office’s dodgy country guidance, many of whom are now street-homeless and destitute; and the several thousands of students wrongly caught up in the Test of English for International Communication teaching scandal who were wrongly presumed guilty after the company that messed up the testing in the first place was then allowed to clean up its own mess.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will remember that a little while ago I raised the issue of constituents of mine who do not possess Android telephones, and therefore have to make a 500-mile round trip to the document scanning centre in Edinburgh. The Government say that it will be possible to complete the process on an iPhone within the year, but the point is that broadband coverage in parts of my constituency is patchy to say the very least. Does that not mean that people who, with the best will in the world, would like to remain are being hampered in their efforts, which will in turn hit businesses in remote parts of my constituency that depend on EU nationals?

Stuart C. McDonald: I agree wholeheartedly. I will come shortly to the issue of the 3 million EU citizens in the UK and how we risk repeating some of the mistakes that were made when the Windrush scandal broke. I just want to finish the list of those who have already been affected by the hostile environment, which includes the people who the Home Office agrees have been victims of trafficking, but who it does not think even merit a short period of leave to remain. The list of people impacted by the hostile environment goes on and on.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The hon. Gentleman said he would come back to the point made by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone). Will he also use this opportunity to clarify for anyone watching this debate that cases of constituents needing to travel 300 miles will happen only during the initial trial phase, and that when the full scheme is rolled out people will be able to complete the process through the post office or—Interruption. SNP Members are shouting, but we have to put both sides of the story so that we do not unnecessarily raise alarms when there are other methods that people can use to apply for the scheme.

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair enough point, but the Home Office still has to do more to make the EU settlement scheme as accessible as possible. I will return to these points in due course.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): My hon. Friend does an excellent job on the Home Affairs Committee. Does he agree that the hostile environment is alive and well today in Glasgow, with the Home Office contractor Serco threatening to make 300 asylum seekers homeless, after they have been labelled as failed asylum seekers? This is a perfect example of the hostile environment and hostile action in the city of Glasgow.

Stuart C. McDonald: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. I look forward to supporting his Adjournment debate on the issue tomorrow. I will shortly come to the asylum system as a whole, as it is one area where we need absolute root-and-branch reform.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On the subject of the hostile environment, does my hon. Friend share my horror at a document that I found yesterday on the Government’s website relating to trafficked women from Nigeria, which says that “trafficked women who return from Europe, wealthy from prostitution, enjoy high social-economic status and in general are not subject to negative social attitudes on return”? Does he agree that this is abhorrent language, and that the Government should immediately change this documentation and this attitude?

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend’s point speaks for itself. That is truly abhorrent.

The Prime Minister’s explicit and almost dystopian goal was to create the hostile environment, as if we can hermetically seal off the wicked illegal immigrants while the rest of us go about our business as usual. It was an approach that reached its absolute nadir with the horrendous “go home” vans—a disastrous episode that encapsulated everything that is wrong with the policy and precisely illustrated the key point here, which is that the hostile climate that the Government seek to create affects every single one of us. The hostile climate should be destroyed with its partner in crime: the net migration target.

I have outlined the sad legacy of the outgoing Prime Minister on migration policy. With her departure and influence totally removed from the Home Office, this is a time for radical reform, including rolling back most of her policies and putting evidence-based policy making, human rights and fairness at front and centre.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): As part of that change in policy, would the hon. Gentleman agree that we have to look at lifting the ban on genuine asylum seekers being able to work and contribute to the economy of the country, rather than forcing them to live on a pittance and not giving them the dignity they deserve?

Stuart C. McDonald: I wholeheartedly agree; I know the hon. Lady has tabled an amendment to the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill on that subject, as we did during the passage of the Immigration Act 2016, so her amendment will have our wholehearted support. I was pleased to be at an event yesterday evening with a coalition of organisations working towards that goal, and I hope the Home Office is listening.

In fairness, there have been little green shoots of recovery under the new Home Secretary and the Immigration Minister. I have welcomed the work to extend the resettlement scheme, for example. There have also been warm words on other possible areas of reform, but they are as yet a million miles away from the fully fledged reform agenda and actions we need.
Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Many people come to see me in my surgeries about family visit visas. The hostile environment is extending to such a degree that people cannot bring their family members over for a visit, because there is a presumption that they will stay once they are here. The Home Office is so bogged down in its attitude towards anybody who wants to come to the UK that we are not able to make progress. Should there not be wholesale reform of the system?

Stuart C. McDonald: There should indeed be wholesale reform of the visit visas and related decision-making processes. Families find themselves in a particularly horrendous position because the family visa rules have been tightened so much that so many family members cannot come here permanently. But when they do come to visit, they are then trapped under pretences in order to stay deliberately, so they are in a Catch-22 situation. I will return to family visas in a moment. The point I am trying to make is that if we do not learn the lessons from these disastrous mistakes, we are bound to repeat them, and there is a serious risk that the Government are going to do just that with the 3 million EU citizens.

As an increasing number of voices across the House—including the Home Affairs Committee—have said, the EU settled status scheme has a fundamental flaw at its heart. Even with the best will in the world and even with the Home Office pulling out all the stops to try to make the scheme work, hundreds of thousands of EU nationals in this country will not be aware of or understand the need to apply. They will lose their rights overnight and will be thrown even deeper into the hostile environment than the Windrush generation. The Government must therefore enshrine the rights of EU nationals in law, leaving them to use the settled status scheme as a means of providing evidence of status, rather than actually constituting the status itself. The Home Office must listen; otherwise this Parliament will have to make it listen to protect our EU citizens from the same disastrous fate as the Windrush generation.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The situation is even worse for seasonal workers who are not permanently settled here, is it not? The whole hostile environment attitude has driven perhaps the most stupid policy from this Government, who will ask 60,000 seasonal workers—essential labour—from the European economic area to go home and then perhaps invite 2,500 of them back on an expensive pilot scheme to do the work that the 60,000 people did previously. Has not this whole attitude just delivered some of the most sclerotic policy making that any of us can remember?

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a very valid point. The Government have shown such a tin ear to calls from across the House to implement a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme. Our answer to that problem is, of course, continued free movement plus a seasonal agricultural workers scheme, and we look forward to the Government actually listening to all those calls—not just from political parties here, but from the industry itself.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I want to take the opportunity of the Minister being here to intervene, because the Scottish Affairs Committee has been looking at the very issue of seasonal workers. We have found that the hostile environment is having an impact on a Government pilot by making it as difficult as possible for visas to be secured. The Government are asking for extra fees—over and above—to get people here to see whether they can work in the Government pilot. Does not that just demonstrate the excesses of the hostile environment—that it even applies to Government pilots?

Stuart C. McDonald: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I commend the work that his Committee has done in this area. It would be useful if the Home Office paid close heed to it.

I have discussed what we need to do to avoid repeating the mistakes of the Windrush generation.

Douglas Ross: The hon. Gentleman is outlining some concerns about the implications of people not applying for settled status. Does he therefore take exception to his SNP colleague, an MEP for Scotland, publicly saying that he will not apply for settled status and in that way encourage others to follow suit, which may see them fall through the gaps?

Stuart C. McDonald: Every individual must make their own call about whether they want to apply. I, for one, would certainly encourage all my constituents and all the EU nationals watching this to sign up for the scheme, but that does not take away from my essential point that they should not be asked to apply to stay in their own home in the first place. These rights should be enshrined in law right now.

It is not just in terms of the 3 million that we need radical change. All across the field of immigration, there is a massive job of work to do to help to fix the lives that have already been messed up by migration policies and to ensure that we avoid messing up so many more—to build a system that actually benefits our economy and society instead of undermining them and sowing division. Everyone in this House will have had many cases, as we have already heard, where we think that the rules are unfair.

This debate provides an opportunity to make the case for reform as we look ahead to the next chapter in immigration law form. I want to mention four areas very briefly, but there are a million more that I could flag up. First, I turn to the issue of families, which has already been raised. In pursuit of the net migration target, this country has adopted almost the most restrictive family rules in the world, with an extraordinary income requirement and ludicrously complicated rules and restrictions on how that requirement can be met. Over 40% of the UK population would not be entitled to live in this country with a non-EU spouse. The figures are even worse for women, for ethnic minorities, and for different parts of the UK. The Children’s Commissioner previously wrote a damning report about the 15,000 Skype children—there must now be many, many more—who get to see their mum or dad only via the internet, thanks to these rules, which force too many to pick between their country and their loved ones. It is appalling that the Home Office seems determined to extend these rules to EU spouses so that many more thousands of families will be split apart. We should be ditching these awful rules, not making more families suffer.
Secondly, there is citizenship. I have met with the Minister representatives of the Project for Registration of Children as British Citizens, and I know that last week she met the organisation. The Home Secretary has acknowledged in evidence to the Home Affairs Committee that over £1,000 is an incredible amount to charge children simply to process a citizenship application when they are entitled to that citizenship. The administrative cost is about £400, so over £600 is a subsidy for other Home Office activities. There is no excuse for funding the Home Office by overcharging kids for their citizenship. At the very least, the fee must be reduced to no more than the administrative charge. More broadly, we need to reduce the ridiculous fees that are being charged across the immigration system, especially to children.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Gentleman is making a very important point. I want to mention something that recently came to my attention at a surgery. A former EU national, who is now a British citizen, is concerned about the implications for them, if we leave the European Union, of the way in which the migration laws have been written. Even though the settled status scheme might seem unclear, the situation is not clear for those who have already taken out citizenship either.

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point. I do not know whether she is planning to contribute to the debate; if so, she can speak more about that.

Thirdly, our immigration detention system remains outrageously bloated, and detention without time limit makes the UK an outlier in Europe. We detain too many people for too long, including many vulnerable adults, such as torture survivors, who should never be detained at all. It is a national scandal and an affront to the rule of law, as myriad reports have shown. We have had some small forward steps from the current Home Office team, but also some missteps. We need radical reform so that detention is a matter of absolute last resort and not routine.

Fourthly, there is our asylum system, which could command a whole debate in itself. There can be few areas that require as big an overhaul. We need to ensure better-quality decisions and proper financial support. We must support the wonderful coalition urging the Government to lift the ban on asylum seekers working. We need a better managed move-on period and properly accountable and funded systems of accommodation. We need a caseworking system so that we are never left with dreadful mass evictions like those we look set to see in Glasgow.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent series of points, particularly now that he has come on to the asylum system, which is a subject close to my heart. Does he agree that if we want to show the world that we are truly an outward-facing, internationalist country—as I believe everyone in this House would agree we are; it is part of our values—then the asylum system is in urgent need of reform to make sure that refugees are truly welcome, and to live up to the findings of the Home Office’s own recently published report on refugee integration? There is a lot we could do right now. Even in the next three weeks, we could make it possible for asylum seekers to work after six months.

Stuart C. McDonald: There is a host of opportunities to improve the asylum system. Only last week, we debated refugee family reunion rules. We have already passed on Second Reading a Bill to change those rules, yet it has been held up in the system, thanks to the Government.

I have briefly mentioned four issues, but there are a million others that other Members of Parliament will touch on, such as visas for religious workers, visit visas, lack of appeal rights, lack of legal aid, the complexities of the tier 2 system, visas for fishing vessels, visas for agricultural workers—and so on and so forth. The truth is that our immigration and asylum systems are truly in a mess.

That brings me on to the Government’s proposals for our future immigration system—their White Paper. Next to none of these issues is addressed in the White Paper at all. The bit of the immigration system that is a disaster is the bit that is being left largely unformed. In fact, it is being rolled out so as to apply to EU nationals in future. The one bit of the immigration system that works perfectly well—free movement of people—is being annihilated. The Government have their priorities completely the wrong way round. I love free movement and my party is passionate about its benefits. We deeply regret that these amazing rights are in danger of coming to an end. All the evidence is that it is beneficial economically—for growth, for productivity and for public finances. In Scotland, in particular, it has transformed our demographic outlook. From a country of net emigration, we are now a country of positive in-migration. We have benefited hugely culturally and socially.

Of course, the quid pro quo is that we will lose our free movement rights too. I have benefited from free movement, as I know many Members in the Chamber have. I regret that this Government want to prevent future generations from enjoying the enormous benefits that so many of us have enjoyed. People did not vote to end free movement, contrary to what the Prime Minister says. This is the Prime Minister’s red line, not the people’s. Simply repeating ad nauseam that we are “taking back control of our borders” is not an argument and it is not leadership. Real leadership is looking at the evidence and saying that free movement is an enormous benefit that we should treasure and keep.

We welcome the gradual change in approach from the Home Secretary towards one-size-fits-all migration policy making. We welcome his announcement that the proposed new £30,000 threshold will be reviewed, including the possibility of regional and sub-state variations within the UK. However, I must emphasise that this is just a small start—baby steps. There are so many other features of the proposed new immigration system that are causing huge concern. Scotland’s economy relies disproportionately on small and medium-sized enterprises. The tier 2 system is not designed for SMEs. Its bureaucracy and expense make it inaccessible for many businesses, which therefore instead recruit from the EU if they cannot do so locally. Reducing the threshold does not fix that; it simply means businesses jumping through administrative hoops and expense simply to recruit workers they could previously have recruited under free movement.

Thangam Debbonaire: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the work done by Hope not Hate and British Future establishes that the British people are behind
what he is arguing for? Most people actually value immigration; they just want a system that is fair, accountable and transparent. That is what I believe all of us here would want.

Stuart C. McDonald: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I think that all sensible people would be behind the arguments I am making.

The other point about reducing the threshold is that it does not fix the fundamental problem that ending free movement risks a demographic time bomb for Scotland, with implications for its workforce, its economy and its public finances. The Scottish Government has proposed ways in which additional Scottish visas can help to play a part in addressing that, learning from systems such as the Canadian system. I want the Home Secretary and the Immigration Minister to engage constructively with those proposals. But ultimately the best answer to the challenges Scotland faces is continued free movement.

We need to recognise that under the outgoing Prime Minister, migration policy has gone horribly wrong. The current Home Secretary accepts that the net migration target was wrong. The High Court says that key planks of the hostile environment were discriminatory and unjustified. Let us ditch both. Let us learn from the past and not repeat these mistakes, particularly regarding the 3 million. If the new system is to work for all of the UK, it will have to include different rules for different parts of it. Let us seize this opportunity to turn over an entirely new leaf on immigration and asylum policy.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call the Minister, on her birthday.

1.39 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I welcome this debate on immigration and the opportunity for what I am sure will be a thoughtful and constructive discussion. I am a little disappointed not to see the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) in her place, because when we were discussing refugee family reunion last week, she made a point about the importance of language. I added to that the importance of tone, and I hope that we will hear people using their language carefully this afternoon. I am sure, given the Members present, that we will.

The immigration system is at a point where we are preparing to leave the European Union and working to provide status to the 3.5 million or so European Union citizens who have made the UK their home. Through the measures we set out in our White Paper on the future borders and immigration system, we are looking forward to the biggest change to the immigration system for over 45 years and are halfway through engaging in a year-long national conversation.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Minister referred to the EU citizens who have made the UK their home, but what about those of them who were denied the right to vote in the recent European elections? What will the Government do to redress that? Was that not a shabby treatment of those very citizens in what should have been an all-inclusive democratic process? It is simply not good enough for that to be swept under the carpet by any manner of means.

Caroline Nokes: I do not think there has been any attempt to sweep that under the carpet. There was an urgent question in the House on the matter—I think it was the week before last—and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman raised his point then, but he knows as well as I do that his question is best addressed to the Cabinet Office, which is responsible for elections, not me as the Immigration Minister.

Alongside the White Paper on the future borders and immigration system that we published last year, the borders, immigration and citizenship system continues to deliver, to secure the UK border, control immigration and provide world-class services that contribute to our prosperity.

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) talked with regret about the immigration system, but it is worth reminding the House of some salient points about its successes. In the year to March, more people came to the UK, with 142.8 million passengers arriving here; the number of visitor visas granted was at a record high of 2.3 million, an increase of 9%; 181,000 people were given entry clearance to come to work in the UK and bolster the UK’s economy; 358,000 students came to the UK to study; over 5,700 people were provided with protection and support through our four UK resettlement schemes; over 5,600 family reunion visas were issued; over 2,700 of which were for children; and 89,000 people were granted settlement, with 149,000 granted British citizenship.

The majority of the people I have referred to engage with the immigration system in a smooth way. They are contributing to the growth of tourism and our economy, attending our world-leading universities and enriching our culture. I do not believe that there is any great difference in aspiration between the Scottish National party and the UK Government on the topic of students. We both recognise that international students make a huge contribution to our education institutions socially, academically and financially. We want our education sector to flourish and to see ever increasing numbers of international students coming to the UK. Indeed, the Government have set an ambition of increasing the number of international students in higher education to 600,000 by 2030.

Where there may be a difference is that the Government are keen to share our successes and send the message that the UK is welcoming, while the SNP sadly seems determined to convey a sense of gloom. I am pleased to say that the facts support the Government’s position. The number of visa applications to study at the UK’s universities increased by 10% last year, to the highest number ever recorded, and visa application numbers are 27% higher than they were in 2011. There are close to half a million international students studying in the UK, and we continue to be the second most popular destination in the world for them. I hope that SNP Members will join in celebrating that success.

While we are on the subject of facts, I note that the motion calls for a policy “based on evidence”. The House will be aware that last year the Migration Advisory Committee—the Government’s expert, non-partisan
advisers on immigration matters—carried out a detailed study into international students. The MAC took evidence from a wide variety of stakeholders representing every part of the United Kingdom, including Scotland. As the MAC indicates, 140 written responses were submitted to its call for evidence. This is absolutely evidence-based policy making.

Pete Wishart: We all know that the MAC does entirely what the Government want it to do. Is it not absurd that we educate international students to a high standard and then boot them out, because there is no post-study work scheme? I was in Montreal with the Scottish Affairs Committee just the other week, where they do everything possible to encourage their students to stay, because they have devolution of immigration policy. Should Scotland not have some of that too?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman has perhaps not read the White Paper and seen the additional offer that the Government are making to international students on post-study work. He would do well to read it. He said that the MAC only gives the Government evidence that we want to hear—far from it. He is falling into the trap of being interested in evidence when it suits him.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Nokes: No, I will not.

The MAC concluded both that students should not be removed from the net migration target and that there should be no increase in the length of time that undergraduates are allowed to remain in the UK on completion of their studies. The MAC said:

"We do not recommend a separate post-study work visa".

I look forward to the SNP’s endorsement of those positions, or are they interested in evidence-based policy making only when the evidence happens to support their pre-conceived notions?

The Government have decided to go beyond the MAC’s recommendations. In our White Paper, we committed to increasing the period of post-study leave for both undergraduates and master’s students because, as I have said, we want our education sector to continue to flourish and to compete strongly on the international stage.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Nokes: No, I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman again.

Evidence-based policy making is the principle that our future borders and immigration system will be built upon. It will be a single immigration system, where it is workers’ skills that matter, not where they come from.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for giving way. She referred to evidence-based policy making. Does she recognise that the Fresh Talent Initiative introduced by a previous First Minister of Scotland, Lord McConnell, which he credits as his single most effective achievement in office, contributed to reversing Scotland’s historic population decline?

Caroline Nokes: That is an interesting point, because I think we heard from the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East that what had reversed Scotland’s population decline was free movement, with people being able to come in from the EU.

The future system will focus on high skills, welcoming talented and hard-working individuals who will support the UK’s dynamic economy and enabling employers to compete on the world stage. In line with the MAC’s recommendation, we will prioritise the migrants who bring the most benefit to the UK, maximising the benefits of immigration. This week, we asked the MAC to review and advise on salary thresholds, including whether there is a case for regional salary thresholds, and we are currently engaging with businesses and employers from all parts of the UK and all sectors of the economy to ensure that the future immigration system is suitable for their needs.

Thangam Debbonaire: The Minister is generous to give way. She mentioned high-skilled migration. Has there been reflection in her Department, and perhaps in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development, about the impact on other countries of us focusing on taking their high-skilled migrants? I am not saying that there is an easy answer—I do not think there is—but I wonder whether that has been a consideration across Departments.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady is right to refer to that. It is important that we consider our immigration system in the round, and particularly when it comes to doctors and nurses. I am very conscious that while we welcome and attract people working in the medical profession from around the globe, many of them come from countries where those skills are sorely needed. In fact, we know that many of them return to their home countries, having gained experience and knowledge here. It is important that we work with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, DFID and the Department for Education on determining future immigration policy, because when it comes to our workforce needs, immigration simply cannot be the only answer.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister says she wants to work with business, which I am very pleased to hear. Does she agree with the director of the Confederation of British Industry in Scotland, who said:

“The proposals outlined in the White Paper don’t meet Scotland’s needs or the needs of the UK as a whole, and would be a sucker punch for many firms right across the country”?

Caroline Nokes: I gently point out to the hon. and learned Lady that I am spending this year engaging with businesses and business organisations. Just yesterday, I had the pleasure of meeting people working in the hospitality industry in Cumbria, such as in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison). It is absolutely imperative that we take forward the White Paper, and we always said there would be a year of engagement and of listening to views.

The hon. and learned Lady must acknowledge that there been reflection in her Department, and perhaps in the other countries of us focusing on taking their high-skilled migrants? I am not saying that there is an easy answer—I do not think there is—but I wonder whether that has been a consideration across Departments.

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The hon. and learned Lady must acknowledge that we have asked the Migration Advisory Committee to look again at salary thresholds because it is important that we get this right. As I said at the outset, this is one of the biggest changes in our immigration system for
45 years, and it is imperative that we listen to the concerns of all sectors of the economy, and of all regions and countries.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The last intervention included a selective quote from CBI Scotland. To be fair, the CBI, the Food and Drink Federation Scotland, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce and the National Farmers Union Scotland have all said that they want an all-UK solution when it comes to our future immigration schemes. They do not want the devolution of those powers to the Scottish Government—least of all, it might be said, to this Scottish Government.

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. He will be conscious that, when we are looking for cross-party consensus, there are several across the House who agree with me and him that we should have one immigration policy for the whole of the United Kingdom.

The future system needs to uphold our international obligations in relation to asylum, and to support decisions based on human rights. As I set out last week, we continue to work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to resettle the most vulnerable people from areas of conflict. We have resettled almost 16,000 people since 2015, nearly 3,000 of whom have been resettled in Scotland. In our new consolidated scheme, starting in 2020, we are committed to resettling about 5,000 of the world’s most vulnerable refugees every year. That strategy is to prevent vulnerable people from falling into the hands of traffickers and making dangerous journeys across both land and sea.

It is firmly our view that people should claim asylum in the first safe country, not the last, but where people are in genuine need of our protection, we will provide it. I am proud that this Government have given protection to over 66,000 people since June 2010. Where an individual does not meet our immigration rules or our obligations under international law, I make no apology for making enforcing decisions that the public expect as a matter of fairness.

Peter Grant: May I take the Minister back to her comments on the Migration Advisory Committee? I note with interest that she wants us to accept everything that committee says, but seems reluctant to accept the findings of a House of Commons Select Committee. The creation of the Select Committees was celebrated by Mr Speaker not so long ago.

Can the Minister tell us which member of the Migration Advisory Committee has direct experience of the impact of migration in Scotland? I have just looked at the committee’s website, and there is no doubt that all its members are very august experts in their own field, but none of them has a job anywhere further north than York and, as far as I can tell from the potted biographies, none of them has ever worked in any of the devolved nations of the United Kingdom. Is it any surprise then that the Migration Advisory Committee is made up of the most eminent experts there are in the country, but that the Migration Advisory Committee is made up of the most eminent experts there are in the country, but will be aware that when we recruit to a vacant position on the MAC, which happens every few years, we are of course open to applications from every part of the United Kingdom, including Scotland.

The UK’s measures on access to work, benefits and services have been in place and developed over many years of varying and successive Governments, and are consistent with the legislative frameworks operated by most other comparable countries. Opposition Members should be reminded that other EU member states are subject to an EU directive requiring them to have in place right to work checks and sanctions for employers of illegal workers, to protect potential victims of modern slavery.

Measures to restrict access to benefits and services are also designed to protect the taxpayer—a legitimate objective that has public support. A YouGov poll last year found that 71% of people support a policy of requiring people to show documents proving their right to be here in order to do things such as taking up employment, renting a flat or opening a bank account. Measures on the right to work and the right to rent are about tackling unscrupulous employers and landlords to protect the vulnerable, while also protecting good employers and landlords. That is in the interests of a prosperous and fair society that supports those who play by the rules, as well as protecting those who might otherwise be exploited. However, we are clear that these measures must distinguish effectively between those with lawful status, who are entitled to access work, benefits and services in the UK, and those who are here illegally. The Home Office is committed to improving how we meet the differing needs of the public we serve.

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Nokes: I am tempted not to give way, because later this afternoon I will asking for the leave of the House to wind up the debate as well as open it. That will give me an opportunity to respond to points that Members have made in their contributions, which I hope will be more helpful than simply responding to an intervention.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. It may be helpful to say that somebody might object, which would prevent that from happening, so I think the Minister ought to show generosity now.

Caroline Nokes indicated assent.

Stuart C. McDonald: Well, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Will she address head-on the High Court decision that the right to rent scheme is causing terrible discrimination in the housing market? How can she possibly defend the Home Office decision to appeal that on the grounds that the discrimination is justified in any way, shape or form?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Home Office is appealing that judgment, and given that there is live litigation, it would not be appropriate for me to comment at this point.
As I have said, we want our systems to become as simple and straightforward as possible. During the engagement I have held with employers on the White Paper over the last six months, I have been very conscious of the point the hon. Gentleman made about small and medium-sized enterprises, and the challenges they may find in engaging with the tier 2 sponsorship process. It is absolutely the Home Office’s intention to make all our systems far more straightforward and streamlined, and the comments I have received from employers will certainly enable us to build a system that I hope will be both responsive and quick. A challenge has been set—I think it was in the Chancellor’s Budget—that we want to be in a situation to determine the equivalent of tier 2 visas within two to three weeks. That will be a dramatic improvement, and one that I hope users of the system, and indeed small businesses, will welcome.

Thangam Debbonaire: The Minister is being incredibly generous in giving way, and I am very grateful to her. She mentioned engagement with employers, which of course the right thing to do. Will she consider public engagement, of the sort that Hope not Hate and British Future have carried out over the last two years, in the course of developing and expanding the policy and turning the White Paper into concrete measures? Bringing the British people with her would be the right thing to do.

Caroline Nokes: Yes, certainly. I have mentioned the engagement with employers, and over the last few months we have also been meeting non-governmental organisations and academia. Indeed, in the hon. Lady’s own city of Bristol, we held a roundtable that was well attended by representatives of Bristol University, which is very keen that the voice of the student should be heard, as well as the voice of the institution. It is important that we continue to engage and listen to voices from across the entire country.

We are marshalling our reforms under three key themes: improving our customer service and responding more effectively to the individual needs of people who interact with the system; making sure that we respond better to vulnerable individuals who interact with our system, including by ensuring that our processes are accessible; and ensuring we are an open organisation that listens and responds when our customers and staff identify problems, using feedback to design our policies and procedures and to understand their impact.

The EU settlement scheme embodies those principles. We have listened and responded, building on the feedback that we received through the extensive stakeholder engagement and the two public beta phases before its launch in March. The customer experience is where we want the future system to be. The scheme is fully digital and genuinely world leading because applicants can validate their identity using their mobile device—including Apple customers later this year—and are provided with a secure digital status that, unlike a physical document, cannot be lost, stolen or tampered with.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), who is no longer in his place, made the point about those who have only Apple, not Android, phones, and about how the broadband coverage in his constituency makes uploading documents difficult. I would say to him that his constituents do not have to travel on a 500 mile round trip to Edinburgh, because the postal route opened on 30 March in time to coincide with the original planned date of leaving the European Union.

The motion talks about rejecting the requirement for EU citizens to apply for settled and pre-settled status, but a declaratory system, under which they automatically acquired an immigration status, would significantly reduce any incentive to obtain evidence of that status. It would risk creating confusion among employers and service providers, and would have the effect of impeding EU citizens’ access to benefits and services to which they were entitled.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Minister talks about confusion among employers. In the highlands, in my constituency, the confusion among employers is over where they are going to source staff, as people have been chased off by the hostile measures taken by this Government. Is it not time to say that people in the highlands, who are just highlanders, should just be able to stay in their homes?

Caroline Nokes: On EU settled status, we have absolutely said to our EU friends, neighbours and colleagues not just, “You can stay,” but, “We want you to stay.” That is an important message, which I will continue repeating both in the House and outside it.

We have put in place a system that is simple and straightforward. In the vast majority of cases, people’s applications are being determined within one to four working days, and satisfaction with the scheme is high. We are at a point where well over 800,000 people have been through the scheme, and it is important that we continue to move from the current phase to making sure that as many as possible access their status. That is why we have put in place up to £9 million of funding for 57 voluntary and community organisations across the UK to help us to reach out to an estimated 200,000 vulnerable or at-risk EU citizens and help them apply. There are over 300 assisted digital locations across the UK, where people can be supported through their application, and it is important to reflect the fact that the scheme is working. Furthermore, it has been built at pace, is successfully delivering in large volumes, and is protecting vulnerable individuals, which demonstrates how the Home Office is building for the future.

I am proud to serve as Immigration Minister at this time of unprecedented change, during which we are engaging with stakeholders right across the country to build our future borders and immigration system, and I very much look forward to hearing further contributions from hon. Members this afternoon.
of the UK’s immigration policy for a decade. The first was to bring down net migration to the tens of thousands. This bogus target was backed up by no research or rationale, apart from being a good soundbite. It has done harm to our economy and led to the scapegoating of migrants, and it has never been met.

The net migration target drove the Government to restrict access for international students. International students generate over £25 billion for our economy. They contribute to our culture and society and to soft power abroad, not to mention the fact that they subsidise university fees for UK students. Labour has called for international students to be taken out of net migration numbers.

The second pledge was to create a “really hostile environment”. The Government cut the Border Force, and they turned teachers, doctors and landlords into immigration officers. The hostile environment policy culminated in the Windrush crisis. Labour warned from the start that the hostile environment would lead to discrimination, and that is exactly what has happened.

In March, the High Court ruled that the right to rent scheme directly causes landlords to discriminate against prospective tenants on racial and nationality grounds, and furthermore that the Government have provided no evidence that it actually achieves their stated aim—to reduce illegal migration.

The high cost of our immigration system is part and parcel of the hostile environment. This morning, the British Medical Association called on the Government to scrap up-front charging for migrants using the NHS, as it causes discrimination and people are being denied urgent and essential care. When the coalition Government were bringing in the hostile environment, they co-ordinated a cross-departmental, focused and strategic approach to denying services to migrants, but since Windrush we have seen no such serious attempt to remedy this great injustice.

We were promised a compensation scheme “within two weeks” when the scandal broke, but it took the Government over a year to set it up. Only 13 people have received payments from the emergency hardship fund. Now we have the compensation scheme, it is extremely difficult to navigate. The form totals 18 pages; the burden of proof is high; and there is a severe lack of help and advice for a generation of people who are, in general, unused to using the internet.

It is a scandal that the scheme does not compensate those who have been wrongfully deported. The Government’s guidance says “it is difficult to determine whether inability to return to the UK is a loss”.

What an absurd statement. Of course losing your home, being separated from family and being sent to an unfamiliar country is a loss.

Meanwhile, victims of Windrush are tragically passing away before they can get justice. Over the weekend, The Guardian reported that Richard Stewart had died without an apology or compensation. He was a prominent Windrush campaigner who moved to the UK as a British subject in 1955, but was told in 2012 that he would need to pay £1,200 to naturalise. He could not afford to pay that.

Many victims of Windrush were wrongly locked up in immigration detention. The UK’s immigration detention system is a stain on our national conscience. We are the only country in Europe that detains people indefinitely. We must have a 28-day time limit on immigration detention. Our amendment to the immigration Bill has strong, cross-party support and sends the message that this House demands an end to indefinite detention. Labour has called for the closure of the Yarl's Wood and Brook House detention centres—two names synonymous with mistreatment and abuse. We will also review the entire detention estate and consider whether we need to close Dungavel detention centre in Scotland.

We now face a potential repeat of Windrush for EU citizens. Labour has voted against the Tory immigration Bill, which would end freedom of movement. It is foolish and reckless to change our immigration system in this way without first knowing what our future relationship with the EU will be.

Mr Sweeney: I welcome my hon. Friend’s announcement of the Labour party’s intention to close the Dungavel detention centre, which is a shameful stain on this nation’s conscience, as are all our detention centres—extrajudicial detention without recourse to proper justice.

Does my hon. Friend recognise the practice of the Home Office of moving people around different detention centres around the UK so that they are not able to access friends, family or any sort of legal representation? That is a shameful act, and it should be stopped immediately by the Home Office.

Afzal Khan: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and I agree with him.

In Labour’s first Opposition day debate after the 2016 referendum, we called on the Government to unilaterally guarantee the rights of EU nationals. If the Government had done this, we could have avoided the situation where, four months before we face a cliff edge, millions of EU citizens are still in limbo.

The SNP supported our amendment to the immigration Bill, which would make settled status a declaratory system, so EU citizens living in the UK would be automatically granted settled status, rather than having to apply for it. In rejecting a declaratory scheme, the Government often make the argument that the process in 1973 for the Windrush generation was declaratory, so we should make people apply to avoid a repeat of Windrush. I believe that that argument shows the Government have learned the wrong lessons from Windrush.

The Government are saying that Windrush people were illegally detained and deported, because they did not have the proper papers to prove they were in the UK legally. With EU citizens, the Government have decided to create a situation where people will still be detained and deported, but that will be legal because they have not applied for settled status in time. Just as the Government are not fulfilling their obligations to EU citizens, they are not fulfilling their humanitarian obligations to refugees.

The Prime Minister has consistently failed the most vulnerable child refugees. Even when forced to resettle children under the Dubs amendment, the Government closed the scheme after just 480 children had been resettled, rather than the 3,000 originally envisioned. Despite repeated calls from non-governmental organisations...
and MPs and a vote on the Floor of the House, the Government have failed to expand refugee family reunion. These rules have been under review for over a year. They do not require legislation to be enacted, and they would make an immeasurable difference to the lives of refugees in the UK. As we move beyond the failures of the past, we must start building an idea of what new immigration policy will meet the needs of our economy and build prosperity.

In December, the Government published a White Paper on immigration. Their own economic analysis predicts that the proposals would cost between £2 billion and £4 billion over the first five years. The proposed £30,000 salary threshold, in particular, would severely limit access to labour that many sectors in our economy desperately need. The health and social care sector is dealing with serious workforce shortages, while demand is increasing. Across the UK, four in five European economic area employees working full-time in social care would have been ineligible to work in the UK under the proposed system. In Scotland, less than 10% of those in caring personal service occupations earn above £25,000, and none earns £30,000.

Labour and the SNP agree on our diagnosis of a broken immigration system. However, we do not agree entirely on the cure. The SNP has argued for a devolved immigration system, where Scotland is given the power to determine its own immigration rules. We believe this approach would be unenforceable, because there would be no way to distinguish between those who have a visa under the Scottish system and those who have a visa for the rest of the UK. We would either need visa checks along Hadrian’s Wall or we would have to rely on the hostile environment. Neither option is acceptable. Under a Labour Government, a devolved immigration system would be unnecessary. Our immigration system will be flexible and based on the needs of our economy, including Scotland’s, not on bogus migration targets.

In conclusion, the Prime Minister’s legacy will be a cruel and hostile immigration policy, which has harmed our economy and caused the Windrush crisis. Whoever is our next Prime Minister, they must commit to ending the hostile environment and introduce a 28-day time limit on immigration detention.

Joanna Cherry: I cannot let the hon. Gentleman move on from his statement about the impossibility of enforcing a differential immigration system within the United Kingdom without asking him what steps the Labour party has taken to look at other systems, such as the system within the Canadian federation, which operates perfectly satisfactorily without border checks, and I remind him that Hadrian’s Wall does not actually run along the border.

Afzal Khan: I have already said that our immigration system will be flexible and based on the needs of our economy, including Scotland’s.

Whoever is Prime Minister must make settled status a declaratory system, scrap the £30,000 salary threshold and uphold our humanitarian obligations to refugees. This country has a great amount to offer and to gain from migration, and that should be celebrated.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I suggest to Members that we work on about 10 minutes each to make sure everybody gets equal time.

2.14 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your forbearance in allowing me to speak at this point in the debate.

Let me first say that I appreciated the tone and much of the content of the speech delivered by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). He took a very measured approach to some of the issues that I think across the House we recognise are matters of concern. However, in response to the Minister’s opening remarks and the interventions she suffered from the SNP, it was clear that when it comes to this matter, as in so many other matters, the SNP’s position is, in my view, tedious.

SNP Members, as they always do, frame the debate around the constitution: whether decisions should be made in Edinburgh or London. That is what dominates their thinking. That is what gets them most excited, as we have seen in this debate. In doing so, they have, as they always do, let down Scotland. Their voices should be standing up for their constituencies, telling us about the needs of their communities and their businesses. Instead, they use this as an opportunity to talk on and on about independence; about how, if we had independence, we could have everything we ever wanted and it would all be perfect. It is the age-old tactic of those who sell snake oil. The fact is that the people of Scotland told us exactly what they think of the SNP’s independence plans in 2014. They want none of it and they want us, as Scottish MPs, to get on with the job of representing Scotland’s interests within the UK.

Chris Stephens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Will he tell me what is tedious about an intervention raising the issue of Serco, a multinational company, being willing in the next couple of months to throw 300 asylum seekers out in the street? Does he not share my concern that there is something wrong with Government policy in that regard?

Stephen Kerr: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I was referring, as he well knows, to the interventions we have heard since, which have focused again on the SNP’s never-ending neverendum desires for Scotland.

Joanna Cherry: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He says that we should be representing the interests of our constituents. I assure him that my constituents have written to me in their hundreds about their desire to stay in the single market and their desire to keep freedom of movement. Businesses in my constituency want to keep freedom of movement, too. So may I just suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he shows a little bit more respect for SNP Members and the efforts we make to represent the views of our constituents? He may tell us that people in Stirling do not care about freedom of movement. But that is not my understanding from the way they voted in 2016. Can he just show a bit more respect?

Stephen Kerr: The hon. and learned Lady talks about freedom of movement. Businesses in my constituency tell me that they want that. The two major universities in Edinburgh South West, Heriot-Watt and Napier, want to keep freedom of movement, too. So may I just suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he shows a little bit more respect for SNP Members and the efforts we make to represent the views of our constituents? He may tell us that people in Stirling do not care about freedom of movement. But that is not my understanding from the way they voted in 2016. Can he just show a bit more respect?
last week and this week, the Westminster leader of the SNP accused a serving Member of this House of being a racist, and today it was said, without any challenge, that the same right hon. Member who serves in this House had made a career out of telling lies. So let us not hear anything about respect from SNP Members.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I think the Chair said something about it previously. I was not in the Chair at the time. Mr Speaker did not hear it. I do not want to get into a debate about it.

Stephen Kerr: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The truth is that this debate is a great opportunity to talk about the positive side of immigration: to talk about how people have come from all over the world to make their home here in the United Kingdom and in Scotland in particular, and how they make an invaluable contribution to our communities and our economy. But the SNP never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.

Luckily, Government Members have heard already how immigration policy can be run at a UK level to take account of the local and sectoral issues throughout our economy. I would like to add my voice to those genuinely speaking up for Scotland, rather than casting around for more grievance and more excuses to talk about constitutional politics. Simply transferring responsibility for Scotland’s immigration to Holyrood, as the SNP proposes, entirely misses the point of how a UK-wide approach will ensure a positive environment to attract the very people our economy needs.

We cannot afford to have different systems operating in the United Kingdom, where people must be able to move freely around. I referred earlier to the various hugely influential voices in Scotland on this issue—the director of CBI Scotland, Tracy Black, the Food and Drink Federation Scotland, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce and NFU Scotland—who are saying that we should use Scotland’s influence to lead a UK-wide system that meets our needs. That is exactly what I am trying to do by making this contribution.

The proposals for a future immigration policy, however, as laid out in the White Paper, will cause real damage to the UK economy and must be changed. The truth is that the diverse needs within Scotland need to be accommodated within a flexible policy framework based on reality, rather than on an academic theory. Scotland’s needs for an immigration policy are the same as those in any other part of the UK. In our fishing communities in the north-east of Scotland, we find similar issues to those in communities in the south-west of England. In our industrial heartlands in central Scotland, we find the same issues as in the west midlands of England. In places such as Stirling, with its rural agricultural base and tourist attractions, we find the same issues as in Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cornwall and many other parts of England.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman says that there are no differences, except that England has developed an immigration issue because of population growth. The problem is that Scotland has a set population, with a diminishing working-age population. He quotes directors and business, but what about NHS Scotland? We need more people.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Lady is well aware that every social attitudes survey conducted shows that attitudes to immigration in Scotland mirror those across the United Kingdom. We Conservative Members are speaking up for the positive benefits of immigration.

If someone is running a hotel and looking for staff in Callander, the chances are that they have the same issues as someone running a hotel in Penrith or Penzance. The people who work in these industries—hospitality, tourism, food production, manufacturing, social care and many more—cannot be described as unskilled. Meet the people who make whisky and find out about how they make their product, and tell me that they are unskilled. They are not, yet the White Paper produced by the Government tells us that everyone who earns under £30,000 is assumed to be unskilled. The average salary in Scotland is £22,980. I would not begin to think, let alone say, that the average Scottish worker is unskilled. Herein lies the problem of relying on an arbitrary salary level to determine a policy. Whatever number is chosen, it is subjective and the methodology used to reach it is open to question and dissection.

Some of the most skilled people I know earn less than £30,000 a year. To call them unskilled labour is a travesty. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am sorry, but relying on the wisdom of a panel of academics, however learned they may be, of whom by the way, is resident in or has a connection with Scotland, and none of whom seems to have any connection with the country north of Watford Gap—that is what I thought, but apparently it is York—is not a wise approach. I am a critic of the Government’s approach on this. The White Paper on the Migration Advisory Committee report is a cut-and-paste job. Admittedly, it is expert-led, but where was the demonstrable use of critical faculties? Where was the consideration of all parts of the United Kingdom? Where was the Union test?

Speaking for myself, it is hard to discern what test was applied before the Government published their White Paper. If the Government publish a White Paper, it is not unfair to say that this is the starting position for Government policy. What is really needed is a system that is adaptive to the needs of specific sectors. We need to get under the skin of the UK economy and understand the needs of our businesses. Where they cannot plug gaps using training or automation, need seasonal staff or need a high supply of specific skills that are in short supply in the UK, those should be the drivers behind our immigration target, not an arbitrary salary figure. Only an economist cloistered in the halls of academe, with their theories and assumptions, would begin to consider this measure to be adequate.

As we move towards new leadership, I hope that our Government, Prime Minister and country will move in the direction of an immigration policy that will seek to meet the needs of our country dynamically. It needs to be an adaptive policy that changes as the needs of business and our economy change. Furthermore, we need to ensure that we attract talent. We should want to attract talent to our country—people who will want to settle here, make their homes and careers here, who are skilled, who work hard and who are ambitious for themselves, their families and their communities. These are the people we should welcome and encourage to make their homes here.
In conclusion, these issues are pertinent to Scotland, the whole United Kingdom and our economy. However, by focusing on constitutional arguments, as the SNP continues to do on this issue and on every issue, it lets Scotland down. It fails to stand up for Scotland’s interests in the United Kingdom. We need positive engagement on immigration, a rational debate and an acknowledgement that the current proposals are not workable.

2.26 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): It is sometimes a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), but I am not so sure today. I was struck by his description of the arguments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) as “tedious”, by his use of the term “snake oil” and by his talking, as ever, at the end of his speech about the obsession with the constitution. It dawned on me that I have heard this speech before: it is his single, transferable British nationalist rant. It then dawned on me—this is something I thought I would never say—that my length of service in this House is almost twice the combined service of all the Tory Back Benchers here, including the Parliamentary Private Secretary. We will have to have another debate about immigration when the grown-up, experienced MPs from the Tory party can be bothered to do their jobs.

Douglas Ross: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stewart Hosie: No, I will not on that point.

I am pleased that it does not simply focus on the Prime Minister’s toxic legacy on immigration and the hostile environment that she and her hapless Government created, but recognises the positive contribution that immigrants and immigration bring to the country. In this debate, in this Chamber and in the country, I am sure that there will be positive discussion about how we improve the system to make it far more humane and—this is where I agree with the hon. Member for Stirling—far less arbitrary than it is at present. I am not so sure today. I was struck by his description of the arguments made by my hon. Friend specifically references Scottish needs on immigration, both for demographic and different economic sectoral reasons. This is important, particularly for Scotland’s growth sectors, which I will say more about in a moment, along with making a small number of other specific points.

I note the value and benefit that migrants, and EU migrants in particular, bring to the economy and I will cite four of Scotland’s growth sectors to demonstrate that. In Scotland alone, in the food, drink and agriculture sector, 10,000 EU migrants are employed. That is 12% of total employment in the sector. One in eight people working in that entire sector is an EU or EEA worker. In tourism in Scotland, there are 17,000 EU workers, which is 9.5% of the total employment in that sector. In the creative sector, there are 10,000. Even in finance and business services, 9,000 workers—or 4% of the total employment in that growth sector—are from the European Union. That is before there is any mention of the contribution that migrants and migrant workers make to health and other vital public services. It is clear from those few examples that any attempt to constrain or restrict the flow of EU labour in any way would be profoundly damaging for businesses in Scotland. Their costs would undoubtedly rise—that is, if alternatives could be found at all—and output, particularly in agriculture, would most certainly suffer.

My second point is that inward migration delivers almost all the net population growth expected for Scotland. Without it, over the medium term, the population would remain static, but have a higher proportion of older people. Migration is therefore vital to ensuring that the proportion of working-age people is maintained, so that there are people to do the jobs that need to be done, and to pay the taxes to fund the public services on which we rely.

The Government’s argument is that there is still a mechanism in place for people to come, and the Minister spoke about the number of people coming to the EU in various capacities, but all sorts of skilled labour—not just highly paid skilled labour—is mobile; that is how it can come to Scotland, and to the UK. If we put up barriers, be they real, hard, financial, or even soft, perceived barriers, we limit the number of people who want to and can come to Scotland, because it might simply be easier for them to go elsewhere.

Dr Whitford: My hon. Friend talks about soft barriers. There has been a 90% drop in nurses coming from the EU, even though they are not obstructed as yet. Is that not a sign that people go elsewhere if they feel unwelcome?

Stewart Hosie: That is precisely my point. If that drop in numbers continued for more than a few years, the health service and other caring sectors would have a serious problem. It is not simply EU citizens but all migrants—all new Scots—who deliver benefit to our country. I will concentrate a little more on EU and European economic area citizens, but I will shortly move on to the contribution made, and the problems faced, by people from beyond the European Union who come here, either permanently or for short visits.

We should be thankful to the Government for the publication of “EU Exit: Long-term economic analysis”, which puts a hard GDP number on the benefit from EEA migration. We know that Brexit is bad economically, but every single non-EEA Brexit scenario modelled, including no deal, average free trade agreement, and the now lost and forgotten Government White Paper, was worse with a zero net inflow of EEA workers—around 2% of GDP worse over the forecast period. Net zero EEA migration has a hard-number impact; we know that, as do the Government, because they published it.

No one who cares about the economic wellbeing of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland or the UK as a whole should ever embark on a hostile environment policy that makes it difficult for people to come to the UK, or that in any way, shape or form stops EEA citizens living or working here, yet that is precisely what the Government have done, and it is not only EEA citizens who suffer.

I will give two brief examples of the unnecessary and arbitrary obstacles faced by people who wish to live here permanently or make a short visit. The first is of a South African lady who married a Scottish man who lived and worked in South Africa more than 15 years ago. They moved to Scotland. The lady travelled initially on a tourist visa, but was told that she had to go back to South Africa, where they no longer had a home, job or income, to apply for a UK visa. That obviously caused
distress, and had a significant financial cost to a household with modest earnings. Forcing that lady to return to South Africa to apply for a visa that would allow her to live in Scotland with her husband delivered absolutely no benefit to the UK. It was a nasty, pointless, arbitrary and unnecessary piece of hostile bureaucracy that could be changed tomorrow if this Government cared anything for the people who live here.

The second example I wish to give is of a very successful Pakistani gentleman. He travels regularly overseas and has never overstayed on a visa in any country. Indeed, on his last visit to the UK, he left after only a couple of weeks, having visited all the friends and family whom he wished to see, which was the reason for his stay. Even though he had an excellent sponsor and an exemplary record from previous visits, his last visa application was rejected—and not on what you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I or a reasonable person would consider real grounds; he was told, wrongly, that he did not have “enough incentive to leave the UK on completion of” his “proposed visit”.

Indefensible! That arbitrary judgment was handed down by some bureaucrat in the absence of any evidence whatever.

Weddings and funerals are missed, and family relations are destroyed, because of ludicrous, arbitrary decision making. If these decisions were made by some tin-pot despotic country, we would all rightly say, “That’s appalling. The rule of law has been abandoned in favour of arbitrary decision making.”

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): My hon. Friend talks about evidence being ignored. In many cases, significant, substantial evidence is not just ignored, but thrown out and abandoned. What is the point of the Government even attempting to collate a portfolio of evidence if it is to be completely ignored by decision makers?

Stewart Hosie: Every MP must have examples of fantastic applications being rejected, even when submitted with every conceivable relevant piece of paper and certificate on the planet, and even when there is a brilliant, solvent sponsor, so my hon. Friend is right. That is the nub of what this Government’s hostile environment has delivered. It has brought a bout economic harm and ludicrous net migration targets, ignores the social and cultural benefits of immigration, and strips much-needed staff from Scotland’s growth sectors.

The UK has in essence abandoned an evidence-based, rules-based immigration system in favour of arbitrary decision making that panders to the screeching headlines of the right-wing, Brexiteer-friendly press, but that causes, and will continue to cause, real distress to real people and their families, and ongoing economic harm.

2.37 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. The opening remarks of the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) were constructive in tone and content, although I may not have agreed with them all.

Leaving the European Union provides us with a unique opportunity to reshape and maximise the benefits of immigration to the UK, through a sensible, fair system that nurtures talent at home while attracting the best talent from around the world for the benefit of the UK economy. Although I wholeheartedly welcome the skills-based approach to immigration in the White Paper, it failed to recognise the differing immigration needs of sectors in different parts of the country. One of the many criticisms of the European Union was its blanket approach to regulation; what was right in one part of the European Union was not always right in the other. We should not lose sight of that, or make the same mistakes in the United Kingdom.

As a Scottish Conservative, let me say that I am unashamedly pro-immigration. People from across the world have made East Renfrewshire their home. Immigration is good, necessary and desirable; we want it, and we need it. I also discard the notion that migrants are somehow solely responsible for pressures on our public services and the housing market. The reason people cannot get a GP appointment in East Renfrewshire has nothing to do with an influx of eastern Europeans, and everything to do with the Scottish National party’s woeful handling of health matters in the Scottish Parliament. Blaming problems in our personal lives and in the nation’s life on migrants is lazy and wrong.

Turning to the White Paper, it is vital to regional and sectoral economies across the United Kingdom that our approach to immigration be flexible, based on evidence, and not one-size-fits-all. Many of Scotland’s key sectors—food and drink, oil and gas, fisheries and agriculture—have real and specific needs. I think that the failure to recognise that was one of the reasons the White Paper was met with such hostility and negativity from various groups and business and industry leaders across Scotland.

As has already been discussed, under the current proposals, to be granted a work visa a migrant must secure a job paying at least £30,000 a year. I am not sure who that threshold was designed for, but it was certainly not designed for the labour market in Scotland, or, presumably, for any other labour market outside London and the south-east. While it would be great if average earnings were £30,000 a year, that is not where we are as an economy. It is important to remember that salary and skills are not the same thing, as is frequently demonstrated in this place.

Fisheries, agriculture, hospitality and care jobs range from low to medium-skilled. They are industries that depend heavily on migrant workers, and they do not pay anywhere near £30,000. It would, of course, be brilliant if we could see more domestic workers going into such professions in the future, but, in the short term, if those industries are to operate as they do now they will need continued relatively easy access to labour. I welcome the Home Office’s reflection on the £30,000 figure, but I question the legitimacy of an arbitrary threshold, and I am not sure that regional differentiation is the answer. Personally, I should prefer a uniform threshold at a lower level: a threshold of about £18,000 might be sensible.

Similar logic applies to student visas. Under the current proposals, the UK will offer leave to remain under student visas to last for three years. Given that a normal undergraduate degree course in Scotland lasts...
for four years, that proposal is clearly hopeless and needs to be changed, as I think the Home Office has already recognised.

Overseas students not only choose to invest large sums in higher education across the UK, but spend significant sums while they are here, contributing growth to the economy and adding to indirect taxation revenue. I do not want to see a student visa system that incentivises overseas students to pick universities elsewhere in the UK while Scotland potentially misses out on those benefits simply because it structures its degrees slightly differently. We should also consider the longer-term benefits of retaining highly skilled students in the UK jobs market, including the benefits to our economy. We need an immigration system that nurtures the best talent to remain in the UK, deploying the skills gained here, rather than encouraging a brain-drain to the detriment of our economy, whether in Scotland or in the rest of the UK. I therefore think that post-study work visa schemes should be a priority.

We on the Scottish Affairs Committee have done a great deal of cross-party work in this regard, considering in particular the issues of changing demographics in Scotland and depopulation issues. Thanks to the Government's record, we have plenty much full employment, so the idea that gaps can be filled by our growing the “indigenous workforce”—or whatever the term is—is a fantasy. Technology takes time, and only goes so far; we need, and will always need, people to come to our country to work. However, we must also ask ourselves why a smaller percentage of those coming to the UK from the EU come to Scotland than should be the case on the basis of our population.

What we desperately need, both in this Chamber and in the one up the road, is a mature debate on why fewer people than we want and expect come to Scotland, why people leave, and what meaningful action both Governments can take in the years ahead to change that. What we do not need is the attitude of Fergus Ewing, one of the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretaries. When it was pointed out to him that evidence given to the Scottish Affairs Committee about the seasonal agriculture workforce showed that some people in Bucharest had said that they were not very interested in coming to Scotland to pick soft fruits, he said that all that showed was that the UK Government and their agencies could not be trusted to sell a positive story about Scotland. I thought that was incredibly immature and not remotely helpful, and suggested an unwillingness to engage seriously with the issues that we face.

Demographic challenges are acute throughout the UK. Unsurprisingly, I reject the notion that the answer lies in devolved immigration policy, especially when, as far as I am aware—I am sure that an SNP Member will correct me if I am wrong—it is still the SNP's position that the devolved immigration policy should be implemented and enforced by the Home Office through border control, presumably so that the SNP can blame UK Government agencies for any problems, as it does in every other context.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) mentioned some of the agencies that do not support the devolution of immigration policy. It is important to note that that is not because it is not technically or theoretically possible, but because it is not desirable, and not in the best interests of Scotland. A number of organisations have stated clearly that Scotland's needs could and should be best met through a UK-wide system.

We need the future immigration system to be nimble and flexible enough to adapt to the changing requirements of our economy. The ridiculous “tens of thousands” target has never been met, and does not fit the requirements of the United Kingdom. No arbitrary targets, please: the right level of immigration for the UK is whatever number is needed at that particular point in time, in the areas where we need it.

We need a flexible immigration system that works for every part of the UK. In Scotland, that means recognising the needs of different sectors of the economy. Farming, fish processing, hospitality and social care all rely heavily on foreign labour, and will continue to do so. Business leaders have rightly voiced concerns about the immigration White Paper, and those concerns should be taken on board and reacted to. Changes must deliver for Scotland.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): There have been quite a few selective quotations, particularly in respect of the NFUS. Does the hon. Gentleman recall, from the immigration inquiry conducted by the Scottish Affairs Committee some time ago, evidence submitted by the NFUS, which said that it “would prefer an all-UK system but would support alternatives if the Westminster Government is unable to develop the systems needed in time to prevent a hiatus in worker availability”?

I suggest that that hiatus is upon us.

Paul Masterton: I thought that ours was a very good inquiry. That is why I said that I did not believe that the devolution of immigration policy was not possible. It is perfectly possible, but I do not believe that it is in Scotland’s best interests, and that is what the NFUS was saying. It said that the best way forward for Scottish industry and the Scottish economy was to retain it in a UK-wide network. We have the opportunity here and now, post Brexit, to create that network—a network that will work.

Post Brexit, we will be building our own immigration policy for the first time in more than 40 years. We need to use it as a chance to prove to the world that we are still an open, inclusive and welcoming nation. That is not always evident from debates here, and from things that certain people say on television. If people throughout the world want to come to our great country to build or rebuild their futures, is it where we should welcome, celebrate and be proud of? It is a sign of our success as a nation, not something to be afraid of.

Immigration, ultimately, is not some problem that needs to be fixed. John Major said that there was nothing as Conservative as pulling your loved ones close and striking out to build a better future for your family, and he was absolutely right. As we build that new immigration system, let us ensure that those words, and that attitude, remain at the heart of our approach.

2.47 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I find it a tad ironic that the current Prime Minister is being hounded from office as much by the unrestrained xenophobia of the extremists in her party, as they chase some kind of British purity, as by her own incompetence.
I find it ironic because she herself was the author of part of the infrastructure of the institutionalised racism that underpins UK immigration policy.

I know that that is not a recent development. The shadow of empire is long and dark and pretty well documented. Those who watched the BBC programme on the Windrush on Monday night will have found themselves under no illusions about the racist threads that ran through government then, just as they do today. Enoch Powell was not a maverick shooting his mouth off; he was part of the mainstream, happy to strip other nations of skilled workers such as nurses when it suited, and equally happy to tell them to go home again when it looked as though there was political capital in it.

How things have changed, and have never changed. As has already been said, the Prime Minister’s previous incarnation as Home Secretary was the time when that hostile environment was ramped up and the gimlet eye of suspicion fell on everyone: an immigrant, someone who might consider giving a job to an immigrant, a landlord who might consider offering a home to an immigrant family, a truck driver just crossing the channel, a charity offering support to asylum seekers, and anyone who might have come into contact with an immigrant or might consider coming into contact with such a person.

I thought that Gordon Brown’s “British jobs for British workers” was bad, but the then Home Secretary obviously thought that she could go one better. Labour’s anti-immigration mugs were topped by the Tories “go home” vans. It is a disgraceful and disgusting trail of mistrust and racism that led from Churchill and Powell through Blair and Brown to this shabby lot who are disgracing the concept of government. It stretches further back in time, of course, and Brexit is just one facet of it—this horrid and brutal British exceptionalism. But it is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full damaging to the people and economies of these islands. It is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full damaging to the people and economies of these islands. It is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full damaging to the people and economies of these islands. It is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full damaging to the people and economies of these islands. It is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full damaging to the people and economies of these islands. It is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full damaging to the people and economies of these islands. It is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full damaging to the people and economies of these islands. It is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full damaging to the people and economies of these islands. It is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full damaging to the people and economies of these islands. It is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full damaging to the people and economies of these islands. It is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full damaging to the people and economies of these islands. It is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full damaging to the people and economies of these islands. It is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full damaging to the people and economies of these islands. It is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full damaging to the people and economies of these islands. It is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full damaging to the people and economies of these islands. It is not only cocking a snook to the world; it is damaging to the people and economies of these islands. We are already seeing the effects of a Brexit whose full
and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) for the way he introduced this debate and the measured and reasoned arguments he put forward. I may not always agree with what he says but, as a colleague on the Home Affairs Committee, I think he always raises extremely valid points and puts them across in a sensible manner and I appreciate the way he did that today. That may not have won him much praise from his colleagues, but it was worth saying.

The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) mentioned how many people had contacted her over the immigration issue and many other matters. I remember that she even had to take to Twitter once because she could not do her shopping in Waitrose or M&S, I think, because of the volume of people who had been contacting her about the issue, but I gently say that at least some of the constituents she represents take a different view from her, so when their views are portrayed from this side of the Chamber I do not think they should be shouted down in the way they have been today by Members of the SNP.

Joanna Cherry: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but perhaps he would care to remember that 72% of people in Edinburgh South West voted to remain in the single market and the customs union. That is what informs the weight of emails I get about the importance of freedom of movement. I get hardly any—one in a blue moon—that oppose freedom of movement and hundreds in favour of it.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful that the hon. Member for Dundee East did not leave the Chamber as I started speaking. He decided that Scottish Conservative Members did not have enough experience to speak in this debate—that we were too young, too silly, too short of experience to contribute to this debate. Then when I tried to intervene on him he was too fearful to take the intervention. [Interruption.] And he is now too fearful to even listen to this; he cannot even stay in the Chamber. Well, I have more to say about him: he was too fearful to listen to Scottish Conservative Members then, and he is too fearful now because he has walked out of the Chamber. Sometimes some people say that, with experience and longevity in this Chamber, you also become boring and irrelevant, and I have to say, having looked at the faces of the hon. Gentleman’s colleagues as he was speaking, I think he has now reached that point in his career. That is perhaps why he has left—he has no love on those Benches and he has none from these Benches, given the despicable way that he spoke in the debate. [Interruption.] We are very excited today, aren’t we? [Interruption.] SNP Members are asking where other Conservative Members are. The SNP parliamentary membership is 35, and I think we have less than a third of them here today for their own debate. For their own debate, they cannot even get more than a third of their Members to turn up. Perhaps the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West will get a few more back into the Chamber today.

We have also heard much in this debate from SNP Members about the “hostile environment” and we have heard lots of quotes from SNP Members about what the Conservative Government have done and what the Labour Government did. I am surprised, however, that not a single SNP Member has quoted their own party leader, because we all remember that Nicola Sturgeon said in July 2014, when she was Deputy First Minister and a key figure in the SNP independence campaign of that year:

“We have set down a robust and common sense position” on the issue of immigration and migration. She went on to say:

“If Scotland was outside Europe” EU nationals would

“lose the right to stay here.”

That is a direct quote from Nicola Sturgeon from the SNP. That was their position as they were fighting for separation for Scotland from the rest of the United Kingdom. I am glad we have a more measured response in the UK Home Office and the UK Government.

Stuart C. McDonald: The hon. Gentleman completely misrepresents the point the First Minister was making at that time. She is well known for being absolutely in favour of free movement, which would have been lost if Scotland was outside the European Union—which it would not have been, by the way. It is completely wrong to mischaracterise her as saying that people would not have been allowed to stay; she was simply stating, as a matter of fact, that free movement rights would have come to an end.

Douglas Ross: I am not sure I can do anything different than quote the First Minister’s words back to the hon. Gentleman. Nicola Sturgeon said in July 2014:

“We have set down a robust and common sense position. If Scotland was outside Europe”—

which it would have been if it had separated from the rest of the United Kingdom,

“they”—

EU nationals—

“would lose the right to stay here.”

That is what the First Minister said, verbatim.

I am grateful that the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East, who led for the SNP, agrees with my next point. We have seen a number of comments in the press by someone who was at the time an SNP councillor and has now become one of its representatives in the European Parliament. I respect Christian Allard’s right to have a personal opinion on whether to apply for settled status but he is also an elected officer, and I am concerned that his comments encouraging people not to apply for settled status could lead people into a difficult situation.

On 12 February this year, the Home Affairs Committee held an evidence session on the settled status scheme, and I asked witnesses what advice they would give if professionals or politicians were encouraging people not to apply for settled status. Nicole Masri, the legal officer for Rights of Women, said:

“Our advice is: the system is there; you have to apply.”

Danny Mortimer, the chief executive of NHS Employers, said:

“I gently say that at least some of the constituents she had been today by Members of the SNP.

Danny Mortimer: We are very excited today, aren’t we?view are portrayed from this side of the Chamber I do
The hon. Gentleman said at the start of this debate that he would also be encouraging all his constituents to apply for settled status, and I hope that we will get that consistent message from politicians representing all parts of Scotland in all Parliaments. The advice that Christian Allard is proffering could be dangerous for people who might think it acceptable not to apply for settled status and then fall into significant problems.

I want briefly to mention an issue that I have raised on numerous occasions about non-EEA workers in our fishing industry. It is an issue that has been raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) for the SNP, by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for the Liberal Democrats and by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for the Democratic Unionist party. I raised this at Home Office questions just a couple of weeks ago, and I certainly will not be objecting to the Minister responding to this debate, in the hope that she can again focus on the point that I and many other hon. and right hon. Members have made. The Minister has cited the Migration Advisory Committee in this regard, although she did quote it directly. It has stated:

“There is no case for schemes for particular sectors within the immigration system other than for agriculture, which has some unique characteristics”.

I worked in agriculture before I was elected, so I have gone from green fields to green Benches, and I know exactly that there are unique characteristics within the agriculture sector. Representing Moray, a coastal community, I also know there are unique characteristics within the fishing industry, and I believe that we have to look again at allowing non-EEA workers to come into our fleet. I mentioned my constituent, Douglas Scott, when I held a Westminster Hall debate on this issue. Douglas is from Lossiemouth and his boat is now being tied up. He cannot run his business because he cannot get staff from outwith the EEA to work with him.

The Minister has previously said that part of the problem with the previous system was down to certain people being exploited. That is a problem, and we have to deal with the exploitation. We have to deal with the crew and the skippers who exploit staff, but we do not have to absolutely rule out a system that has worked in the past. It has had problems, but I believe we must tackle the problems rather than saying that the system as a whole cannot be allowed to continue.

I am considering your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker, on the amount of time we can speak. I appreciate the SNP’s bringing forward this debate today. It is useful to discuss immigration in Scotland and across the United Kingdom. I welcome the publication by the UK Government of the immigration White Paper, and particularly the listening exercise—a year-long consultation to hear the views of communities, organisations and individuals across the country. I am extremely grateful to the Minister, the Home Secretary and the Department for listening to the significant concerns raised by Scottish Conservative and MPs about the £30,000 threshold and I welcome the fact that this is now under review.

I also agree that we do not need a differentiated immigration system for Scotland. That point has been well made in this debate by my hon. Friend the Members for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton). The point has been made not just in this Chamber but outwith the Chamber. A report published by the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford has stated that it is “not clear that significant regional variation would lead to a better match between policy and regional economic needs”.

We have also heard from a number of organisations in Scotland. CBI Scotland has said:

“Let’s get it right for the whole UK. The better the outcome we get, the less need for variation across the UK and the less companies need to worry about doubled up systems and extra red tape.”

The Food and Drink Federation Scotland has referred to:

“Significant variations in approach to integration and reception that may impact on”—

“our members”—

“ability to attract workers or relocate them to the required locations whether in Scotland or the rest of the UK”.

The Scottish Chamber of Commerce has said that its “network does not believe that the devolution of immigration powers to Scotland is necessary to achieve a business solution to migration targets”.

The National Farmers Union Scotland has said that its “preference is that Scotland’s influence should lead to a UK-wide system that meets our needs”.

I agree with CBI Scotland, the Food and Drink Federation Scotland, the Scottish Chamber of Commerce and NFU Scotland that a separated policy for Scotland would not be good for Scotland’s interests or our constituencies’ interests, and I am pleased that the Government are not going to go down that route. I welcome the White Paper that the Government have published, and I look forward to the listening exercise. I hope that the Minister has listened to some of the concerns that I have put forward today on behalf of my constituents in Moray.

3.5 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I want to concentrate on the issues that education—particularly further and higher education in Scotland—has experienced and could experience as a result of a hard Brexit. First, I would like to talk about the post-study work visa, especially in my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on photonics. Right across the central belt of Scotland, we have an extremely large amount of strength and expertise in photonics, but photonics and quantum technology are very sensitive to developments in the market. We are currently bringing our international students here, training them up and ensuring that they have the necessary intellectual capacity, but then sending them home to their own countries so that they can challenge or work against companies in our own constituencies. What we should be doing with these talented people is ensuring that they stay to contribute to our economies and that that intellectual property is not lost to our competitors and those who would seek to undermine those companies.

We know that international students are a huge benefit to our local economy, and they pay fees of up to £35,000 per annum. That is a massive amount of money for them, so coming here to do a course—particularly a longer course—as an international student is a huge financial investment. When it comes to their graduation,
however, what do we say to their parents? We say, “Well, actually, there’s no guarantee that you can come to the graduation ceremony and go home again. So although you have paid the best part of £100,000 for your child’s education, we’re not even going to allow you to come and join in the celebration of their graduation.” That is shameful.

Conservative Members have talked a lot about the £30,000 salary threshold, and there have been many strong words about that this afternoon, so I urge the Members who have raised concerns about the threshold to join us in voting against it. We know that £30,000 is no indication of the skills of a particular person or of a particular sector. When the White Paper was first published, I asked a series of written questions about what was meant by low, medium and high-skilled positions. I was told that high skills equated to degree level, that medium skills equated to college level or A-level, and that low skills would describe somebody whose highest qualification was at GCSE level, or in Scotland, National 5 level. That was how the Government were designating skills, but I know many people with degrees who do not command salaries of £30,000. We also know that salaries in Scotland are significantly lower than in the south-east of England. Once again, policies are being developed that are particular to one area of the UK and do not take into account the requirements of others.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The hon. Lady makes a strong case on income thresholds. Does she agree that the minimum income rule, which continues to divide families in a spouse visa situation, is equally disgraceful? Many people in my constituency earn nowhere near £18,600. It is yet another example of the hostile environment created by the Government.

Carol Monaghan: It is £18,600 if they do not have any children; if they do, it is even greater. If they have children, we put in extra barriers to ensure that those families cannot be together. It is utterly disgraceful.

Many people in research and academia will not come close to the salary threshold of £30,000, such as early career researchers, technicians and many of the EU nationals working in our universities. We should be rolling out the red carpet for such people and doing everything in our power to ensure that they stay, contribute to the success of our universities, and continue to contribute to our communities. Yet once again, we put barriers in place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) mentioned Professor Alison Phipps, the UNESCO chair at the University of Glasgow. I will say a little more about her. Many of the projects that she is involved in are funded by the Department for International Development. The UK Government are funding those international projects, yet the academics involved in them—partners across Asia, the middle east and Africa—are unable to come and be part of that collaboration.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I, too, pay tribute to Professor Phipps, who works so hard on these issues. I wish to put on the record another case—that of the head of international relations at the Islamic University of Gaza, Amani al-Maqadma, whose visa has been denied despite the fact that her project is fully funded by Erasmus+. She wants to come here to contribute to the work of the university, and once again the refusal is self-defeating. It defeats the purpose of the grants that the Government are handing out. Perhaps the Minister will be able to look into that before the end of the day.

Carol Monaghan: It is, of course, a ludicrous situation, given that the UK Government are giving money to these projects. Flights are booked, sometimes costing thousands of pounds, in the hope that the visas will appear in time, and then we get refusals so flights have to be changed. People can no longer book fixed flights; they have to be flexible flights, which are many times more expensive. It is an utter waste of money.

Stuart C. McDonald: Does my hon. Friend agree that one huge problem that we now have, which we did not have in years gone by, is that there is no right of appeal against many such decisions? Everybody has to contact their MP, and we are consistently trying to raise cases here and in newspapers. That is the only way anyone can get justice. We need to get back the right of appeal against all these decisions.

Carol Monaghan: That would make a huge difference, because once the application has been refused it is dead, and there is very little that we can do with it. We can support subsequent ones, but not the one that has been refused.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith also mentioned academic conferences. That is a serious issue, because it is not just about the economic benefits of hosting academic conferences in cities across the UK; it is about saying that we are open for business, we are outward looking, we are ready to collaborate, and we want to have such relationships with experts from across the world. If we cannot have conferences because people cannot get visas to come to them, we utterly diminish our position.

We have recently been raising the issue of the European temporary leave to remain that has been suggested for after Brexit. It will be a visa, or some sort of certificate, for potential students that will allow them to study at our universities, and it will be for three years. Of course, in Scotland our university courses are four years. Let us imagine for a second that EU students end up being classed as international students and have to pay international fees. We could be talking about £50,000, £60,000 or £70,000 in fees over the course of their degree. Are we expecting them to pay that huge amount of money on a gamble that they might get the tier 4 visa to complete the fourth year of their course? That is insane. Let us be clear: it is discriminatory. It will affect Scottish universities, which have longer courses, far more than other universities.

I will quickly mention the tier 5 religious workers visa. I have been contacted by a constituent and by many priests across the diocese who say that they cannot get supply priests from Africa and India because there have been changes to the visa. I have written to the Minister about that, and she responded that they can get a tier 2 visa. I am sorry—it is too expensive, and the archdiocese of Glasgow can get only two of them. It does not work. The hostile environment is also targeting faith communities.
Patrick Grady: I have parishes in my constituency, such as that of the Immaculate Conception on Maryhill Road, experiencing exactly the same issue. Priests have been coming for years on tier 5 visas without any problems at all. It is a law of unintended consequences, because the ministerial guidance on the matter is not about Christian preachers. It is a very serious issue, and the Minister knows that there will be a debate in Westminster Hall next week specifically about it. I hope that she comes prepared to justify the policy.

Carol Monaghan: The Minister will also have to justify it to the archdiocese of Glasgow and other archdioceses across the UK, whose bishops have been contacting MPs on this very issue.

I will mention Windrush very briefly. A constituent of mine has been told that he can get a maximum of £5,000 compensation for everything he has gone through. He is more than £50,000 out of pocket. The hostile environment has wrecked his life.

Finally, I quickly want to mention Helen, who came to see me last week. She fled Eritrea and, in the process, was separated from her two children. With the help of the Red Cross, she located her children and applied for them to join her. Her son was granted a family reunion visa; her daughter, who is now 13, was refused. So one child is still living displaced in Ethiopia and one child is living in Glasgow. Where is the humanity? I appeal to the Minister, if she has an ounce of humanity, to look into the case and that it would be dealt with. I received a letter this morning that said: “I am sorry that a decision has not been made on Mr Popalzai’s further submissions. The Home Office is aware that Mr Popalzai is vulnerable and has raised safeguarding issues. The Home Office is actively working on his case. However, it is currently awaiting policy guidance on an unrelated matter prior to making a final decision on his case.”

This young man is in tears every time he comes to my surgery. What answer can I give him? Because that is no kind of answer at all. It is just, “Wait and wait and wait.” He has seen his friends move on with their lives, and carry on with their education, and he is stuck. He is stuck on antidepressants and is getting counselling, but he has no answer for that young man.

Many of the cases I see in my surgery are of extremely vulnerable families who are in tears. Today, one of my members of staff, Mhairi, tried to accompany one of my constituents, a woman who is heavily pregnant, and her husband to Brand Street, because her three-year-old had been called for interview. I do not know what kind of interview the Home Office expects to get from a three-year-old at Brand Street, but the family went. Their other girls were at school. They were extremely worried that they would not be able to leave Brand Street. During the course of the interview, the father had a seizure and had to be taken in an ambulance, because he was so stressed out about the interview. I still do not know how he is doing or whether he will be okay. I ask the Minister to make a decision on this family. They have daughters who fled in fear of FGM, and they do not want to take their daughters back to face FGM. She should have some heart and deal with this case as a matter of urgency, because it is no less than the family deserve.

I see many cases that look relatively simple and are similar to cases that have been resolved quickly but that, for reasons best known to itself, the Home Office has determined to be complex. As soon as the cases are determined to be complex, they disappear down a black hole somewhere and are not seen for months and years. The Minister and her Department need to look at this and ensure that such excuses are not made for cases that are not complex.

The Home Office is riddled with mistakes and errors, and I regularly see issues with incorrect names and addresses. In a recent decision letter, the Home Office mistook the difference between a closing balance and an opening balance on a bank account in refusing somebody a visitor visa. It loses passports, degree certificates and paperwork endlessly, to the detriment of my constituents.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a powerful case. It does, and the hon. Gentleman is correct, and I see it regularly—week in, week out—in my surgeries. People who have visited the UK on multiple occasions without incident and with no problems, and who are well able to afford the cost of supporting themselves when they come to visit—not that their family would not support them, anyway, because they are guests—are refused time and again. It is offensive, and people are hurt by this. They miss out on family visits and family occasions such as weddings and graduations. They miss out on so much family life that we all take for granted. If any of us wanted to go to any of their countries, we would be allowed to travel. That is the inherent racism of the Home Office and its policies.

Imran Hussain: The hon. Lady is making a powerful case, particularly on visitor visas and the Home Office’s poor decision making. I dealt with a case in which there was a discrepancy of one penny between the P60 and other evidence, so the application was refused and the person could not attend an important family wedding. Again, that illustrates the hostile environment created by this Government through the back door.

Alison Thewliss: It does, and the hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. I see this day in and day out at my surgeries.

More recently, a case has been highlighted in the press—it very much seems that the press is the way to go for those with a complaint about the Home Office, and
if I were to do that the pages of all the Scottish newspapers would be full of my constituents—of a group of blind musicians who came over from Chennai as part of a British Council, Creative Scotland and Scottish Government-funded project. They were asked to come over from India as part of that project, and two of the musicians were refused entry. These two blind musicians were told that they did not have sufficient reason to go back to India after the trip. Their carers were allowed in, but these people with disabilities were not. Because their case was highlighted in the press, the decision magically and mysteriously changed, but it was too late because the event had passed.

The group are now £4,000 out of pocket for flights that had to be cancelled. Will the Minister compensate this group of musicians from Chennai who were not able to travel to take part in a British Government project? That is no less than they deserve. She has wasted taxpayers’ money, and she has wasted these young people’s opportunity by refusing them entry and then cynically changing the decision when the case appeared in the press.

I have good grounds to believe that the Government pay attention to the cases that appear in the press and change their decisions. The UK Government deemed a number of people in the highly skilled migrants group, because they needed small and legitimate changes to their tax returns, to be in some way of bad character and a threat to national security under paragraph 322(5) of the Home Office rules.

The cases that I have highlighted in the press, and the cases of constituents who were on “Channel 4 News” and in the newspapers, were decided a full six months quicker than those of constituents whose cases I could not put into the press due to sensitivity. I would like an explanation from the Minister of why very similar cases, with very similar circumstances, were differently decided because two of them were in the media and two of them were not. The UK Government’s decision-making process on this is deeply disturbing.

The same goes for many other cases I have highlighted in the Scottish press. I have a lot of reason to be thankful to people in the Scottish media, at The National and at other publications in Scotland, because they have repeatedly highlighted the terrible decisions made by the Home Office.

I chair the new all-party parliamentary group on immigration detention, and trauma has been caused to my constituents by persistent and arbitrary detention. There seems to be a modern-day cat and mouse act, with people being arrested under immigration detention and then let go. The impact on those individuals is traumatic and appalling, and these are people who have been through a huge amount of trauma already. They have been tortured and trafficked. They have seen things that none of us would ever want to see, and they are being locked up with no time limit.

People can accept being in prison if they have done something wrong, and they know when their sentence will end, but people in this country, quite uniquely, are held in immigration detention with no end in sight. I ask the Minister to consider why she thinks that is fair. I pay tribute to the strength and dignity of those with experience of immigration detention who came to last night’s launch of the all-party group to tell their stories. People in arbitrary detention do not know for how long they will be locked up, even though they have done nothing wrong. That is a stain on this Government and previous Governments who endorsed places like Dungavel.

We need to do so much more to highlight the plight of people held in immigration detention. We must make sure that we do all we can for people who come to this country fleeing persecution and FGM and looking for a place of sanctuary. We must not, by this Government’s actions, cause them further trauma and further pain. Instead, we must protect them and welcome them with open arms.

We are celebrating a refugee festival in Scotland this week. We are celebrating all the things that refugees and asylum seekers bring to this country, and the Government would do well to attend more such events to celebrate people, rather than locking them up, detaining them and causing them pain.

3.26 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): This has been an excellent debate so far, and I am sure the Prime Minister will come to regret—at least I hope she will—that her defining legacy, quite apart from the Brexit chaos we face, is the hostile environment she created through her Government’s antagonistic, discriminatory and entirely counterproductive immigration policy.

In the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016, we have seen an effort to prevent people from accessing basic services such as employment, healthcare and education. We have witnessed a Home Secretary become Prime Minister and knowingly take a cruel and entirely unnecessary approach towards immigration. If we listened to the Government, we would think the immigration process straightforward, but many people are unable simply to leave, as the Government might lead us to think. More often than not, the Government’s policies have meant that the most vulnerable in society, often women, are disproportionately suffering.

One of my constituents in Paisley and Renfrewshire North, Ms A, is from Botswana, and she came to the UK 10 years ago as a student. She met her British partner, whom she married and they had one child together. Unfortunately, the relationship broke down due to abuse. Ms A is solely responsible for their five-year-old child, as the father shamefully provides no financial support, nor does he exercise any contact.

Ms A initiated the lengthy independent leave to remain—ILR—process to settle in the UK some time ago. However, with uncertainty looming and no official documentation granting ILR, Ms A’s employer chose to end her contract of employment, plunging her into an extremely vulnerable position. She has no recourse to public funds, nor the funds to secure childcare provision that would enable her to re-enter employment. As a result and understandably, my constituent’s mental health is deteriorating and she is anxious that any further delay in her application will plunge her even deeper into financial hardship, although she wonders whether that is indeed possible due to the hefty amounts of money she has spent at the Home Office already.

With Ms A’s son due to start school in August, what should be a positive time for that one-parent family is mired in insecurity and dread as Ms A waits for a decision from the Home Office. Who will look after Ms A’s son if she is sent home? I say home, but Ms A has
been here for nearly a decade and naturally views Scotland as her home. What kind of future citizenship are we creating if we send the mother of a British citizen home? What will that five-year-old boy carry with him into the future?

The plight of Ms A is the plight of many refugees and asylum seekers throughout the country, and that has been further affected by the Government’s policy move to end automatic settlement for refugees after five years, deliberately leaving asylum seekers uncertain about whether they will eventually be deported. My constituency office in Renfrew deals with many cases like that of Ms A, and it is difficult to see how the climate of insecurity can be maintained if Scotland wants to continue to attract people from overseas in an attempt to combat the ageing of our population.

Recently, the UK Government also imposed changes for tier 5 entry visas, including, notably, the removal of ministers of religion from the eligibility criteria. That decision has generated much concern from faith leaders throughout my constituency and in religious communities across the United Kingdom. If we take the example of Catholic communities, that change will have a significant impact on priests coming into the UK because most Catholic dioceses regularly use the tier 5 religious worker visa route for them to come here on supply placements while parish priests are away for short periods. The supply placements are imperative as they enable people to continue attending mass and receiving sacraments, while keeping parish activities running smoothly—activities that are of benefit to the entire community, not just to Catholics.

Under the new Home Office guidance, priests on supply placements will now be required to use the tier 2 minister of religion visa route, which will double the costs incurred by parishes and make supply cover effectively unaffordable in some of the poorer communities. Unfortunately, the tier 2 route also imposes strict language requirements, and even those priests who have completed seminary in English may now be required to sit an additional English language test before embarking on their placements. Religious leaders in my constituency are extremely worried, not only about the financial and practical implications, but about the human costs of those hostile policy changes. I will go into more detail on this issue in the Westminster Hall debate next week initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and touch on some of the representations that I have received from faith leaders across Renfrewshire, including from Bishop John Keenan.

I could go on about immigration detention policies, asylum seekers being denied the right to work, the denial of access to public funds and the ending of freedom of movement—which is one of the best intergovernmental policies ever drafted and something that my generation and the generation after have taken for granted because who in their right mind would want to end it? I could go on about Home Office incompetence, refugee family reunion rules, Windrush and sending LGBTQ people back to countries where homophobic persecution is rife.

The indifferent, iniquitous and incompetent Home Office’s roll of dishonour is, like immigration detention, limitless. We have come to expect that from the Conservatives, but the Labour party has been complicit in much of this, I am sorry to say. Of course, I am happy to acknowledge that there are many in the Labour party who speak out on those issues, and I admire the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), who now speaks for the Labour party on the subject, but its Front-Bench team has displayed a singular lack of leadership over several years. If, instead of producing “Controls on immigration” mugs, Labour had joined the SNP and others in talking up the real and tangible benefits of immigration, the Brexit vote might not have come to pass.

Remarkably, the Labour party has failed to stand up for freedom of movement, despite the enormous benefits it has brought to the UK. The shadow Foreign Secretary said on “Peston”:

“We’re not going to die in a ditch for the sake of freedom of movement”.

What a short-sighted thing to say. When the new Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill was introduced, the Labour party intended to support the Government, but U-turned after facing enormous criticism. On Second Reading, the shadow Home Secretary said that

“the Labour party is clear that when Britain leaves the single market, freedom of movement ends. We set that out in our 2017 manifesto... so on that basis the Front Bench of the Labour party will not be opposing the Bill this evening.”—[Official Report, 28 January 2019: Vol. 653, c. 515.] We all know that 90 minutes later, amid a growing backlash on social media, Labour shifted its position and announced that it would whip its MPs to vote against the Bill. That is not leadership; it is a political and moral vacuum at the top of the Labour party so concerned by UKIP, the Brexit party and Nigel Farage that it has allowed its policy to shift to the right along with the Tories.

The leader of the Labour party has repeatedly made the incorrect claim that freedom of movement is responsible for the undercutting of workers’ rights. He wrote in The Guardian:

“If freedom of movement means the freedom to exploit cheap labour in a race to the bottom, it will never be accepted in any future relationship with Europe.”

That is completely wrong and risks scapegoating migrants for weak labour regulation. The Labour party failed to show proper opposition to the toxic rhetoric on immigration coming from UKIP and the Tories, out of fear of being seen as weak on immigration. The Labour party should be ashamed of its infamous “Controls on immigration” mugs, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) referred earlier.

By contrast, we on the SNP Benches have spoken out regularly on these issues in this place. If we cannot, through argument or the voting Lobbies, change the UK approach, it is explicitly clear that Scotland requires its own distinct approach. The mid-year population estimates published on 25 April highlight the scale of the challenge. Scotland’s population continues to increase, and is at a record high of 5.4 million; however, population growth has slowed over the past two years. The Scottish population is ageing: in 2018, some 19% of the population were aged 65 and over, compared with 16% just 10 years ago. Fourteen of Scotland’s council areas—mostly rural or island councils, as well as areas in the west—have experienced depopulation.
Migration is the only reason Scotland’s population continues to grow. Over the year to mid-2018, some 20,000 more people came to Scotland than left. The recent decrease in net migration has been driven by fewer people moving to Scotland from overseas and more people moving overseas, out of Scotland. I am not entirely surprised by that, given the immigration rhetoric over the past couple of years and the Brexit decision. Natural change—births minus deaths—did not contribute to population growth: over the same one-year period, there were 7,000 more deaths than births in Scotland.

We want the Scottish Parliament to have the powers to establish a less restrictive immigration policy. It is increasingly clear that the UK Government’s immigration policy does not address our economic, demographic or social needs. There is cross-party support for the reintroduction of a proper post-study work visa that suits Scotland’s needs. It is time for a tailored migration system for Scotland, and the Scottish Government’s discussion paper shows how such a system could operate.

This is not merely politicking, or just a desire to be seen to do the right thing; it is an absolute necessity for Scotland, its people and its economy. As per usual, and as we expect, the Conservatives are blind to Scotland and its needs. I cannot quite manage it, but I really should be grateful, because by both their words and their actions more people in Scotland now realise that the only way Scotland will have policies in place to suit Scottish needs, whether on immigration or any other issue, is through independence. That day cannot come quickly enough.

3.37 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). As he said towards the end of his speech, there really could be no more appropriate topic than immigration for the SNP to choose for our first Opposition day debate for nearly a year. The inept and damaging approach of this Conservative Government to immigration typifies how this Westminster Parliament is incapable of serving Scotland’s needs.

As the current Prime Minister’s reign fizzes out in the midst of a constitutional crisis, she is frantically clinging to the wreckage in an effort to outstay Gordon Brown’s reign, staying till the last possible minute as she desperately searches for something other than the Brexit shambles to be her legacy. She should not fear: help is at hand from the SNP. As my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North said, one policy that can undoubtedly be laid firmly at the door of the current Prime Minister is the hostile environment policies. Perhaps even worse, they were not unintended at all, and it was the price that the Prime Minister felt was worth paying to achieve her unobtainable targets. There is no doubt about it, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) said, that there is a racist element to these policies. The long-term lawful residents of the United Kingdom who lost their jobs, their homes and their health as a result of the Windrush scandal were black and ethnic minority people. The only known middle-aged, middle class white person to have lost their job as a result of the Windrush scandal is the right hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), who had to resign as Home Secretary, but make no mistake about it, the rap for the Windrush disaster rests at the door of the outgoing Prime Minister.

Carol Monaghan: My hon. and learned Friend mentions the “outgoing Prime Minister.” When I first wrote to her about my constituent who was caught up in the Windrush scandal, she was in fact the Home Secretary. She knew what was happening years before it was brought to the attention of the House by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy)—I think. She knew about it years before, yet denied knowledge when it all blew up.

Joanna Cherry: The Prime Minister left others to take the rap for her. It is important that today’s debate notes that the hostile environment is the legacy of the outgoing Prime Minister. Of late, there has been a rush in certain Tory quarters to disown the policy. Much as they like to try to lay the whole Brexit fiasco at the door of the current Prime Minister, such chameleon-like figures are the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) and Ruth Davidson—both populists who have more in common than either would care to admit—have tried to distance themselves from the hostile environment without ever taking a principled stand against it.

The current Home Secretary likes to talk about how hard his father worked after arriving in the United Kingdom from Pakistan with just £1 in his pocket. In Scotland, we have a very significant community of Asian Scots, many of whose parents came to the United Kingdom with just £1 in their pocket like the Home Secretary’s father. The reality is that the current policies of the Government, of whom the Home Secretary is
part, are designed to discourage people from following in their footsteps. Even worse, as we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) and others this afternoon, the visit visa system is designed to prevent the families of our Asian brothers and sisters and others from visiting, except in all but the most exceptional circumstances.

At the start of this debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) made a forensic speech. In a measured way, as we would expect from him, he went through in forensic detail the various problems with the system. In particular, he dissected the White Paper and outlined what is wrong with it—what is wrong with replacing freedom of movement with an expansion of the already failing tier 2 visa system. He also pointed to the demographic time bomb for Scotland, which appears to be conveniently ignored by Members on the Government Benches. He also pointed out that the Scottish Government have proposed constructive alternatives to the White Paper.

The shadow Minister, who knows I am very fond of him, suggested that a differential system would be an impossibility for Scotland but, as I said to him in my intervention, there are many examples across the world of differentiated systems working effectively. Canada is the example of which I am most aware, having been there to study the system, but there are other examples. I gently suggest that the Labour party has a go at looking at those examples. If it wants to get back any of the votes it has lost in Scotland, it needs to get on board—this might be a bit of a tall order—with the understanding that the position in Scotland is different.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who has had to leave his place, made a very powerful point about the threatened mass eviction of asylum seekers in Glasgow by Serco, and he has an Adjournment debate on the subject tomorrow. This is another spin-off from the hostile environment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith, who is my constituency neighbour, spoke about the impact of visa refusals on the Edinburgh festivals and on conferences in Edinburgh, as the capital city of Scotland is so important to our economy. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith, who is my constituency neighbour, spoke about the impact of visa refusals on the Edinburgh festivals and on conferences in Edinburgh, as the capital city of Scotland is so important to our economy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) made a powerful contribution about the impact of the Government's immigration policies on education and skills development in Scotland. She is an expert in the field of photonics, about which she spoke, but the points she makes apply across the science, technology, engineering and maths sector and into other sectors such as language teaching. We are discouraging early career researchers and technicians from working in Scotland by expanding the tier 2 system.

Other Members, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), spoke about the problem with religious visas. I first became aware of this problem in relation to the Thai temple in my constituency, but the issue is clearly affecting all sorts of religious denominations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) said that she could have filled the rest of the debate with constituency cases and indicated that they account for a very high percentage of her workload. She is right, of course; that is the position of most of us. That is why I was so puzzled by the speech of the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). Given that so many Scottish MPs have a high caseload of immigration cases, I am surprised that he is not in a similar situation. Stirling must be a little spot that the Government’s hostile environment has not reached.

What I really want to say to the Scottish Tories is that there is no doubt that, in this respect, SNP Members speak for their constituents. We speak for the high number of immigration cases we have to deal with, but we also speak for the fact that most of our constituents voted to remain in the European Union, and opinion polls show that even more people want to remain in the European Union than did three years ago.

I have to say that I feel a little bit sorry for the Minister as she has to both lead and sum up the debate today. It seems a bit unfair, particularly on her birthday; you’d think they would give her a wee bit of a break, especially as I am not aware of any shortage of Ministers in the Home Office. The Minister seemed keen to point to the evidence of the Migration Advisory Committee. Later, we heard from the hon. Member for Stirling that he is pretty unhappy with the MAC report, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East indicated in his forensic dissection of it.

Of course, the MAC report is not the only source of evidence on which the Minister could draw. She could also look to the report of the Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, which estimates the damage that ending free movement will inflict on Scotland. The group comprises a panel of experts with real expertise in the effects of migration and population on the economy and demography of Scotland, who said that proposals in the White Paper “are projected to reduce net migration to Scotland by between 30% and 50% over the coming two decades”, despite the fact that that migration is essential to growing the Scottish economy and to keeping our population up at the level that it is required to be. There are a number of other interesting things in the report by the Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population and I commend the Minister to read it. It would be incorrect to leave the Chamber with any impression that business in Scotland is completely happy with what is proposed in the White Paper.

Deidre Brock: Members from the Scottish branch of the Tories have banded about a lot of quotes about business. I wonder whether my hon. and learned Friend is aware that the Scottish policy chairman of the Federation of Small Businesses has said:

“The UK Government’s obstinate approach to immigration is a clear threat to many of Scotland’s businesses and local communities. These proposals will make it nigh impossible for the vast majority of Scottish firms to access any non-UK labour and the skills they need to grow and sustain their operations.”

Is she surprised by that quote?

Joanna Cherry: Certainly not, because his colleague, the chair of the FSB, Mr Mike Cherry—no relation to me, in case there are any conspiracy theories from Conservative Members—said:

“The MAC’s report is deeply concerning for the small business community.”
Dr Tim Bradshaw, chief executive of the Russell Group of universities, has said of the Migration Advisory Committee's report:

“This was a real opportunity to steer the UK towards a more modern and intelligent immigration system, but the recommendations are unimaginative and, we believe, unworkable.”

The president of National Farmers Union Scotland said that the MAC had failed to take account of his organisation's evidence. He said that the NFUS was very disappointed that the Committee had “not heeded” its “strong evidence” in its recommendations. The NFUS has raised concerns about trade, access to labour and support for agriculture.

Of course, the concerns about the MAC are not just confined to the business and university communities. They have also been expressed by the unions, particularly by the Scottish TUC. Public opinion is also with those of us who bring this issue to the House today. A recent opinion poll in The Herald carried out by ICM said that 62% of people in Scotland support a different immigration solution for Scotland.

I understand the general thrust of the speeches by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Members. There were only a handful of them—

Stephen Kerr: Quality, not quantity.

Joanna Cherry: Well, that is debatable. The point that they are making is, I suppose, in keeping with their unionism—that they would like to see a UK-wide solution.

The hon. Member for Stirling indicated that he had many problems with the Migration Advisory Committee’s report, but basically says that he wants a UK-wide solution. However, there does not seem to be much sign of a UK-wide solution that will resolve the concerns that have been expressed by the Scottish Conservatives, by business, by the universities, by the trade unions, and by the public in Scotland. I put this question to the Scottish Conservatives: if there is not going to be a UK-wide solution, would they support a Scotland-specific solution?

Douglas Ross: The hon. and learned Lady says, “This is the Scottish Conservative position”, but does she accept that it is also the position of CBI Scotland, Scotland Food and Drink and NFU Scotland? They are not Scottish Conservatives. We are articulating the views of these very substantial organisations.

Joanna Cherry: No, I do not accept that, because many in business have said that they are prepared to look at Scotland-specific solutions. The Scottish Government are doing a lot of work with business on selected policy areas and directed solutions. My very good friend the Minister, and MSP for Edinburgh Northern and Leith, Ben Macpherson, is working on that with business in Scotland at the moment.

I put the question back to the Scottish Conservatives: if there is not a UK-wide solution that helps Scotland, are they willing to take the hit on Scotland’s population and economy, or will they, like their leader, Ruth Davidson, simply make speeches about how they have quibbles with UK Government immigration policy, but never actually do anything about it? I suspect that most of us know the answer to that question.

Patrick Grady: My hon. and learned Friend is right. At least Scottish Conservatives have had the courage of their convictions to come here and speak. It is worth noting that, with the exception of a brief intervention, not a single Member from the Scottish Labour party has had the courage of their convictions to come here. Perhaps they have something more important to do than take part in a debate led by the Scottish National party, but it is a pretty poor show.

Joanna Cherry: It is worth remembering that, when the hostile environment policy was brought to the House by the coalition Government, most of the Liberal Democrats, from whom we have not heard a speech today, supported it, and only a handful of Labour, Members had the courage of their convictions to oppose it—the shadow Home Secretary is pointing at herself; I know she is one of them, and I commend her for that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North said, the question remains: what is Labour’s position on immigration? Where are they now on freedom of movement?

Patrick Grady: Where are they today?

Joanna Cherry: Indeed; there are not many of them here. They disowned freedom of movement in their 2017 manifesto. They were planning to vote with the Government on the immigration Bill but, after a fuss on social media, they retreated. I do not know whether they are putting up anyone to sum up the debate. They ought to, on such an important subject. I would like to know where Labour stands. We got a bit of a hint—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This is an SNP Opposition day debate, so the Labour Front Bench would not be required or expected—indeed, including by the SNP—to put up a spokesperson.

Joanna Cherry: I stand corrected, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I apologise for any confusion caused, but it is still worthy of note that we have had so little contribution from Labour Members today. I am left with a puzzled question in my mind as to what Labour’s position on immigration is, but it is a bit similar to the puzzled question in my mind as to what Labour’s position on Brexit is. I suspect that the two confusions are linked.

One prominent Labour politician of yesteryear from whom we heard yesterday was Gordon Brown, who served an even shorter time in office than the current Prime Minister. He was wheeled out again to tell us that the Union of the United Kingdom is at risk; I am tempted to make a comment about Sherlock Holmes, but I will refrain. Where Gordon Brown and I could agree is that the Union of England and Scotland is at risk, but not for the reasons that he outlined, which seemed to blame the Scottish National party.

The Union of England and Scotland is at risk because this Parliament repeatedly ignores the voices of Scotland’s voters and the representatives they democratically elect. The Union is at risk because, unlike the European Union, it is not a union of equals where the voice of every nation is heard and respected. It is a union where the largest member dominates and constantly imposes upon Scotland policies that are damaging to Scotland’s economy, culture and society. In a series of speeches from my hon. Friends this afternoon, we have heard just how those policies are damaging Scotland’s economy,
culture and society. Those immigration policies, aided and abetted by the Labour party and Liberal Democrats, are not only a failure across the UK but a perfect example of this Parliament’s failure to address Scotland-specific solutions on reserved matters.

Our nationalism in the SNP is simply a desire to right that wrong by self-determination. We do not blame foreigners or immigrants for the things that are wrong in our society. We welcome the rich contribution that they make to our country. We know that Scotland’s future lies as part of a Europe of free trade and free movement of people. All the evidence shows that the Scottish economy benefits from immigration. It is time for immigration policy to be made in Scotland, so that the Scottish Parliament can ensure that migration works to the benefit of the Scottish economy, to stimulate population growth and to enrich our society and our culture.

3.58 pm

Caroline Nokes: With the leave of the House, I will wind up the debate, as well as having opened it for the Government.

We have had an important debate that has highlighted the scale of activity that the borders, immigration and citizenship system undertakes and the challenges it faces. It has been wide ranging, with Members raising policy issues and individual cases. For every case that Members have rightly raised, there are thousands more people who are satisfied with their experience of the immigration system. I am proud of the hard work and dedication of officials in the Home Office. It is wrong—wholly wrong—to try to characterise those who work for the Home Office, in some instances doing incredibly difficult and stressful jobs, as in any way uncaring or inhumane.

I have listened carefully to Members’ contributions, and I welcome the thoughts and views put forward in today’s debate. I will highlight some of the comments that I thought were particularly insightful and useful.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) made an impassioned speech about immigration being a reserved matter, and he and I of course believe that it should stay that way. He made some interesting points about the way we describe skilled and unskilled labour within the immigration system, and as part of the White Paper process and the future system, I think we have to find better ways to articulate that. It is not easy to describe skills only in terms of qualifications or salary levels, and I have certainly been guided by the engagement we have done during the last few months. In particular, those in the social care industry certainly have many skills that perhaps do not fall neatly into the immigration categories. I have spent much time over the last six months listening to the Scottish farmer, the Cumbrian hotelier and the Bristolian tech entrepreneur, and I absolutely recognise that we need to be adaptive. Our economy is changing, and jobs exist today that did not exist five years ago. In the same way, there will be jobs in five years’ time that we have not even dreamed of today.

The hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) spoke at quite some length and used the word “arbitrary” repeatedly, but it is absolutely not the case that we have an arbitrary system. We work very hard to make sure that the decisions we make are the right ones, and there is indeed a great deal of work still to be done to make sure that we improve.

Imran Hussain: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Nokes: No, I am sorry, but I will not give way. The hon. Gentleman was not here at the start, and I have a lot of ground to cover in just a little time.

Last summer, I very much enjoyed going to Dundee and hosting a roundtable with people working particularly in the tech sector and the gaming industry. It is important that we reflect on the issues and views not just in a range of different sectors across industry, but of course in the different parts of the United Kingdom—both the individual countries of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and the different regions.

My superb, I have to say, Scottish hon. Friends may not have the length of service of the hon. Member for Dundee East, but I do not think we should in any way see length of service as a proxy for skill. They have certainly shown not only that they have grasped the issues but that they can carry their voice to Government and talk sense in a constructive and persuasive manner.

This week, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has extended the MAC’s commission to looking again at salary thresholds. I commend all those who made the point that we should do that. Indeed, some of them appear to have missed the fact that we are doing it.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) made, to be quite frank, some outrageous allegations. She has called me “shabby” and accused the Government of being “racist”. I reject her very simple and, to be quite frank, nasty attitude on these points. I have spent the last 17 months making sure that we talk about immigration in a thoughtful and humane way, and I have to say that I have gone to quite some lengths to reach out across the House and listen to different views. I do not think that she either listened to or understood my opening comments, when I talked about the record high number of visitor visas granted—2.3 million last year, up 9%—

Imran Hussain: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Nokes: I am sorry, but I have made it clear to the hon. Gentleman that I have a lot of ground to cover, and he was not here for the bulk of the debate.

The grant rate of visitor visas is in the region of 88%, and the characterisation of the UK by the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith is one I simply do not recognise. It was a description that, to be frank, perfectly encapsulated her party’s doom and gloom personality: never has a glass of whisky been more half-empty.

My hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) had some very interesting quotes not only from the First Minister of Scotland, but from one of the SNP’s recently elected MEPs. The concerns he raised suggesting it was in any way appropriate—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Some hon. Members have not been in for the debate, and I do hope they are not going to disrupt the Minister when she is trying to reply to those who have been in for the debate.
Caroline Nokes: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Indeed, the noisy hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) has come in chewing gum right at the end, having left very soon after the beginning.

My hon. Friend the Member for Moray raised the concern that people would be encouraged not to take part in the EU settled status scheme. The scheme is working well, with over 800,000 people through so far, and I do think it is important, as the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) emphasised, that people go through the process and get their status.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) might not have heard the announcement made earlier this week on the MAC’s commission with respect to salary thresholds, because she emphasised that point a great deal, but I reiterate to her that the visit visas are granted at a rate of about 88%, of which 97% are processed within 15 working days. When it comes to customer service and speed of service, I am the first to say that we can always do more, but the characterisation of the process as slow and inaccurate is very unfair.

The hon. Lady also raised an important point, which I would like to respond to, on students and European temporary leave to remain, particularly the consideration of Scottish universities, which have four-year degree programmes, and indeed the many universities up and down the UK that hold longer courses for medicine, veterinary science or architecture. This is something that we are looking at closely. While I am unable to provide further details at this stage, we are considering how best we can ensure that those students are not disadvantaged. That point has been put to me during the different stages of consideration of the immigration Bill, and I have no doubt that this is something that we really must resolve.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) spoke of immigration detention and described it as arbitrary. It is not arbitrary: at any one time, 95% of people with no leave to be here are in the community, and two thirds of those who go into detention leave within a month and over 90% within four months. There is a pilot scheme in Newcastle for women who are exhausted, but who still stay in accommodation that they have no right to be in. I reassure Members that there will be an opportunity to debate that tomorrow.

The hon. and learned Lady suggested that I had been abandoned on my birthday to both open and close the debate. I want to reassure her that there is nothing I love more than being at this Dispatch Box. I also reassure her that when it comes to taking evidence and listening to opinion, of course we listen to the Migration Advisory Committee, the Government’s independent experts, but over the past year we have also been listening to the CBI, both in Scotland and in England. We have been listening to the Federation of Small Businesses, Universities UK, the Russell Group, MillionPlus, the Tourism Industry Council, the NFU in England and Wales, and indeed in Scotland, and many more individual businesses and employers, both large and small.

It is right that we take evidence. It is right that we listen to opinion. We are committed to improving the borders, immigration and citizenship system. That is why we will continue to listen to and consult Members from both sides of the House, as well as stakeholders across a broad range of sectors.

I thank Members for their insightful and thought-provoking contributions. I will continue to reflect on them in considering the Government’s approach going forward, and I look forward to further debates on these points, and indeed others, over the coming weeks. I have no doubt that hon. and right hon. Members will continue to raise these issues with much passion and enthusiasm.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House regrets that the outgoing Prime Minister’s legacy will be her hostile environment policy and her unrealistic and damaging net migration target; calls for a fundamental change in the Government’s approach to immigration, refugee and asylum policy to one based on evidence, respect for human rights and fairness; welcomes the contribution made by migrants to the UK’s economy, society and culture; rejects regressive Government proposals to extinguish European free movement rights and to require EU nationals in the UK to apply for settled and pre-settled status; and recognises that a migration policy that works for the whole of the UK will require different policy solutions for different parts of the UK, particularly given Scotland’s demographic and economic profile.

Patrick Grady: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Just for the record—I know this is standard practice now—the House has basically resolved unanimously that the Prime Minister’s legacy is the hostile environment, and called for the various reforms outlined in the SNP motion. Can you clarify for the House what we should expect from the Government in response to an Opposition day motion having been approved by the House in such a manner?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. As I suspect he knows—he hinted that he might—the former
Leader of the House made a statement on what could be expected. The Government will make a response within, I think, approximately two months. I hope that is clear.

Armed Forces Day

4.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Armed Forces Day.

It is a real honour to open this debate to celebrate Armed Forces Day. It is an opportunity for us to say thank you to those in uniform who serve this country. It is an opportunity for us to express our gratitude to those who are in the regular service, the reserves, the cadets and those who served in uniform, our brave veterans. Also part of the armed forces community are the mums, dads, children, girlfriends, partners, wives and husbands; those who are in the immediate surrounds of those who wear or wore the uniform. On behalf of a grateful nation, I hope the House will join me in saying, “Thank you. Today and this week is all about you.”

This is the eleventh annual Armed Forces Day, and each year the event becomes bigger and bigger. I am pleased to say that the Defence Secretary will be going to Salisbury this weekend. That city is of course famous for its 123 metre spire, but it is also the home of 3rd Division. It is therefore quite apt for her and others to be celebrating our armed forces in Salisbury. The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), the Procurement Minister, will be visiting Wales and the Minister for the Armed Forces, my right hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) will be visiting Scotland.

I had the real honour of visiting Lisburn at the weekend. As somebody who served there during the troubles, how inspiring it was to be able to stand there in the high street with the mayor and various dignitaries to watch the parade of our soldiers, sailors, air personnel and cadets. They were able to walk through the town and receive the gratitude not just of those in elected office, but of the thousands of people who lined the streets. Armed Forces Day is not just about parades, but the open day that takes place afterwards. I am very grateful to the people of Lisburn and indeed to the people of the rest of Northern Ireland. The year before, I was in Coleraine.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister was also in Bangor in North Down. I was alongside him—that is how I know.

Mr Ellwood: I have made so many visits to Northern Ireland, but they do not blur into one and the hon. Gentleman is right. The point I am trying to make is that when I and others served there, there was simply no chance of being able to walk down any high street in uniform and there was absolutely no chance of the civilian population being able to express their gratitude. The change is absolutely fantastic and very welcome.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I would like to give my right hon. Friend a vote of confidence, because I know he played a very big part in the D-day commemoration events in Normandy. I had the great honour of going on to the Boudicca and meeting the veterans. I would also like to thank the Defence Secretary and the staff, who were absolutely magnificent in organising that event. It was simply extraordinary and a total success. I just wanted to say that to the Minister directly, because we owe him great thanks for all that.
Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for those kind comments. I not only thank my hon. Friend for what he has done, but pay tribute to the sacrifice made by his father, who was part of the Normandy landings and who received the Victoria Cross—


Mr Ellwood: The Military Cross, I beg your pardon. He was killed on Hill 112 at the very beginning of that advance. I will come to what happened there and to the fact that I was on board the Boudicca with 90-year-olds who stayed up later than I did, drank far more than I did and were up earlier than I was the next day.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I join the Minister in paying tribute not only to current armed forces personnel, but to ex-servicemen. Will he add to the list of those he is congratulating and thanking the merchant seafarers, particularly at the Normandy landing? Many civilians took to their boats at very short notice to help to liberate Europe.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman has jumped ahead of me, but I absolutely am happy to pay tribute to the work of the merchant seafarers. They supply our surface fleet and submariner fleet and logistically keep them at sea. They played such a critical role in the Normandy landings and do so today as well, and he is right to point that out.

Today is Reserves Day—I declare that I am a reservist—and we should pay tribute to them. Hon. Members might be aware that many are wearing their uniform today with pride, and I point out in particular that many reservists are part of the Whitehall family. Yesterday at the Foreign Office, we invited all those civil servants who not only work hard for the Government and our country in their day jobs but wear the uniform as reservists. They are in all three services, and it was wonderful to see the variety of support not just from the organisers who put this together to show that there are those who can do both jobs, but the other employers that allow and give time to our service personnel so that they can be reservists, as well as working for them.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I cast my eye towards the side Gallery during Prime Minister’s questions to see our hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Mt Cash) wearing his uniform—the uniform of the Royal Artillery—and, as the Minister mentioned, I look forward to welcoming the Minister for the Armed Forces to our Stirling military show on Saturday. I think that it would be a really good thing if our serving personnel and our reservists have more opportunities to wear their uniforms in public. The more that the public see those who wear the uniform and have the opportunity to thank them in person, the more the bond will be strengthened between the public and those who serve them so selflessly in the Queen’s uniform.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. If any of us travel to the United States for business or otherwise, we will see—in any airport or high street—that if there is somebody in uniform, others will go up and simply thank them for their service. Those people are completely unknown to them but simply do that out of a sense of duty and pride. Perhaps we are a bit reserved in this country, but we should do that more, particularly with veterans. I am really pleased that one thing I have managed to do is enlarge the veterans badge. It was so small that someone had to invade that person’s body space to realise that it said “Veteran.” It is now twice the size, so it really jumps out at people. I hope that that will be the green light so that if anybody sees that badge, they go up to that person and say, “Thank you for what you have done for our country.”

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Will the Minister also thank the many veterans charities around the UK who help and support veterans to adjust to civilian life? I am thinking particularly of the Coming Home Centre in Govan, which I regularly support with letters to ensure that they get adequate funding. Will he say something about that and encourage MPs to get involved in helping veterans charities to get the funding that they need and deserve so that they can help veterans?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to heap praise on our veterans charities. There are around 400 service-facing charities of different sizes. Some of the large ones that we know well, such as Combat Stress and Blesma, have been around for 100 years or so; others, which aim to keep the name of a loved one alive, are just starting up. They do incredible work, and it is so important that we honour and respect that, but we must also make sure that their work is co-ordinated, because resources are limited, and it is important that charities work together in synergy to ensure that we provide the best possible service for those who require it.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister makes an important point about the need for proper integration and co-ordination of the charities supporting our veterans. I join in his remarks about Reserves Day. Having served in the reserves for 12 years, I think it is important to acknowledge the sacrifices made by reservists. Thousands of them have served on operations overseas. We should recognise the impact that may have had on their personal life, and they should not be forgotten when it comes to supporting veterans.

Mr Ellwood: Sometimes reservists step forward to fill the gap when there is a shortfall in the regular components of a unit or formation. I know from when I served—I am looking around at others who have served—that after a number of days, no one can tell the difference between reservists and regulars; that is how good these people are. With the character of conflict and conventional warfare changing, we need the skillsets and specialisms found on civilian street. That is another reason why reservists make an important and growing contribution to our frontline capabilities, so I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

There are three objectives for Armed Forces Day. The first is to do with showcasing what the armed forces do. We need to recognise that the profile of our armed forces has changed. Iraq and Afghanistan are no longer in the headlines all the time. However, that does not take away from the fact that we are involved in more than 20 operations and exercises around the world. At any moment, about 4,000 members of our Royal Navy are at sea or working overseas; 7,000 members of our RAF are working overseas; and 10,000 members of our Army are deployed on operations or exercises. That is a major commitment. It is us looking beyond our shores,
helping other countries and making our mark across the world. Those operations cover the full spectrum of capability, whether they involve the interdiction of drugs in the Caribbean, countering piracy, dealing with a resurgent Russia in the skies of eastern Europe, still mopping up extremism in Iraq or Afghanistan, or helping upstream with the stabilisation challenges in African countries, together with our Commonwealth friends.

Let us not forget what happens closer to home. When we are required to support civilians here in dealing with flooding, or in Operation Temperer, when the police require extra support to deal with terrorist attacks, it is our armed forces who stand in harm’s way. It is because of our armed forces that we can sleep at night, knowing that our country and its interests are absolutely defended.

What we try to do, through Armed Forces Day, is explain that. That is important because the footprint—the outreach—of our armed forces is shrinking. All those in our age group probably know of somebody who served—perhaps our parents, and definitely our grandparents. Our bond with them is a reminder of what they did for our country. We are aware of the duty they performed, and perhaps of their sacrifice. I am horrified to say it, but we could get our entire armed forces into Wembley stadium. That is how small our armed forces have shrunk, so civilians’ direct exposure to our armed forces is ever smaller. It is critical that on Armed Forces Day, we celebrate, show and educate the public on exactly what our armed forces do.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): Like many colleagues across the House, I went out to speak to constituents who had come to talk to us about the “Time is Now” lobby. Will my right hon. Friend also explain what the armed forces are doing about the climate change challenge?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend has raised an important point. I shall deal with the threats that we face in a minute, but she is right to point out that a campaign to do with climate change is taking place outside the building at this moment. I believe that, in the long term, climate change is the biggest threat that we all face but need to face up to. If we are to be the custodians of values and standards, that must include looking after our planet, in which regard Britain can take a leading role.

The second point that I wish to stress is that Armed Forces Day is all about civilian society saying thank you to our armed forces. It gives civilians an opportunity to say, “We are really grateful for what you are doing.” That does not just mean us, perhaps through speeches in the Chamber; it does not just mean the town mayor taking the salute as the parades walk by; it does not mean just the crowds showing their appreciation by clapping and saying, “Thank you very much indeed.” It also means our being able to say, “Thank you for keeping us safe,” and ensuring that we do so regularly.

This is a one-day event when we say thank you, but a thank you should be said on every single day of the year, and the importance of that should be reflected in the armed forces covenant. We highlight the event and it has a profile, but we have that duty every day—not just the Ministry of Defence, but every Whitehall Department. That is why it is so critical that the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board, which brings together the responsibilities of other Departments, can point the finger and say, “The NHS: is it providing the necessary services? Local government: is it providing the necessary housing, or are we disadvantaging the people whom we promised we would look after?”

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant, I am delighted that we are having this debate. The Minister has touched on the impact of other Departments and Veterans Gateway, and how they should be working together. Does he agree that there is a significant problem with the Home Office in respect of serving personnel and their families, especially Commonwealth soldiers who need visas?

Mr Ellwood: Not for the first time, I find myself in agreement with the hon. Lady. We have had Westminster Hall debates on this issue, and we have made the case for the Home Office to reconsider. There has been a communication problem, in that those who are making the trip have not been made aware of the consequences of bringing family members. We are correcting that, but no one should be hindered from doing what is best, given the contribution that our Commonwealth friends make to our armed forces. We shall have to see where things move in the next couple of months and what the appetite will be, but I am absolutely behind the hon. Lady in wanting this matter to be addressed.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): My right hon. Friend was explaining what Armed Forces Day does to acknowledge the efforts of our current armed forces. Does he agree that it is also a time to remember those who lost their lives while pursuing their military careers? Just this week, there has been a fantastic community effort. A memorial at Califer Hill in Moray had become overgrown, as a result of issues that I do not want to go into. So disappointed were currently serving and previous members of the military that the memorial to three Tornado operatives—Samuel Bailey, Hywel Poole and Adam Sanders—had become overgrown that members of the community got together to tidy it up. That is a great thing that they do, not just on Armed Forces Day but all year round.

Mr Ellwood: I am really pleased to learn that the memorial is being given the reverence and support that it needs, and is being cleaned up so that people can actually see it. I try to distinguish between this day and Remembrance Day, because Remembrance Day is about thanking and reflecting on the fallen. I want Armed Forces Day to be a celebration and an outreach, educating people about the positive aspects of our armed forces.

The armed forces covenant falls, almost, into three parts. It asks organisations to support our regular personnel, and there have been nearly 4,000 signatories. We have seen companies give deals and special discounts to those in the regular forces. The covenant also covers the reserves; it asks companies to make sure that if someone signs up to be a reservist, they get time off to go and do their annual camp and training and so forth, and they are not impeded or have to use their holiday time. I stress that anybody who allows their employees to go away for a number of days finds that those employees will come back all the richer from their learning and what they have experienced, to the benefit of the employer.
Ruth Smeeth: Does the Minister agree that we as employers in this House—every single Member of Parliament—should become covenant employers in our own right and that the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority should work with us to deliver that? We should not have to go through the MOD to deliver that; we should all be encouraging everybody to promote the covenant both in this place and in our constituencies.

Mr Ellwood: Let us go further than that: shall I write to IPSA and invite it to become a signatory to the covenant? Perhaps that is what should happen.

Ruth Smeeth: That would be a wonderful intervention by the Minister, but I have tried to make that suggestion in private to IPSA and have not been very successful, so any help the Minister can give me to ensure that IPSA allows us all to become covenant employers would be very welcome.

Mr Ellwood: I suspect that following this debate IPSA will be more aware that there is an invitation heading its way.

Another organisation that I hope is well aware that there is an invitation on the way, because I have written to it, is the BBC. I make the following point directly—although the BBC will probably cut this because our debate is being broadcast by BBC Parliament. Our veterans—2.5 million of them—are changing in profile. Sadly, in the next 10 years that number will diminish and go down to 1.5 million, because we will lose the second world war generation. The television is so important to many of these elderly people, who are on their own and use it for company and so forth; we have heard all the debate about this. I simply ask the BBC to look carefully at this issue. Its contribution to the covenant could be to allow our veterans to continue having that free TV licence. I have written to the BBC but have yet to have a reply; I look forward to receiving something in the post very soon indeed.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): There has been consensus thus far in this debate, but I must point out that one way of achieving that would be to bring it in-house; let the Government of the day decide. The provision was in our manifesto and we are willing to introduce it, and it was in the right hon. Gentleman’s party manifesto as well. Let us keep those TV licences free for the over-75s.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman makes his point and it is now on the record—unless the BBC has cut that bit as well.

I need to stress the issue of perception, because another aspect of Armed Forces Day is to correct the perception that somehow if someone joins our armed forces they might be damaged by their service. Nothing could be further from the truth: those who serve are less likely to go to prison, less likely to want to take their own life and less likely to be affected by mental health issues. If anyone is affected by any of those issues, then absolutely the help should be there, and we spoke about the importance of veterans support and indeed what comes from the Government too. The idea that those who serve are damaged is perpetuated in society; the Lord Ashcroft report underlined that, and we need to change it. We need to change it for two reasons. First, it does nothing to help recruitment and the next generation wanting to sign up for our armed forces. Secondly, it does nothing for those who have left the armed forces and are seeking a job, as they might therefore not get that job. They might not gain employment because their employer has a false idea that somehow they are damaged. We need to change that.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Although I agree with much of what the Minister is saying about employers, we must also recognise that neither a reservist nor a full member of the armed forces is an employee. The Minister has implied on the Floor of the House that he does not agree that members of the armed forces should be treated as employees. Does he think that it would help with recruitment if he said that they should be?

Mr Ellwood: I think the hon. Gentleman is being pedantic; I think he knows exactly the spirit in which I support the armed forces. If he wants to discuss this after the debate I will be more than happy to do so, and I will listen carefully to his speech if he wants to elaborate on that. My commitment to all those who serve and their ability to get into employment is second to none, as I hope is reflected in the comments I have made.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I absolutely echo the support of everyone in this Chamber for the current members of our armed forces and for our veterans. Most of the veterans I see in my surgery are suffering for one reason: their mental health as a result of post-traumatic stress disorder. We live in a rural area, and they need quite specialist treatment. Even with the best will in the world, and with the covenant, they are not able to access that support. Will the Minister make a commitment today that any member of the armed forces who is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder will be able to access defence mental health services at whatever time after they have left service, because PTSD often crops up more than six months after they have left?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady highlights the challenge that we face. While someone is serving in uniform, their mental health and physical health are the responsibility of the MOD, but once they depart from the armed forces—or, indeed, if they are part of the family in the armed forces but not wearing a uniform—that is the responsibility of the NHS. The NHS has good facilities in some areas, but they are less good in others. They are getting far better: the TIL service—the trauma intervention and liaison service—is the first port of call for anybody with the challenges that the hon. Lady mentions. We also have complex treatment centres up and down the country, but they are still in their infancy and we need to get better from them. I absolutely hear what she says, and this is exactly why we have the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board to point the finger and say, “Please look, this is the support that we require.” The NHS has just received £21 billion extra. Let us see some of that money go into creating parity between mental and physical health.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important point about looking after our veterans and their mental and physical health, but he must not allow himself to be diverted from the
important point he was making, which is that we have 200,000 extremely fit and active members of our armed services, very few of whom are suffering in those ways. The point of Armed Forces Day is to celebrate the fantastic service that they make to our nation. Of course we must look after those who are disabled in one way or another, but we must none the less celebrate those who are fit, healthy and active, and serving the Queen.

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend does in supporting the armed forces' profile in Parliament. It is absolutely paramount in educating others. He is absolutely right to say that we need to keep this in perspective and celebrate the positive side of being in the armed forces, while not forgetting our responsibility and duty to look after those who are less fortunate or require support.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I apologise to the Minister for coming in late. The covenant has now been going for about 10 years. What percentage of its objectives have been realised in areas such as mental health, housing and employment? It has been going for a very long time and I would like to know how far we have come. Has he had any discussions with the British Legion about this?

Mr Ellwood: That is mapped out in our annual report, and, if I may, I will send the hon. Gentleman a copy of it. He is absolutely right to suggest that we should not be complacent about the importance of setting the bar ever higher. This is one of the toughest things that I have found in getting parity across the country, not least because responsibility for this is devolved to the other nations. I can finally get to my third point on what the armed forces are actually about: the bond of the communities themselves. I am looking round the Chamber, and I can see representatives of the places where people have served. There is a symbiotic relationship between the garrison, the base or the port and the surrounding conurbation. Let us take Portsmouth, Aldershot and Plymouth as examples. Those places have a long history of relationships between those in the garrison and those who are working outside. Spouses and partners will seek work in those places, and children will need to be educated there. It is absolutely paramount to get all those things right, and we must ensure that we celebrate that as well. Armed Forces Day can highlight and illuminate the bond between organisations, and it is important for us to focus on that.

That brings me to the issue of veterans, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash)—who has now departed—raised earlier. Madam Deputy Speaker, I know that you want me to conclude soon, but it is appropriate that I should in particular, “What’s it like coming here?” He said, “It reminds me of when Britain was great.” That sent a bit of a shock through me about where we are today and the role that we have taken. Perhaps we have become a little risk averse in what we do, and in our willingness to step forward as a force for good. We should reflect on that.

The veterans strategy, which I touched on earlier, is critical in bringing together and co-ordinating charities and the work that we do, to ensure that support is there. Part of that is ensuring that there is a transition process, and that when people leave the armed forces they transition back into civilian society with ease. Of those who participate in the official transition process, which can last up to two years, 95% are either in work or employment within six months, which is very good to see.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I represent Darlington, which is the nearest major town to Catterick garrison. I see what the Minister is talking about day in and day out. Does he think that we do enough to celebrate, and to highlight to people who might be considering a career in the armed forces, the support that is available to people leaving, and the breadth of successful careers that veterans enter into, from teaching to running their own businesses? All kinds of things are possible, and sometimes we do not explain and highlight enough the support that is available to people as they leave.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady is right to point out the challenges for somebody who has perhaps done three tours of Afghanistan on the general-purpose machine gun. How do they put that in their CV and then sell it to, say, a civilian organisation? There is not a lot of call for that, unless they are some soldier of fortune who is looking for mercenary work, which I hope would not be the case.

We need to ensure that this can be turned around, and the skillsets can be recognised. That must happen in two phases. First, we must explain to companies what the skillsets are, and our Defence Relationship Management organisation does exactly that. Secondly, we must ensure that the individual who is in uniform and who is departing can learn the necessary skills and gain civilian qualifications on their way out, so that they can land in civilian street best armed to face the future.

James Gray: Will the Minister pay tribute to some very good companies? FDM springs to mind, which has so far placed 500 personnel in the IT industry, and does great work. To pick up on one detail, when people leave the armed forces they tick a form that gives them the option of a variety of interests and industries in which they might like to be retrained. For some reason, there is no box for the land-based industries: farming, game keeping and so forth. Will he change the form to allow soldiers to opt for land-based careers, for which, after all, they are well qualified?

Mr Ellwood: I was not aware of that. I would be delighted to have a meeting with my hon. Friend. Perhaps we can take the matter forward and see what we can do. Absolutely, we should not miss any such opportunity.
While we celebrate the armed forces we must look to the future and ask why we have our armed forces. They do not just defend our shores and promote prosperity; perhaps for Britain or more than any other country, they project global influence. It is in our DNA to participate and be active on the international stage, to move forward, and to have an understanding of the world around us and to help to shape it. We will lose that ability if our hard power cannot keep up with the changing character of conflict.

As I see it, we are facing greater danger than at any time since the cold war. However, in the cold war, we had three divisions in Germany alone. We had 1 (British) Corps; now we are down to one warfighting division just in the UK. We are pleased to have an aircraft carrier, with a second on the way, but the fact that the Navy’s budget did not change has affected the rest of the surface fleet. We are pleased to have the F-35 and the P-8 maritime patrol aircraft, which are excellent, but in the Gulf war we had 36 fast jet squadrons—today we are down to six. Our main battle tank has not been updated for 20 years, and our Warrior has not been updated for 25 years.

The money needs to come. We need to invest more in our defence if we are to keep that profile, but the threats are changing and becoming more diverse. There is not just a single threat—not just a resurgent Russia or a rising China—and extremism has not disappeared, but cyberspace will take over as the area of most conflict. Data, not terrain, will be the prize, and we will become all the more vulnerable as 5G and the internet of things take over.

We are becoming ever-reliant on an automated world, but how vulnerable we become, and how our world closes down, if that world is interfered with in any way. Two thirds of our universities are hacked or attacked in any year, so we need to build resilience. A hundred years ago we developed the RAF, which moved away from the other armed forces—we created a new service. I pose the question of whether we now need a fourth service, one to do with cyber and our capability to lead the world’s understanding of not just resilience, offensive and defensive, but of the rules of engagement, too.

Somebody could attack this House of Commons, and we would not know who it was. We would not understand where the threat came from, but it would affect us. Even if we found out who it was, to whom do we go to complain? Who sets the rules of what is a responsible response? How do we retaliate?

These are questions that we should be asking ourselves, and we should work with our allies to defend western values.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Ellwood: I will conclude, if I may.

We constantly talk about the erosion of the rules-based order, but we do not say what we will do about it. China was not included in the Bretton Woods organisations that were created after the second world war. Somebody, some nation, who understands how the world is changing needs to step forward and articulate where we need to go. Otherwise, we will see a new cold war between the United States and China, and we will see these threats become greater and greater.

As we say thank you to those who have served and are serving, what are we doing about it? What role do we see ourselves playing? We have become distracted by Brexit in this vortex of discussing something that has taken our mind off what is happening around the world. The world is changing fast. I believe it is in our DNA to step forward, as we did 75 years ago, and help craft the world into a better place. That requires greater investment in our armed forces.

I conclude as I began, by saying thank you to all those who have served, all those who do serve and all those who want to serve, and the families around them. We owe you a debt of gratitude, and we are very grateful for your service.

4.47 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): It is a delight to speak in this debate. This Saturday people will come together in communities across the country to say thank you to the men and women who make up our armed forces community. Ever since the first national event in 2009, Armed Forces Day has become an important date in our towns, cities and villages. There are well over 300 events taking place this year in every corner of the UK, including parades, concerts, air displays and more.

In my own community in Llanelli, the local branch of the Royal British Legion and the Llanelli Veterans Association have organised a parade and a day of activities for adults and children, and I look forward to spending the day there. It is heartening to see the numbers of people attending events growing year after year and to see the whole community represented, from young children fascinated by the military equipment on display to the second world war veterans proudly wearing their medals.

There is a simple reason so many people turn out at events across the country: the public want to show their deep gratitude and admiration for our serving personnel, our veterans and their families—the men and women who stand ready at a moment’s notice to do whatever is necessary to defend our country, and the personnel who represent the very best of Britain in freeing civilians from the tyranny of Daesh, assisting in the aftermath of humanitarian catastrophes, deterring Russian aggression in the Baltics and Poland, and contributing to peacekeeping operations across the world.

Our reservists play a vital role in each and every one of those operations, bringing their unique skills and experience to work with colleagues in the regulars. Today, on Reserves Day, we pay tribute to all those who give up their time to train for and serve in the reserve forces, many of whom will be wearing their uniform to work today to highlight the important role that they play.

Armed Forces Day is also a moment to say thank you to our veterans for their service and for guaranteeing so many of the freedoms that we take for granted today.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Armed Forces Day is a great opportunity for our communities to support our armed forces, and I will be very proud to attend the celebration in Trefedgar this Sunday. I have been working with local employers in Blaenau Gwent to encourage firms to sign up as forces-friendly businesses and we have had a good response. However, my experience is that not enough businesses have heard of the armed
forces covenant, so does my hon. Friend agree that we need an even bigger awareness campaign to help organisations to get involved and to support our veterans?

Nia Griffith: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is right. Considerable progress has been made on awareness, but we still need to make sure people understand what the qualifications mean and how the qualities and skills of our armed forces personnel can be translated into today’s workplace. I understand from the Minister that he is very committed to work in that field.

In recent weeks, we have been reflecting on the particular sacrifice made by those who served in the second world war and, in particular, the D-day landings. It was a great privilege to attend the commemorations in Normandy earlier this month and to meet some of the men who took part in that operation 75 years ago. It is clear from talking to them that they do not regard themselves as heroes—they were just doing what they were trained to do and they got on with the job in the way that that war-time generation so often did. At Bayeux war cemetery we saw the immaculate flowerbeds by each headstone, carefully looked after by the staff and interns of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which does such important work in ensuring that the graves of those who made the ultimate sacrifice are treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve.

There will be significant agreement across the House today because we are all committed to our Armed Forces Day and to honouring the men and women of our armed forces community. Members of Parliament also have an important responsibility to talk up our armed forces and to highlight the many benefits of service, particularly to young people who may want to sign up.

I want to take this opportunity to ask the Government about several issues that matter to personnel, many of which were highlighted in the armed forces continuous attitude survey published last month. The first is pay. We know that subjecting armed forces personnel to the public sector pay cap means that they have received a real-terms pay cut for seven years running, which goes some way to explaining why satisfaction with pay is at just 35%. The pay award has again been delayed this year. The Armed Forces Pay Review Body has submitted its report to the Government, so I ask the Minister to update the House on the current pay round when he winds up the debate. I do not expect him to announce the pay award today, but can he tell personnel when they can expect to hear what the Government propose?

Giving personnel below-inflation rises also has a knock-on effect on retention. The number of personnel choosing to leave the forces is at historically high levels and pay remains one of the top reasons personnel decide to leave.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I have to ask the shadow Minister the same question I asked the Minister: if this is such an important issue, does she not agree that in terms of pay and conditions members of the armed forces should be allowed to be treated as employees and have a representative body to represent them with the Government?

Nia Griffith: Indeed. The hon. Gentleman makes a fine point and there is a very good case for having a consultation on what sort of voice would be practical for our armed forces.—[Interruption.] If I may, I will make some progress.

The pay body’s 2018 report highlights the extent to which personnel shortages put additional pressure on those who remain in the services. The latest personnel statistics show yet another drop in the trained size of the armed forces, with each of the services now smaller than at this point last year. Although we have seen a slight rise in intake in the 12 months to March—by 120 personnel—that alone is clearly not enough to enable the Government to meet the target set out in the 2015 SDSR. Will the Minister set out what specific action he will take to ensure that we do not continue to see further falls—[Interruption.] I do hope that the Minister heard that and will be able to tell us in his winding-up speech what specific action he or his colleagues will take to ensure that we do not continue to see further falls in the number of armed forces personnel.

The Minister will know the Labour party’s view of the future accommodation model. Will he tell the House what recent conversations he has had with Amey about this issue? Will he also update us on the future accommodation model? We all want to see good-quality service accommodation that meets the needs of our personnel and their families. We accept that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work for everybody. Some families will be in a position to buy, and the forces Help to Buy scheme may be able to assist them, while others are happy to live in service accommodation. Living on site with other military families can provide a crucial support network for our forces and their families.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): CarillionAmey has had more than 36,000 complaints in three years about the conditions of service family accommodation—that is, 1,000 complaints every month. There is outrage among service families about the contract with CarillionAmey. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is time the Government stepped up and intervened so that we have decent maintenance for our armed forces personnel?

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend makes a good point. None of us wants to see any of our serving forces and their families living in substandard accommodation. There are certainly issues to be addressed in respect of Amey and forces housing.

In respect of the future accommodation model, we do not want personnel to be pushed into the private rented sector without any choice. Indeed, a recent Army Families Federation survey demonstrated that, if the availability of accommodation currently on offer was reduced and a rental allowance offered instead, only 22% of respondents would definitely remain in the Army. The insecurity, variable quality and limited availability
of the private rented sector is a concern, and it is not clear how the additional costs of private sector rents would be met.

The armed forces community encompasses not only current and former personnel but their families, who provide a crucial support network to service members and who experience the demands of forces life at first hand. The nature of service life means that many forces families have to move house repeatedly, including to postings abroad. One difficulty that some service families face is finding new schools for their children, especially if they resettled outside the admissions cycle.

A recent Children’s Commissioner for England report highlights how service children are sometimes not placed in the most appropriate school with siblings or other forces children from the same unit, causing further and unnecessary distress. It can help if local authorities have better awareness of the needs of service children. For example, Rhondda Cynon Taf Council has a dedicated education officer who works closely with the families of serving personnel, and with schools, to ensure that the children of service members are supported in their education. The fragmentation of education in England, with admissions in the hands of academies or academy trusts, makes such work more difficult.

Ruth Smeeth: Does my hon. Friend agree that one issue that is really difficult for many schools to understand is the impact of Remembrance Day on children whose parents are serving? There might be only one or two children of service personnel in each school, and when children are taught about what may be happening in various areas of conflict, it means something slightly different to those whose parents could be out there. That is why education is so important, as is making sure that the covenant applies.

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to make sure that children are properly supported and that a structure is in place within the local authority to ensure that schools are properly educated to understand that.

Obviously, we are very concerned about this fragmentation of education in England, with the academies and academy trusts being a bit of a law unto themselves. What consideration have the Government given to this issue, and what conversations has the Minister had with his colleagues in the Department for Education to try to assist with the admissions process in particular?

The families of Commonwealth personnel, who make an important contribution to our armed forces, experience particular challenges owing to the Government’s minimum income requirements for bringing in spouses or children to this country. We on the Labour Benches believe in scrapping these income requirements so that all personnel are treated equally. I urge the Minister to prevail on his colleagues in the Home Office to make that important change.

The nature of the work that our armed forces undertake—keeping us safe and representing us abroad—means that some people will not be in regular contact with service personnel if they do not have friends or relatives who serve. That is why Armed Forces Day is so important. It is an opportunity to say thank you, to show gratitude and appreciation and to commit to supporting our armed forces community the whole year round.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith). I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate to celebrate our armed forces’ past and present service to our nation on this the 11th Armed Forces Day.

We as a country have a proud history of stepping up on the world stage and it is our armed forces that ensure that we play a major role. This year, as we celebrated 75 years since the D-day landings, I have been learning about the incredible contribution that my constituency, Chichester, made. There are wonderfully vivid accounts of tanks rolling over the South Downs and of our still quaint villages being disturbed by our American allies playing baseball on the village cricket grounds. All along the south coast, there were practice landings before the assault was launched. There are tales of Eisenhower, Montgomery and Churchill watching a final rehearsal of the landings from the Bracklesham Bay Hotel as their men ran drills.

RAF Tangmere, near Chichester, played a huge part, taking operational control of 56 squadrons from 18 airfields and pilots from all around the world—from allied and occupied nations such as Canada, New Zealand and Poland. Our local history is full of incredible stories, although today there is little left of our wartime past. That is why I have been supporting the Save Tangmere Tower campaign, which is working to restore the former RAF control tower and to preserve a part of our military heritage, remembering not only the RAF pilots during the battle of Britain, but our brave Special Operations Executive agents, often women flying into occupied Europe.

Our wartime history has been woven into the fabric of our society. Even our generation have lived with the memories all around us. My grandmother served in the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force and my grandfathers were in the Royal Navy and the Merchant Navy. My husband is named after his uncle who served and died with the Royal Artillery in Italy in 1944. We all grew up with a military heritage, remembering not only the RAF pilots during the battle of Britain, but our brave Special Operations Executive agents, often women flying into occupied Europe.

Today, Chichester still plays an important role in the defence of the realm, as Thorney Island is within my constituency. Thorney is home to the 12th Regiment Royal Artillery, which provides close support air defence to the UK’s manoeuvre forces, protecting critical assets from a range of airborne threats. I have met some of the men and women serving at the base a couple of times and once totally by chance when we went to sell poppies at Westminster tube station and they were already there rattling their buckets.

My background is in business, so I must admit that I have a lot to learn about the armed services, but being in this place I have already begun on that journey and I am looking forward to continuing it, having signed up to the armed forces parliamentary scheme. With Portsmouth just down the road—and to follow in my grandfather’s footsteps—I have enrolled in the naval course, where I will have the opportunity to get a real insight into what it means to be in the Navy by being in their shoes for a
Our armed forces really are the pride of our nation. They place themselves in harm’s way so that we may enjoy the liberties and freedoms that we all cherish and value, and today we are all here just to say thank you. In return, we must fully fund our defence capability and veterans’ services, which is why I welcome the Chancellor’s commitment earlier this year of £1 billion extra funding. I hope that we can continue to keep the memory of past service alive through sharing the stories of our ancestors and preserving the relics that remain here. The British armed forces are the envy of the world, and we and our allies rely on their professionalism and skill, both now and in the future, especially in such uncertain times as the ones in which we live.

5.5 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I will start by declaring an interest: as many Members here know, my husband served for 17 years in the Royal Navy, finally retiring as lieutenant commander in the Submarine Service. It is therefore appropriate that he joins us today in the Under-Gallery.

Armed Forces Day is an opportunity to thank members of our armed forces, both serving and retired, but of course this year there is added significance in that we are also celebrating 75 years since the D-day landings. Armed Forces Day is also an opportunity for us to do more than just speak and give more than just gratitude, and actually to take action to ensure that things are as good as we can make them for members of the armed forces, who are willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice. The contribution that serving and former personnel make to society goes beyond their service, and we should ensure that their futures—inside and outside the military—are worth investing in. We need to allow them to develop as professionals, both for their life in the armed forces and for their life beyond, to ensure that they can contribute to and develop links with local communities, and to make sure that their family life and personal wellbeing are assured.

It is important that we do not spend this afternoon being complacent. There is good work going on but, as a school report card would say, we could do better. There are issues that mean that serving is not always as attractive as it should be. As and when somebody from a given school in Scotland goes into the armed forces and makes a success of it, would it not be a good idea if they were encouraged in every way possible to go back to their old school and tell the fourth, fifth or sixth-year pupils how they did it—"I was in this very same classroom. You can do the same. It’s a great career”?

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): May I make a suggestion? As and when somebody from a given school in Scotland goes into the armed forces and makes a success of it, would it not be a good idea if they were encouraged in every way possible to go back to their old school and tell the fourth, fifth or sixth-year pupils how they did it—"I was in this very same classroom. You can do the same. It’s a great career”?

Carol Monaghan: Of course, and people in many professions go back to their old schools and tell the students about their careers. We have seen the mess that has been made of recruitment—the amount of money that has been spent and the poor results—so maybe we should go back to using members of the armed forces as primary recruiters.

At all stages of the recruitment process, recruits should have confidence in its inclusivity of all identities of gender, sexual orientation, race and religion. When considering recruitment, it is important that we are also looking at the labour markets. Who are the military trying to recruit, where are their challenges, and who are they up against when trying to get the very best? If we need to consider the increased use of reservists to ensure that people have skills developed outside the military that can be used inside the military, then that should be done.

Armed forces pay scales reflect an outdated approach. Recruits will start with significantly lower salaries and more distorted pay scales than those in the police or fire services. In July 2018, the MOD announced that personnel will receive a 2% salary increase with an additional one-off payment of 0.9%. However, as the current inflation rate is about 2.2%, the armed forces’ annual rise of just 2% is still below that.

Ruth Smeeth: Does the hon. Lady agree that it is even worse for those in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, who were not entitled to a pay rise at all, which is why they are currently consulting on an industrial dispute?

Carol Monaghan: It is incredible that we treat those personnel as separate when they are actually fundamental to the operations that we engage in.

Giving pay rises that are below the rate of inflation has a negative effect on the forces’ reputation as an employer that nurtures and respects its employees. The Scottish Government have taken a progressive approach towards public sector pay, delivering a guaranteed 3% increase to all those earning below £36,500. We believe that, as a minimum, a similar offer should be made to all armed forces personnel.

Much has been made of the tax bands in Scotland with regard to military personnel. Will the Minister say what are the plans for mitigation for personnel in Scotland who are earning less than £33,000 and are currently being taxed at a higher rate than their counterparts in Scotland? My hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) mentioned an independent representative body similar to a trade union that would help to ensure that the interests of personnel were addressed properly. It would be able to negotiate on pay and conditions, and look at other structural issues, but unlike normal trade unions it would have no right to organise a strike. Clearly that would undermine the integrity of our armed forces, and
we could not allow that to happen. In many cases, a representative body works extremely well—for example, the Danish Reserve Forces Association which describes itself as a negotiating organisation. It looks at contracts and pay but also provides legal assistance to personnel who need support in cases related to their service in the armed forces. This is something that we need to consider seriously.

Quality accommodation is fundamental to the welfare of personnel and their families. There are major issues with the MOD estate in terms of work space, living accommodation and training facilities, and a lot of it is in old, unsuitable buildings. The current management of the housing estate has provided extremely poor value for money for taxpayers. The performance of CarillionAmey in managing service accommodation has been shockingly poor. We do our personnel a gross disservice in continuing in this manner.

The education of forces children has been mentioned. There are big issues with continuity of education. It is right that we start considering military personnel children as having adverse childhood experiences, because their experiences potentially have an impact on their educational success. In Glasgow, when people fill in their annual update of contact details and other information, there is a tick-box that says, “Are the parents military personnel or veterans?” If the box is ticked, that is highlighted in the young person’s records and allows intervention if required. That is a very simple thing that could be done.

Veterans who have incurred physical injuries during their service should be assured that they will receive a commitment to lifelong specialist medical care. At the moment, these services are primarily led by charities, and we know of many such charities operating in our constituencies and throughout the UK. Stanford Hall was recently opened as a new facility for personnel who have suffered extensive injuries, such as limb loss. It takes over from Headley Court, which was the previous centre, but there is an issue with Stanford Hall: it is mainly for serving personnel, not veterans. It seems ludicrous that we cut people off at that point.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and I spoke of the division between the two. I visited Stanford Hall. The NHS is building its own facility there, so it can share what is going on. The focus of Stanford Hall is on not only extreme injuries but all rehabilitation, no matter how small or large, and it is paid for by the MOD. The NHS is responsible for dealing with civilians, including our veterans, and it is important that we do not lose sight of that.

Carol Monaghan: I would like to make two points. First, a lot of the equipment in Stanford Hall has been developed between Combat Stress, which fulfils this programme, the MOD and the NHS regarding an out-of-hours mental health helpline, and we very much welcome that. While it is imperative to focus on primary care and support for physical and mental health, further effort must be put into the awareness and understanding of such conditions, so that both serving and former military personnel feel confident enough to reach out and ask for help when it is required.

There are 2.5 million veterans in the UK, and around 240,000 of them are living in Scotland, the majority of whom have re-established themselves in society.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): On that point, Scotland’s Bravest Manufacturing Company was officially opened last week by the First Minister. It is based at the Erskine Hospital site, which I am sure you are familiar with, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I have visited it a number of times. It is a Royal British Legion Industries social enterprise that gives veterans employment and development opportunities they might not otherwise have. Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming what it does for ex-service personnel and congratulating Michelle and the team on the excellent progress they have already made?

Carol Monaghan: For those who do not know about the excellent work that the Erskine Hospital does, it is known throughout the west of Scotland—in fact, probably throughout Scotland—as a real centre of excellence for veterans. I am a supporter of Erskine, as are many of my hon. Friends.

We know that a minority of veterans are affected by health issues related to their service. These are often early service leavers, who have only completed their training or had only a short period of service, and it is not right that, just because of that, we leave them to it. The support we offer them must be extended to ensure that they properly reintegrate into society.

War widows and widowers must also be incorporated into the veterans community, and must have services that are specific to their needs. We need to address concerns about the fact that a war widow’s pension is incorrectly perceived as a benefit, rather than compensation, because this has a negative impact when a widow is assessed for an income-based benefit.

I conclude by saying, on behalf of the SNP, that I extend the thanks of Members on these Benches to all those who are currently serving or have served, and to those who are supporting serving personnel. Often the families and the support networks are forgotten in our comments, so it is important that we remember them too on Armed Forces Day.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), and I pay tribute to her husband. He did so many years of fitting service for our country, so I thank him also.

We have a fantastic legacy of military service in Ochil and South Perthshire. In fact, the predecessor constituency covering a large part of mine—Kinross and Western Perthshire—was the constituency of Alec Douglas-Home, who used to say it was a constituency of blackface sheep and Black Watch colonels, and I can say that the
military legacy remains with us. Today, Ochil and South Perthshire combines Perth and Kinross with Clackmannanshire, and we have some very active veterans and some very active regulars in the armed forces, as well as a number of cadet forces.

The fantastic legacy still continues in south Perthshire with the Black Watch, while Clackmannanshire has the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and the air cadets—Squadrons 1743 in Crieff, 1145 in Kinross and 383 in Alloa—all of which do a fantastic job in training younger people and giving them new opportunities both to serve in our armed forces and to have confidence and skills that they can take on to civilian life. We are very fortunate to have an Armed Forces Day that is commemorated annually in Clackmannanshire. Unfortunately, owing to inclement weather this year, it was rained off, so I look forward to joining the provost and all our local councillors to celebrate next year.

There are real benefits to our modern armed forces. The Royal Navy motto says: “If you wish for peace, prepare for war.” I could not agree more with that sentiment. I think many people in this House would agree that it is a sentiment that also stands true in politics. We must prepare for the worst situation, but in doing so we must make sure that we are strengthening ourselves and our allies to succeed and achieve the great goals that this country has always stood for—whether in democracy, justice or humanitarian aid. That is what our modern armed forces are here to deliver.

As well as that, the armed forces provide a number of opportunities for our citizens here at home. We see that in the cadet forces that take place in schools in my constituency—at Morrison’s Academy and other schools right across my constituency—and we can see how valuable the cadet forces are in giving younger people confidence and skills and in complementing some of the academic studies that are taking place every day. We are also very lucky—we can see these opportunities, and we know about them from speaking to teachers—in how the cadet forces can link with the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme. I hope that one day the National Citizen Service will be extended to Scotland because that has been an important part of citizenship right through the ages, and we should keep it going to show people the value of being a British citizen.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that when the National Citizen Service was first introduced, the Scottish Government did email and contact the UK Government about it, but never heard anything back?

Luke Graham: I did not, but after 12 years in government, the SNP could have done a lot better than just one email. I am sure the Minister will come to the Dispatch Box and make a fresh offer to the Scottish Government to join the National Citizen Service. I have actually gone into this, and the hon. Gentleman can check my parliamentary record, and there is money available if we were to join. At the moment, it is only Scottish—sorry, I should say SNP—stubbornness, not the UK Government’s, that is stopping Scotland benefiting.

As I was saying, our armed forces can be a fantastic humanitarian force, and as a member of the Public Accounts Committee before I became a Parliamentary Private Secretary, I was fortunate enough to see the potential for that humanitarian force when visiting HMS Prince of Wales in Rosyth. There, I was able to see state-of-the-art technology and engineering—made and forged right across the United Kingdom, but brought together and based in Rosyth. That will provide this country with opportunities not to wage war, I hope, but to defend our allies and the international trade ways around the world and to provide humanitarian aid, as we saw recently when hurricanes hit the Caribbean and other areas.

Our armed forces are now less for war; they are for defence, but also for humanitarian aid. I agree with what my right hon. Friend the Minister said in introducing the debate, in that our armed forces need to be the most advanced in the world. They do not necessarily need to be the biggest. I lived in China for a number of years, and I saw that we are probably not going to match China on scale, but when it comes to the use of technology, tactics and skills and our deployment around the world, we can match virtually anyone. Working with allies across the world, large and small, we can deliver humanitarian aid, help to deliver defence and, where needs be, help to deliver justice, as this country did in some of the missions of the late 1990s, which were delivered so well.

I have seen the value of our armed forces, and I would like to come on to some of the responsibilities that I feel we in the House have. A few years ago, I was lucky enough to have the first round of Territorial Army training. Unfortunately, I was not able to complete it because my company shipped me abroad, but during that training I was able to see some of the conditions that our regulars have to live in.

A key area that I saw was housing, which has been mentioned by other hon. Members, and one issue, which still exists today, is housing around our defence estate. We have taken steps through our veterans strategy, but I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will be able to build on that and take further steps to improve housing on the defence estate and ensure that the men and women who are serving our country have the accommodation they deserve.

There is also the issue of mental health, both for serving and former members of the armed forces. The charities are fantastic, but we leave too much to them. In my constituency, one of our local councillors in Clackmannanshire, Councillor Bill Mason, works incredibly hard with SSAFA, providing welfare and support to a lot of veterans in Clackmannanshire and elsewhere in Scotland, but we should not be reliant on the charities. We should work in partnership, but make sure that they are getting the right support from our Government, too.

As has been mentioned by other Members from across the Floor, helping former armed forces personnel to reintegrate in civilian life is a real challenge and one that, even though we have an ambitious veterans strategy, we have not been able to address.

In my previous life, I worked as finance director for Tough Mudder. Tough Mudder worked with the Wounded Warrior project and Help for Heroes, so I had some first-hand experience. I remember that I had a captain who had served in Iraq put forward his CV to become a finance manager in my team. To be honest, once I had read through his CV and seen the work he had done and...
the leadership skills he had, I thought the interview should be taking place the other way round, but it was difficult to align him to a job that had certain analytical and academic requirements.

Although by no means insurmountable, those requirements proved to be barriers that meant that that individual did not get that role. The Government need to look at those barriers and find the bridges so that we can help people who have been in the armed forces to hone their skills and use them to get the right qualifications. We also need to help them with their CVs and with interviewing in the correct manner so that they can show that they have the skills and experience and can apply them successfully in returning to civilian life and, we hope, in reaping the rewards of their experiences in our armed forces.

I touched briefly on the veterans strategy. If anyone has a chance to read it, they will see that it is a fantastic document, which has the co-operation of all the devolved Administrations, as well as local and central Government. I highlight to my right hon. Friend the Minister the fact that the strategy involves a mix of devolved and reserved services. In his introduction to the debate, he talked about the services provided by the NHS, which are devolved to different parts of the United Kingdom. I ask him to commit to policies being driven by central Government, considering that the armed forces and citizenship are reserved functions, to ensuring that this is driven from the centre and to working in partnership with all levels of government to make sure that support reaches and is felt in the individual communities around the UK, so whether someone is in Clackmannanshire or Bristol, they will get the same support, the same standard of care and the same valuable welcome back into civilian life.

I hope the Minister will recognise and use the new data that will be available from the latest census. The census Bill will be coming before Parliament. I know colleagues share my excitement with the Minister for the constitution that the new Bill will include a question on veterans in the census for the first time. I congratulate the British Legion on its “Count them in” campaign, which has been so successful. The inclusion of the question will give us data about veterans right across the UK, so whether someone is in Clackmannanshire or Bristol, they will get the same support, the same standard of care and the same valuable welcome back into civilian life.

Days of recognition are important and valued, but our armed forces need us to fight for them every single day. The military has the motto, “Train hard, fight our armed forces need us to fight for them every single day. The military has the motto, “Train hard, fight our armed forces need us to fight for them every single day.” The services in the UK.

I have the greatest privilege to be the chair of the all-party group on the armed forces covenant and a vice-chair of the all-party group for the armed forces, with responsibility for the “senior service”, the Royal Navy, as I enjoy reminding the First Sea Lord on a regular basis. It is a privilege to be able to talk about how wonderful our armed forces are: those who currently serve and their families who support them day in, day out; and the veteran community and the people we call on to look after them. This is an opportunity that all of us should enjoy.

On Sunday, in my great city, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), there will be our Armed Forces Day parade. It is a wonderful event and I hope they stay in sunshine—not least because Saturday is my birthday. It will be a wonderful event, as it is every year, with hundreds and hundreds of children who will visit—

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): For your birthday!

Ruth Smeeth: I am being heckled by my hon. Friend. It is indeed my own birthday party.

What is so wonderful about our Armed Forces Day parade is the intergenerational conversations that happen, with our service personnel, our veterans community and our cadets—sea, air and Army—talking to each other and telling stories. This is what is so important. They are a community and a family, and we need to respect them at every opportunity.

Locally, we are privileged to have our own veterans community, the Tri Services and Veterans Support Centre, which is based in Newcastle-under-Lyme but serves all of North Staffordshire. It is run by Geoff Harriman, who does a huge amount of work for our veterans. It has been established for only three years, but five D-day veterans visit every week for a cup of coffee or tea and a biscuit, and tell their stories. Given recent anniversaries, I feel it is incredibly important that I name them so that they are on the record: Bert Turner, Harry Gould, Jim Wildes, Daniel Harrison and Norman Lewis.

I would like to tell the House the story of Bert Turner. Bert was in Bomber Command and was shot down twice during world war two. He is a D-day veteran. He delivered Paras—I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) is in his place—on to the field during D-day. His stories are extraordinary and they are all true. Day in, day out he flew sorties to ensure that we were safe. He gave up his time, even when he was shot down and could probably have taken slightly longer to recover. He got back in a plane to keep fighting with his comrades. He is an inspiration to all of us. He was also one of the people who went to Normandy for the D-day commemorations, and we thank the Royal British Legion and everybody who arranged his transport. His story and others have to inspire the next generation. That is why twice a year with the local cadets in Stoke-on-Trent—I am proud to be their honorary president—we arrange “Vets and Cadets”; we have pie and peas for our veterans and cadets, so that the war stories continue.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I am grateful to my fellow Defence Committee member for giving way. On behalf of the whole House, I wish the hon. Lady a happy 29th birthday, seasonally adjusted. I absolutely commend the initiative that she mentioned.
I want to mention another D-day veteran—Reginald Francois, my father—and I am immensely proud of that. She is right that we owe all these men a debt. My father taught me never to take living in a free country for granted. That is why I think “Vets and Cadets” is wonderful, because those who served can teach those who follow them the importance of freedom, and the fact that freedom is not free.

**Ruth Smeeth:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention and, more importantly, I thank his father for his service.

Not only have we had the opportunity to celebrate our D-day veterans, but next year we as a country will be able to enjoy VE-day. This gives the whole country the opportunity to thank everybody who served then, who served and who will serve, as well as their families and everybody involved. It annoys many of us that we focus on our veterans’ community only on Remembrance weekend and that we are able to ignore them for the rest of the year. We should not. They need our support day in, day out, because let us be honest: they earned it. Many of us in this Chamber believe that we act in public service every day, but the hours that we are away from our families and that we commit to our constituents are nothing compared with what we ask our armed services to do for us in every corner of the planet, without hesitation. If they dare to say, “No,” they are no longer in the armed forces. We thank them and their families, which is why I am adamant that this House should become a covenant employer, as should every Department. They should not just be covered by the Government saying, “But the Government signed up to the covenant.” Every employer in this country should turn that into a reality.

**Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): One of the challenges we have with the covenant and Government Departments is to see in a practical way the well meant and written covenant pledges. An issue being raised with me relates to the Treasury, and the MOD has had to help those serving in Scottish parts with changes to taxation through the Scottish legal system to make sure that they are not disadvantaged by location. Another issue that has appeared is stamp duty on properties, which is why we need to ensure that the covenant means something to everybody.

Among those who do not understand what the covenant is, are those who would be its beneficiaries. They do not know how or when to access help, and do not come to us and ask for it. One of the issues in this House is that too many of our teams do not know how much support is out there for serving personnel. That is why the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed and I organised an event in this place two weeks ago, so that our staff could meet people from veterans charities to learn how to get support for our constituents who are veterans when they need it. There are two questions that all of us should ask our constituents when they come to us for help: “Have you ever served in the armed forces?” and “Are you a member of a trade union or trade body?”. We can help them in a way that no one else can if we know those two pieces of information. We have to make sure that they can get the right support, from places as diverse as the charity SSAFA, Veterans UK and even the right part of the NHS. Obviously, in all our constituencies, there are many small veterans charities that can also assist.

I appreciate that many other people wish to speak, but I want to point out that this week is the centenary of the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund, a wonderful charity that has supported hundreds of thousands of people across the country over the last century. It has chosen to launch a wonderful campaign this week to mark its centenary. It is asking the wider community to identify RAF veterans, because it believes that more than 100,000 RAF veterans are not getting the support that they need, warrant or could do with. It is asking all of us to put those veterans back on the radar, which is appropriate for the RAF. I have today tabled an early-day motion on the subject; I hope that everybody in the Chamber will sign it.

There is nothing more important than ensuring that the people who serve, and served, our country get support from everyone in this place. I thank everybody for their support today.
Legion stalls, and by hosting a collection tin and sales of poppies in my constituency office. The remembrance parades that I have attended in previous years in Fenton and Longton have always been very well attended. In fact, the number of people from the community who attend them is increasing each year. That is a moving reminder of how much our present-day liberties rest on the sacrifices of those who came before us.

This year’s Armed Forces Day will once again be marked at Queen’s Park in Longton. The event is being organised by the North Staffordshire armed forces and veterans celebration committee, the Queen’s Park Partnership, and Stoke-on-Trent City Council. I want to take this opportunity to thank them all, and the volunteers, without whom the event would not be possible. I especially thank the serving officers and veterans who will be taking part. There will be armed forces displays and vehicles, stalls and entertainment, and a parade for members of the forces, veterans associations, cadets and schools. As in every year, thousands of attendees are expected, and they will all, of course, be very welcome.

Queen’s Park was opened in 1888, and was laid out under the instructions of the then mayor of Longton, John Aynsley—a member of the great Aynsley ceramics dynasty—on land that was donated by the Duke of Sutherland. I mention that because it illustrates the way in which Queen’s Park is integral to Longton’s history, civic obligation, generosity, and community spirit. It is, of course, suited to hosting the Armed Forces Day celebration for our city and for all those in our community who have selflessly given service in the past, and to paying tribute to those who continue to serve in our armed forces today.

We are one nation, and the Armed Forces Day celebration is for people of all ages and all backgrounds. Places such as Queen’s Park underline the fact that it is about bringing us all together, grounding us in our local communities with the common thread of our national armed services. It is, of course, a cross-party, or non-party event. In previous years I have attended Armed Forces Day celebrations in most constituencies, and I am always amazed to see, outside the office of nearly member of Parliament, posters and flags dedicated to supporting veterans and those who had unfortunately fallen in war. I think that we need to do more in this country to support our veterans.

I am conscious that there are many calls for us to go further in taking time as a country to reflect on and celebrate the role of our armed forces, giving greater recognition to the incredible sacrifices that have been made for us all. Those calls, like the calls for us to increase funding for our armed forces in the forthcoming spending review, need careful and open-minded attention.

Our armed forces, perhaps more than any other institution under Her Majesty, unite our kingdom. As a country, we owe it to our service personnel and veterans to celebrate their work and dedication, and to remember their sacrifices. After all, we are free to enjoy a day such as this only because of their continuing vigilance in keeping us safe and free all year round.

5.49 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Madam Deputy Speaker, it is good to see you in the Chair for this debate.

I congratulate Provost William Hendrie of West Dunbartonshire Council on holding last weekend’s Armed Forces Day in West Dunbartonshire in the recently refurbished borough hall in Dumbarton. I also mention the 7th Scots D Company reservists based in my constituency, in the ancient royal borough of Dumbarton, and thank them for their continued service; and Owen Sayers, the Deputy Lord Lieutenant, who I have known for many years and who does many charitable works on behalf of veterans across the whole of the west of Scotland.

The armed forces in Scotland have a very long history. Indeed, Scotland is a martial nation that since its earliest days has sought to reflect the nation within it. As far back as 1138, our late King David I led a diverse army of Normans, Germans, English, Northumbrians and—would you believe it?—Cumbrians, although the less we say about the battle of the standard, the better. Reflecting on that martial history, we must note the appointment of a Bruce as Governor of Edinburgh castle. I am sure that all Members will wish to congratulate Major General...
Alastair Bruce, especially as I know that, with the 700th anniversary this week of Bannockburn, he is especially delighted with his appointment.

Scotland’s history is also a history in which the immemorial custom of service has been—I will be honest—abused. In the late 1700s, the promise of small plots to up to 75,000 highlanders further impoverished those in service and indeed sent many of their families into exile. The clearances were an unmitigated economic disaster and a human catastrophe, yet the years that lay ahead would see Scots from every walk of life fulfill their immemorial duty.

The horrors of world war one, in which my great uncle James Timlin fell the month before the armistice was signed, serves as a warning to politicians and tyrants alike that they must exhaust all diplomatic efforts before blowing the whistle to go over the top.

World war two saw death and destruction fall on so many, including those living in my community of West Dunbartonshire through the horror of the Clydebank blitz. Those who served not only changed the face of the European continent but returned home and battled to be treated as equals by a political elite. Without doubt the vast swathes of those serving in the armed forces at the time in Europe and the far east resolutely, through the ballot box, played their part in demanding the peace dividend. Their efforts to overcome national socialism also ensured that the post-1945 Governments would be held to account, with a legacy in health, housing, social security and ways that would not have been possible before.

Later conflicts would see my brother serve in Iraq and in Afghanistan twice. As other Members have testified, and probably will again in this debate, having family on the frontline brings the comprehension of war to the forefront of your mind. It is a comprehension I would not wish on anyone. My nephew last year passed out from the Royal Engineers, and I and his family fully appreciate the opportunities offered to him, bar one: he is not an employee. Armed Forces Day and the extending events around Armed Forces Week are laudable and are much-needed attempts to address the growing gap between those who serve and the society they protect, but I have often wondered—and reflected following what I have heard today—whether they could in fact make that gap grow wider. In all the talk of heroes and gallantry, we forget that those who serve are doing an extraordinary job, and I therefore hope that we can begin to use Armed Forces Day as a force for good, not the more hysterical reactions to any suggestion of a so-called armed forces union. Giving serving members that voice and ability must surely be the most straightforward way to begin addressing all the issues we have heard about today.

The charities that many Members have spoken about today do a fantastic job in the circumstances, and many of them have historical pedigrees of which they can justifiably be proud, but we cannot and must not kid ourselves that they are able to reach every member of the armed forces in the way that they would like to. The varied nature of our defence establishments and their geographical spread make that all but impossible. Indeed, a system that is based principally on charity can often mean that some are less able to access services and advice, because they are not adept at navigating the vagaries of a social context that has not been constructed by them. A trade union is the time-honoured, tested fashion in which working people everywhere have been able to overcome social and economic barriers to advancement in the workplace, and it is time to extend that to the armed forces. This is quite simply normal practice among most of our close neighbours, and it has been rather counterintuitive to have to explain the UK’s byzantine system to those for whom this is normal.

Let me bring my remarks to a close by reiterating that the people serving in the armed forces are doing an extraordinary job, and I therefore hope that we can begin to use Armed Forces Day as a force for good, not the more hysterical reactions to any suggestion of a so-called armed forces union. A trade union is the time-honoured, tested fashion in which working people everywhere have been able to overcome social and economic barriers to advancement in the workplace, and it is time to extend that to the armed forces. This is quite simply normal practice among most of our close neighbours, and it has been rather counterintuitive to have to explain the UK’s byzantine system to those for whom this is normal.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this debate ahead of Armed Forces Day on Saturday and on Reservists Day today. With that in mind, I shall start by paying tribute to the work of the reserve units based at Raglan barracks in Newport and thanking them for all they do for us. Armed Forces Day is an important way of ensuring we continue to recognise the service and sacrifice of our armed forces. A number of events are taking place in my constituency over the coming days to mark the occasion, including the civic flag-raising ceremony in Newport, the St Andrews armed forces cadet day in Lliswerry and the armed forces VE Day barbecue at Alway Primary School. I would also like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of the two Royal British Legion branches in my constituency, in Caldicot and Newport. They undertake great work all year round to support the forces community.
I also pay tribute to all those past and present who have served from my constituency. At this point, I was going to mention the neighbour of the 86-year-old veteran who rang my office to complain about the veteran not being eligible for a free TV licence and how disgusted he felt about that, but the Minister dealt with that earlier. Lastly, I pay tribute to the Afghan interpreters who have come to make their home in Newport and who, I feel, need greater help and clarity from the Government about how they can be reunited with their families.

Military history, like national history, is so often written about the officer class—those who make the major decisions—but it is important that we understand, too, what happens in defence and war to the ordinary soldier. History is also, importantly, about everyone who serves, their day-to-day experience and their life afterwards, including the trauma that they face as a result of the service that they gave to their country. I will therefore take the opportunity of today’s debate to highlight the experiences and service of my constituent Anthony Lock, who was Corporal Anthony Lock, from Newport.

I appreciate the Minister’s earlier remarks about keeping perspective, and the many positive stories and experiences that we have shared today, but I wish to put Anthony’s story on the record. I recently read his brave and heartfelt book, “Broken by War”, which is a hugely powerful account of his time in combat, what he witnessed, how it affected him, his injuries, his recovery and, crucially, the lack of support offered to him throughout. He wrote the book to help others in his situation and to bring about change. I hope that Ministers will commit to read it, and will reflect again on what more needs to be done to support veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Anthony joined the armed forces after leaving school in Newport aged 17. He went on to serve with the Royal Welsh Regiment in Kosovo and Iraq. However, his life was to change forever after his service in Afghanistan, when he was hit by two improvised explosive devices in six weeks. The first explosion broke his neck, but he was misdiagnosed, so, unknowingly, he continued to serve on the frontline, surviving on painkillers.

The second IED explosion during his service in Helmand province very nearly ended Anthony’s life. Thrown 30 feet in the air from the blast, he believes that he survived only because a rescue helicopter was nearby. His heart actually stopped beating for a time during the emergency flight to Camp Bastion, and he became the first British soldier serving in Afghanistan to be surgically operated on while in the air. He was the most injured soldier of his regiment in Afghanistan.

The life-changing injuries that Anthony experienced in Helmand were accompanied by the long-term legacy of post-traumatic stress disorder and severe depression. It is fair to say that he feels let down by his regiment. As he told me, in nine years there were nine close deaths around him and numerous traumatic events; yet not enough was done to help him through it. I think the Defence Committee acknowledged in its report the particular incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder among those in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Since leaving military service, Anthony has applied for many jobs, but to date has been unsuccessful. He has had help from military charities to write a CV, but otherwise the support has been limited, despite, as has been said a few times in the debate, the obvious many skills and experience that he has to offer. I would like the Minister to look again at what is happening in JobCentre Plus with the armed forces champions that are supposed to be in place.

Anthony is grateful for the help that he has received from charities, particularly Poppy Practice, which is only a small charity but found Anthony as a result of reading his book. He has talked to me about the waiting times for appointments for veterans suffering from PTSD, which are far too long in the UK. He has also talked to me about the spike in PTSD-related veteran suicides in 2018—a tragic reminder of the need for Government at all levels to have a more effective response to mental health issues among current and former service personnel. Just today he told me that he believes that there have been 32 suicides this year that we know of.

Anthony still suffers every day from invisible injuries, and has said that he might not be here today were it not for the support of his partner Rhiannon and his daughter Katie. In a recent interview, he said:

“It’s been hard for them too. I am angry in my head but not outside it. I am just nervous around people. I'm angry about what happened. I got blown up twice and life is difficult now...I did English, maths and management qualifications in the army but no one can find them now and employers can’t see the person through a CV when you apply for jobs.

I don’t sleep at night. I have nightmares about what happened to me”.

He also said:

“If I had lost a limb my injuries would be more visible. If I walk down the street no one can see what I’ve been through but if someone has lost a leg people can see that.”

Anthony deserves huge credit for his continued commitment to fighting for the dignity of veterans, and I recommend his excellent book, “Broken by War,” which powerfully recounts his experiences of war and encourages other veterans to reach out for support.

Ahead of today’s debate, I asked Anthony what his main ask would be for improving the support available to veterans in our society. He told me that we need much quicker signposting of mental health support services within the forces community, a better system for handling the slow process of compensation and pension claims for those unable to work—the Defence Committee has also referenced that—help into work and recognition of the skills and experience of veterans, and, above all, a commitment from government at all levels to end the stigma around mental health in the armed forces.

In his own words, Anthony says “the forces community are too proud, too shy and too scared to reach out for help.”

He says that many veterans still feel the Government send young soldiers to war only to “leave us to fight on our own when we return.”

Anthony has served in some of the major conflicts since the second world war, but he is not a celebrity. So many veterans like Anthony are unknown individuals in society who could have become unknown soldiers lost on the battlefield, but their history and service are just as vital to the UK as that of any general, air marshal or captain. We have to listen to people like Anthony and we have to be told their stories.
6.6 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). Anthony’s story is very poignant, and we all understand what he, his family and his community have gone through. I appreciate that.

It is a great pleasure to participate in this debate and to have the Minister responding. As a native of my constituency, born and raised on the Isle of Anglesey, I will know that my constituency has a proud tradition of service in the armed forces, whether it be the Army—a huge number of recruits go into the Welsh regiments—the merchant navy, the Royal Navy or the Royal Air Force. RAF Valley trains our fast jet pilots to this day.

This year, we celebrated Armed Forces Day for the whole of north Wales on 25 May at Holyhead in my constituency. It was a wonderful seafront gathering, and the armed forces, cadets and various reservists all came together. The port of Holyhead has a proud history, including housing the whole Dutch navy during the second world war. I remember going to school with many people who had Dutch surnames. In fact, I am told that more than 90 Dutch sailors married local women during the second world war. It was not the Americans at the Valley air base but the Dutch sailors who got the women. There is a great tradition whereby we have a memorial to the Dutch navy, at which I helped to host an event with the Dutch embassy to celebrate the great European co-operation with our Dutch friends and allies.

The event on 25 May was not just a traditional celebration of Armed Forces Day and of the work of our armed forces; it was also a poignant occasion. We gave the freedom of the county of Anglesey to the Royal Navy Submarine Service. In this debate we have heard the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) talk about her husband serving in the Submarine Service, which does a fantastic job. Personnel from the Navy Submarine Service told me that it was only the second time that it has been given the freedom of a borough or county—the first being the town and borough of Barrow-in-Furness. It was a great honour for the county of Anglesey, which I am proud to serve, to honour the submarine service, because we have a great seafaring tradition.

The Holyhead maritime museum is known throughout the country for its artefacts from Royal Navy and merchant navy seafarers, as well as from the important volunteers who go to sea in our lifeboats to keep our coastlines safe.

Our Armed Forces Day event on 25 May also had a special memorial to the submarine HMS Thetis. For those who do not know, HMS Thetis is in the history books for the wrong reasons. It was a T-class submarine of the Royal Navy that served under two names. Her first identity was HMS Thetis, and she commenced sea trials on 4 March 1939. She sank during those trials on 1 June 1939, with the loss of 99 lives. Many of those men are buried in my constituency and we had a special memorial for them on the 80th anniversary. She was salvaged, repaired and recommissioned under the name HMS Thunderbolt, serving in the Atlantic and Mediterranean until she was torpedoed and lost with all hands in 1943. That makes the Thetis one of the few military vessels in service history that have been lost twice with their crews. It was a real sacrifice for those crews, and we rightly remembered them on that occasion.

I am an ex-merchant seafarer, and I want to concentrate part of my speech on the work and sacrifice of merchant seafarers for our country. During the second world war, for example, they kept the trade links open and the food coming to our island nation. I remember, as a 16-year-old on my first vessel, talking to older seafarers who had actually served in the convoys. One in particular, a ship’s cook, joined the merchant navy at 17 and had been torpedoed and survived twice. He was left in the cold waters of the Atlantic while ships were being torpedoed, and bombed by fighter aircraft, around him. It is important to remember the conditions in which our merchant seafarers served during the world wars. We saw the D-day commemorations recently, and many merchant seafarers were involved in D-day. Many sea captains, using their seafaring skills, took the troops across to liberate mainland Europe. I am sure the Minister will join me in paying special tribute to the merchant navy.

More positively, last year we had commemorations in the House and in the country of the centenary of the great war. What was special about those commemorations was the fact that we were talking about real communities and real people. It was a great people’s history, and we were able to celebrate the contribution made by local people to their community and their country. I am a great one for going around village memorial halls, and several small communities on Anglesey have memorial halls, as the Minister will know, that were built more than 100 years ago so that we should remember the great sacrifices made in the first world war. Many of them are rightly dedicated to those who lost their lives. They have now been revamped and are part of our living history. I would like to see small museums and galleries in those memorial halls so that we remember the dedication, service and sacrifice of the communities we all represent for ever and ever.

Before I came to the House 18 years ago, I ran a welfare unit for veterans and dealt with many ex-service personnel. It was difficult to diagnose many of the conditions that they had and to help them with benefits. We have improved considerably in the last 20 years, and I pay tribute to the last Labour Government, the coalition Government and the present Government for the work that they have done to help veterans. We have a dedicated veterans Minister and much support from charities, as well as the MOD. The Minister who opened the debate is no longer in his place, but, I have had correspondence with him as recently as last month—I will be coming back to him—and I know that he looks at these issues meticulously so that we are able to help veterans.

Our casework is getting more complicated and more and more veterans are coming to see us. We really need to target the issue of mental health. Great progress has been made in the House, with many Members talking about their own experiences, but, as the Prime Minister has rightly said, mental health treatment should have parity with physical health services. We must help our veterans. Many relatively young veterans have been in theatre and in many conflicts in recent years, and we must help and support them.

Today, Armed Forces Day, is an opportunity to celebrate not only the work that our armed forces do for our country, but people from communities throughout Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the dedication
and service that they have given us. I pay tribute to active service personnel, and to ex-service personnel too.

6.15 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in any debate that refers to the armed forces—it is always a pleasure to speak in the House, but this is a particular pleasure. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who unfortunately is no longer in his place, for his commitment as a soldier, as a reservist and as a Minister.

I thank all those who wear or have worn the uniform, serving this great country, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—as others have said, we are better together—through thick and thin. It is little wonder that our armed forces are the envy and measuring standard of the entire world. Our armed forces have supported us in times of peril—through world two world wars, the troubles, Afghanistan and Iraq to name only a few. Today, they are stationed around the globe, carrying out work that we do not hear about, yet the world would be a worse place without their efforts and contributions. The blood that they shed and the burden they take upon themselves is all for you—I say that to everybody in the House—and for me as well. To think that they are not fully rewarded for their sacrifices and supported through their own times of peril is disappointing, to say the least.

I declare an interest—I should have done so at the beginning of my speech—as a former part-time soldier. I served for 14 and a half years in the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Territorial Army.

Just last Saturday, the gallant Minister was in Lisburn for Northern Ireland Armed Forces Day. It was a smashing day, as he rightly said. I have a request for him, or, in his absence, for the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), who will respond to the debate. Northern Ireland will be 100 years old in 2021; will Ministers consider a national Armed Forces Day in Northern Ireland to tie in with that centenary?

The armed forces are 9,900 trained personnel short of their Government-set target: the Royal Navy and Royal Marines are some 1,230 short of their 30,450 personnel target; the Royal Air Force is 1,740 short of its 31,750 personnel target; and the British Army is 6,930 short of its 82,000 personnel target.

We are fortunate in my constituency to have a strong Regiment section in the Crawfordsburn Road centre in Newtownards. We have that service ethic, so it is important to give people those opportunities. We also have active cadets in all three services.

The House might wonder why I brought up those figures, but the link is clear: why would someone put their physical and mental health on the line for the minimum wage? Why would they leave their family and all those they love for months on end when their Government—my Government—cannot give them pay that reflects their sacrifice? It is little wonder that so many of our trained and elite leave the service and serve privately—the pay is quadruple that which the uniform pays. The shadow Secretary of State referred to pay, and she was absolutely right to—we need to think about that.

Why would someone take the minimum wage when, added to that, they now know that they could well be abandoned in later life should another armed regime such as the republicans seek to rewrite history? Would it not be fair to say that the treatment they can expect once they retire is the reason they are not joining? Just like soldier F, they have to contemplate the prospect of facing prosecution for doing their job. The Government have to do more to protect their soldiers. That issue has come forward on numerous occasions. Soldiers should be allowed to retire in peace; that is the least we can do for them. The Democratic Unionist party, of which I am proud to be a member and to speak on behalf of today, supports our armed forces. We will not watch silently as our armed forces are dragged on their knees to appear in court at the age of 75. The witch hunt must stop now.

Our soldiers cannot simply disobey orders. That is called insubordination, and they would be punished for it. They cannot win in that scenario. They face two choices: be punished by their superiors for disobeying orders and for not following the appropriate procedure, or be punished by the media agenda of the day and even by the judicial system. Why should they willingly have to sign up to that? They should not have to do so, but they do. I doubt soldier F knew that that was what he was signing up to. Our soldiers deserve better. The very least that they deserve for protecting us is the right to protection in the courts. The sacrifice that they make for all of us to sleep safely at night is immeasurable, yet that is how they are treated. On behalf of all those soldiers who face the prospect of an investigation, let us make it clear that we stand by them and support them in these legacy battles. I believe that there is a consensus of opinion in the House to support that view.

We should remember that the soldiers who did wrong were prosecuted during the troubles in the appropriate way through the Army. They did face justice. What they face now is not justice; it is unacceptable. It is a sop to a republican agenda, and the antithesis of justice. For all the sacrifices that they have made, it is appalling that they do not receive the support they need when they retire. Royal Irish veteran Robert McCartney of the charity Beyond the Battlefield has estimated that some 400 veterans attempt to take their own lives each year in Northern Ireland, 30 of whom succeed. Those statistics are accurate, and they reflect the concern that we have for our veterans in Northern Ireland. I commend Robert McCartney and many other charities such as the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association, Help for Heroes, St Dunstan’s, and the Royal British Legion—they are almost too numerous to mention. They all help greatly, but we should be doing more to help our armed forces.

I do not think that there is one Member today who has not mentioned mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or other mental issues that have come about because of things that have happened in the past.

Albert Owen: Will the hon. Gentleman add to that list of charities the Mission to Seafarers, which does excellent work for UK shipping veterans both here in the capital city and across the UK and the globe?
Jim Shannon: It is always good to be reminded of these things by the hon. Gentleman. As I said, aside from the ones that we know directly, there are many more that do fantastic work. The Royal Air Force Association looks after its veterans well; it does really fantastic work.

In Northern Ireland, it is estimated that some 17,000 veterans have some form of mental health problem—diagnosed or not. That is a massive number of people who need help and assistance right now. These appalling figures are not matched with enough support. I know that charities fill in the gap, and, as I have said before, I am very pleased with the steps that the Government have taken, particularly the Minister’s Department. None the less, when we see magnitude of the number of veterans who have mental health issues, we should be thinking about setting extra money aside for them. The support that those veterans need should be made readily available to them, and I believe that we are failing in that regard.

I have been associated with SSAFA for a long, long time—since long before I became a Member of Parliament. My mother and father were also involved in that charity. We hold a coffee morning in September/October every year. The good people of Newtownards have contributed some £30,000 to the charity, selling tea, coffee and sticky buns. The Ulster man and the Ulster woman are very fond of their sweet stuff—as a diabetic I know that I should not be so fond of it. None the less, we do our best to help the veterans. We should also give credit to those Members in this House who have served so gallantly in uniform.

When the IRA were committing the countless atrocities during the troubles in Northern Ireland, it was the brave soldiers stationed in Northern Ireland who were there to help clean up the blood left behind and who tried their very best to limit the loss of life. These memories rage on in their minds to this day—a great burden that takes its toll.

The big gap in the rates of pay for our armed forces shocks me, especially when compared with our US counterparts. In our armed forces, the salary starts at £15,008, compared with that of the US army, which starts at £19,099. In 2018, the 2% pay rise for our armed forces was still below inflation, which was sitting at 2.4% at the time—for all that sacrifice. What kind of message does that send to our soldiers?

I hope those points show that action needs to be taken now. In a time of celebration for our armed forces, they should be able to join us. No longer should they have to face tough economic turmoil after retirement, no longer should they have to face the battle with their mental health following retirement, and no longer should we stand by and watch. Our servicemen deserve better. Our servicemen deserve better. Our servicemen deserve better.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I am pleased to respond to this debate on behalf of the Opposition, and I can honestly say that it has been an excellent debate. It has been consensual and genuinely cross-party in character, and we have heard from all parts of the House. I think it is true to say that there has been one resounding message, and that has been a message of appreciation for all that our armed forces do for our country and our people.

The official Armed Forces Day is on Saturday, with national celebrations in Salisbury in Wiltshire. Today is Reserves Day, and I was very warmed by and impressed to see the flags above Portcullis House and various Government Departments as I walked across Westminster bridge this morning. They were an important symbol. For me, that set the tone for the day and for this debate.

The tone of the debate was set very well by the Minister, who gave a significant statement. I very much hope that his remarks will not simply be confined to this Chamber, and that they will be studied carefully by the people who aspire to the leadership of the Conservative party and this country. The tone was also well set by my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), the shadow Secretary of State for Defence who is from Wales. She indicated a number of points on which we are all united, and mentioned the tremendous work and commitment that our armed forces provide to this country as well as some of the issues they are concerned about. It is only right and proper that we give attention to improving the situation for our armed forces and do not simply rest on our laurels. We recognise that things have to get better because we are talking about the defence of this country—and, frankly, nothing is more important.

The Minister and the shadow Secretary of State both emphasised the tremendous debt of gratitude that we owe to our armed forces. Both also referred to D-day—the significant landings that took place on those five beaches, and the paratroopers who went behind enemy lines and helped to liberate our continent. I attended an event on HMS Belfast organised by Blind Veterans UK. It was a very moving experience to hear at first hand from veterans about what they went through and the sacrifices they made. As a number of Members have said, what motivated them and all their compatriots who fought and died was not that they wanted to be brave, but that they believed it was their duty to do what they did.

A number of Members have referred to events being organised in their constituencies to commemorate and celebrate Armed Forces Day. We have heard eloquent remarks from a number of Members; I apologise if I do not mention them all. For me, it is worth noting the eloquent remarks by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth). I am delighted that it is my hon. Friend’s birthday on Saturday. I am sure that at her local celebrations the armed forces will join everyone in singing happy birthday to her.

We heard similarly eloquent remarks by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), who quite correctly said that the armed forces unite our country; how true that is. My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) also made some eloquent remarks. I learned a great deal about the history of the
second world war, but I, for one, did not realise that there was a significant naval presence from the Dutch in Anglesey. I am sure that plenty will be written in the history of the island about the contribution that they made to the defence of our country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) made a very moving speech in which she referred to her constituent Anthony and the difficulties that he has experienced since he has done his best to get back into the world of work. I very much hope that the book he has written will indeed be read by many people and the lessons from it learned.

**Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab):** I wish briefly to thank a number of local organisations in my constituency for what they have done. Reading Borough Council has prioritised veterans in its housing register, in an area of high housing need. That is an important step. The town council in Woodley has put together a wonderful commemoration of the sacrifice in world war one, highlighting many local men who failed to return from Flanders. Many local voluntary and veterans’ organisations have made contributions. I would like to thank them for their support for and recognition of the wonderful service that has taken place.

**Wayne David:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am sure that although his remarks were peculiar to his own constituency, they are generally applicable too.

I think that if we are serious about this, we recognise that it is not enough to be appreciative of the commitment made, past and present; it is also necessary to ensure that the defence of our country is based on the firm footing of the personnel in the armed forces. What is absolutely central for them in order to give of their best is the maintenance of a good state of morale. However, surveys have been conducted showing very clearly that the state of morale among the armed forces should be a cause for concern among us all. The impact of service life on family and personal life remains the top factor influencing the intention of many of our personnel to leave the armed forces. It saddens me to say that satisfaction with service life remains below the peak of 61% that was reported in 2009 and today stands at only 46%.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** I am going to ask the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan): we need to give one united and very big thank you.

Mr. Rodda and the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) made a very moving speech in which she referred to her constituent Anthony and the difficulties that he has experienced since he has done his best to get back into the world of work. I very much hope that the book he has written will indeed be read by many people and the lessons from it learned.

**Wayne David:** That suggestion is worthy of serious consideration. It should not be dismissed, because there is a strong case for a collective voice for personnel in the armed forces so that Government can be helped by knowing exactly what they want and can respond accordingly. That is something to be carefully considered in future.

It is very important to send a clear message that, while there has been a great deal of progress and there is a great deal of pride among all of us, we want to see an improvement. We are concerned about the relatively low morale in large sections of the armed forces. Careful attention needs to be given to pay, to ensure that pay rises at least keep pace with inflation and we do not see an erosion of the living standards of our armed forces personnel. Careful consideration should also be given to pensions, compensation and housing.

The Opposition are concerned about the apparent fixation of certain Conservative Members that outsourcing is good, no matter the circumstances and irrespective of the costs or implications. We have to be entirely objective and look at what works and delivers satisfactorily for our personnel. Unfortunately, it is our conclusion that much of the outsourcing is ideologically motivated and does not improve things for our personnel. We need to look carefully at whether it would be better to do much more in-house and ensure that we have the services and standards that our armed forces deserve.

I think in particular of housing. I know that the Ministry of Defence is piloting the future accommodation model. I agree with the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes); it would be useful if we had a mechanism that enabled us to hear directly from the armed forces and their representatives what they think about the situation, rather than Ministers believing they know best and simply creaming off the views of one or two individuals. The Government must engage fully and openly with the armed forces to ensure that they are acting in the interests of all personnel and are seen to be doing so.

We have to do two things: we have to commemorate and celebrate, and we also have to stand back and look coolly at how things can be improved. The atmosphere of the debate has certainly allowed us to do that. I would like to finish by echoing the remark made by the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan): we need to give one united and very big thank you.

**6.37 pm**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew):** I would like to echo the comments that the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) just made. The tone of the debate has clearly reflected the feeling of all Members across the House, and I think it accurately reflects the respect, admiration and support of the population out there for our armed forces. That set a really good tone for the debate; if only all debates in this Chamber were so constructive.

Members have clearly demonstrated a very good understanding of not only what is important to our armed forces, but the challenges faced by both the regular and reserve forces. Our military personnel are incredibly brave, protecting not only our shores but, frankly, our way of life. They do that day in, day out in a world that continues to become increasingly dangerous. The fact that they do that in not only the UK but across the globe is something we should always be thankful for. They take on dangerous and demanding tasks without complaint—they just get on with it. They see it as their job and their duty, and they do it with great service. There is a duty on all of us, in return, to say thank you and show them that everything they do is not taken for granted. It is right for us to ensure that they are not disadvantaged, whether in the workplace or the provision of services, by the fact that they took part in military service.

We have heard a lot this afternoon about the armed forces covenant, which the Government and Members across the House are steadfastly supportive of. It is a promise from the nation to serving personnel and veterans.
and their families, to ensure that they are treated fairly and not disadvantaged as a result of the service they have given to our nation. It is great to see that across the UK—whether it be the UK Government, the devolved Administrations, local authorities, charities big and small or businesses—there is a real desire to sign up to the covenant and to ensure that we give that special recognition and that thank you, covering all the important areas, including education, health and housing, and recognising the skills of many of our veterans, which could provide valuable inputs to businesses across the UK. It is great that, since the launch of the covenant eight years ago, we are now close to the 4,000th organisation signing up, with Facebook being among the latest to do so this week.

We are preparing for Armed Forces Day on Saturday. I am looking forward to going to an event in my own constituency that Lyn Rigby, the mother of Fusilier Lee Rigby, will be attending. I am going to Swansea later, so I will be going back to my roots in Wales. That shows the breadth of events that are being held all over the country and the wonderful support for the armed forces.

It is important to remind ourselves that today is Reserves Day. That reminds me of the last Defence questions, when the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), said that three Members on the Government Front Bench were reservists and kindly pointed out that I am the one who is not. [Interruption.] Indeed, there is still time. I saw that one political sketch writer wrote the next day that I looked rather crestfallen at my right hon. Friend’s comments and that he could not quite see me in a military tunic, but could well see me in a Butlin’s Redcoat. I have to say that was harsh, but it is probably fair.

Yesterday, I was with my right hon. Friend at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, where we had a brilliant reception, and this morning we had a breakfast reception in Downing Street. It was great listening to reservists from all walks of life who work for Government and act as reservists, so they are serving the nation twice. They give so much to our nation and put themselves in incredible danger. Listening to one serving in Somalia really made me realise the enormous sacrifice they make in giving up their time to serve our nation in the reserves.

I want to come on to a few other points. I am conscious of the time, but I will try to get through as many of them as possible. The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), rightly raised a number of issues. Recruitment is an important issue. That we are looking at that and continue to keep the pressure on, because keeping up the numbers is incredibly important.

The hon. Lady asked if I could provide an update on the 2019 pay award. I am afraid that I cannot give any specific information because there has been some delay, but I can give her the assurance that it will be backdated to ensure that nobody loses out. There was a comment about an independent body. Well, that does exist: the Armed Forces Pay Review Body provides independent advice both to the Prime Minister and to the Secretary of State for Defence.

Another important issue is access to schools. This is where the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board is really useful because we do have cross-Government Departments there. We are raising that matter with the Department for Education. It is important that we provide as much stability as possible to the families but, as I say, we will continue to raise that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) rightly referred to the importance of our armed forces and the sacrifice of many of them. She also reminded us of the armed forces parliamentary scheme. It is important. It is a good advert. If Members have not done it, enrol. Those involved would love to see them, so I encourage Members to do so.

James Gray: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and I must apologise for missing most of the debate as I was chairing something elsewhere. One or two Ministers have taken part in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, and one of the good things that happened is that they got a uniform. We would certainly welcome my hon. Friend if he wanted to come and join.

Stuart Andrew: Well, I walked into that one, didn’t I? I was going to say, let us see what happens in a couple of weeks’ time, but I might not be here.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) introduced her husband to the Chamber, and I had the pleasure of meeting him in Glasgow a few weeks ago. I certainly thank him for his service. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we must not be complacent about the support that we offer to members of our armed forces—those who are serving, but also those who are veterans. Also, we ought to do a better sell of what it is like to join the armed forces. Sometimes, I think the public have a certain perception of what is on offer in terms of the trades people can learn and the skills they can acquire, and we are not as good at selling those aspects as we could be, so I will take that point back to the Department.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) rightly reminded us of his constituency’s proud armed forces history, and I had the pleasure of meeting him in Glasgow a few weeks ago. I certainly thank him for his service. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we must not be complacent about the support that we offer to members of our armed forces—those who are serving, but also those who are veterans. Also, we ought to do a better sell of what it is like to join the armed forces. Sometimes, I think the public have a certain perception of what is on offer in terms of the trades people can learn and the skills they can acquire, and we are not as good at selling those aspects as we could be, so I will take that point back to the Department.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton),
I wish the hon. Lady a happy birthday—the whole city will be out celebrating with her, I am sure. She rightly pointed out that next year we have the VE Day and VJ Day anniversaries. We must make sure that we celebrate in style. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South talked about the services we provide to people who leave the armed forces. Later this year, we will have the new transition policy, which we have been working on, and I hope that under it things will be looked at earlier. We want to cover all the issues that the armed forces face, and to include the family too, because families are critical.

I want to mention the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). It was really quite moving listening to her talk about her constituent, Anthony Lock, and in particular the support he has received from Rhianonn and Katie. It just goes to show that, when we get somebody signed up to the armed forces, we often get not just that individual, but the whole family. We must never forget that, when we say thank you to the people who have served in our armed forces, we are also saying thank you to the wider family.

The hon. Lady made some points to which I want to respond. First, I will make sure I read the book. Secondly, I will speak to Baroness Buscombe about Jobcentre Plus; that is really important. I will come back to the hon. Lady on the other points she raised.

It is always good to hear from the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen); I am from Anglesey myself. My dad was in the merchant navy, so I know all about the merchant navy and many of the memorial halls that the hon. Gentleman was talking about.

Wayne David: Was your dad Dutch?

Stuart Andrew: No, he wasn’t Dutch.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about national Armed Forces Day. Of course, it is open to all local authorities to apply, so we look forward to seeing applications from across the country, including one from Northern Ireland, I am sure.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): This has been an excellent debate and a timely reminder of the importance of thanking those who step forward to serve in our armed forces. On local authorities putting themselves forward to host Armed Forces Day, as a fellow Yorkshire Member of Parliament—there is another Yorkshire Member in the Chamber—will the Minister send our very best wishes to Scarborough as it prepares to host Armed Forces Day next year? I am sure that, collectively, we want to ensure that that day is a stunning success—not just for the country, but for Yorkshire.

Stuart Andrew: Absolutely. I am doing a tour of the country now. It is great news that next year the event will be going to Scarborough. Earl Howe will be there this year to support that. It is going to be great news for Yorkshire and for the whole of the country.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Just to continue with the Yorkshire theme, may I suggest, as a fellow Yorkshire Member of Parliament and with regard to my hon. Friend’s earlier comments about being a reservist, that he might think about signing up as a reservist for the Yorkshire Regiment?

Stuart Andrew: There are a lot of offers. I expect that my diary will get extremely busy. Let me just say that I will take everything into consideration and I will get back to my hon. Friend.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I noticed that the Minister side-stepped completely the questions I raised in my speech. I did at least elicit some support from the Opposition Benches with regard to an armed forces representative body. I think I am correct in saying that in a Select Committee evidence session the Chief of the Defence Staff hinted, in response to my question, that an armed forces representative body was worthy of consideration. Why do the Government not think it is?

Stuart Andrew: I do apologise. I did mean to address that point, which is on my sheet. I was not trying to side-step the issue. There are a number of avenues that members of the armed forces are able to use to register any concerns and complaints they may have with the armed forces, and they will be looked at very closely. The personnel we have are the greatest asset we have in the Ministry of Defence and we want to ensure that their issues are addressed—and they are, if I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance.

Carol Monaghan: Will the Minister give way?

Stuart Andrew: I need to finish now, but I will happily speak to hon. Members after the debate.

We have had a really good debate. The hon. Member for Caerphilly was right to say that the tone has been absolutely right. I am glad to have been able to respond to the debate. I thank all Members for their contributions. It is clear that all of us, as a society, are very supportive of our brave armed forces community, whether they serve at home or overseas, whether they are veterans, or whether they are families, who do so much to sustain them. This week’s Armed Forces Day gives the whole nation the opportunity to show their appreciation and gratitude to those who have given so much.

I endorse strongly the call to the whole House from the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East, to get involved in the rich programme of Armed Forces Day events that will happen this week. I know that many have already committed to doing so, which is fantastic. Whether they are happening in their constituencies, their regional areas or at a national level, this is a great opportunity for us as a country to say, very sincerely, thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered Armed Forces Day.

PETITIONS

Nnamani family, Glasgow

6.53 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Paisley and Renfrewshire North, who join in solidarity with the Church of Our Lady and St George in Penilee in Glasgow South West, a mere stone’s throw from my own constituency. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for collating these signatures, and for the work he has done on behalf of Mary Nnamani and her family.
The petition states:
The petition of residents of Paisley North,
Declares that Mary Nnamani and her family who fled from
Nigeria in danger of their lives have become a full and valued part
of our community in Glasgow through our schools and Church
Community; further that the Nnamani family have claimed asylum
here and we would dearly love them to say.
The petition, therefore, requests that the House of Commons
urges the Home Office to grant Mary Nnamani and her family
the right to remain in this country, where they have claimed
asylum.
And the petitioners remain, etc.

NHS Hospital Services in the Consett Area

6.54 pm
Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I have a
petition from residents in North West Durham, who are
hoping that the Government listen.
The petition states:
The petition of residents of North West Durham,
Declares that a succession of Government funding reductions
has led to fewer services being delivered at Shotley Bridge Hospital;
and further that this reduction of services threatens the viability
of a community hospital in the Consett Area.
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons
urges the Government and the Secretary of State for Health and
Social Care to ensure there is no reduction of local NHS Hospital
services in the Consett area.
And the petitioners remain, etc.

Disabled Access: Thirsk Station

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

6.55 pm
Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I am
grateful to you for granting this important debate, Mr Speaker,
because train travel has never been more popular or important. Around 20,000 miles of railway
track criss-cross our island, and altogether we made
1.8 billion rail journeys last year—a 3% rise on the
previous year. I am a frequent rail user, boarding a train
every week at York or Thirsk that whisks me to Westminster
to represent my constituents, and then boarding another
to return home to glorious North Yorkshire in time for
my surgeries and visits at the weekend. Importantly,
this week the Government legislated for a target of net zero
carbon emissions by 2050. Using public transport is one
way that we can help to tackle climate change and
improve air quality.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This week, most
Members across the House took the decision to drive
for that net zero carbon outcome for the UK, but that
can be achieved only if more people make use of public
transport. The fact that those who are disabled are
precluded from using many railway stations, such as
Thirsk, due to the lack of facilities is absurd. Does the
hon. Gentleman agree that the Government must, in
future policy relating to climate change targets, enable
all people to travel on public transport, not just those
who are able-bodied?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely
right. As I will say later, around 40% of stations do not
have access for disabled people, and we know that
disabled people are accounting for a greater and greater
proportion of our population, so this is hugely important.
I am grateful for his intervention.

We need to encourage train use for all users and
facilitate access to stations. Trains allow us to commute
and explore the length and breadth of our country,
from Thurso in the very north of Scotland to St Ives in
Cornwall, both of which, of which, I must mention, are replete
with step-free access for disabled passengers. This is the
essence of the problem: these essentials cannot just be
for those who are in the physical prime of their life.
Trains and the 2,500 stations that they pass through
should be made more accessible for everyone. Everyone,
including disabled people, the elderly and parents pushing
prams, should have the same opportunity to travel by
train.

In particular, Thirsk railway station in my constituency
is in need of accessibility improvements, which will
make a real difference to people’s lives. As with most
stations, trains travel through Thirsk extremely quickly—I
have stood on the platform when trains come through
at over 100 miles an hour—but Thirsk is unique in that
it has an island ticket office and platforms stationed
between the tracks. Concrete steps are the only way to
access the ticket office and platforms. Passengers must
reach the ticket office and both platforms by na vigating
a barrow crossing the high-speed railway line. This can
be a very difficult and even traumatic experience for the
elderly, disabled passengers, parents with pushchairs
or people heaving heavy suitcases. Thirsk is not alone:
40% of railway stations in England, Scotland and Wales do not have step-free access, and research found that over a third of working-age disabled people had experienced problems using trains in the last year as a result of their disability. A solution is much needed.

The railway industry is on the right track: it is encouraging more people to travel by train using the disabled persons railcard; carriages have been adapted; and I regularly see ramps on platforms, and kindly staff going above and beyond to facilitate access for passengers. Information is also improving and becoming more widely available to disabled users. National Rail has published an access map online, which is a great resource for disabled passengers, but it also highlights the limited access they have to railway stations in my constituency. I quote the entry for Thirsk station:

“customers should note that access to all platforms is via a barrow crossing”—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Kevin Hollinrake: The entry continues—

“which is reliant upon staff assistance, and cannot be accessed outside of staffed hours.”

Fortunately, we are starting from a good place in this debate, as improving access to our railway stations for disabled passengers is very much a key priority for the Government. As for further down the line, Network Rail is working towards an entirely accessible transport network by 2030, in which there will be assistance if physical infrastructure remains a barrier. That timetable will remind those of us who remember train travel before privatisation of the British Rail slogan, which is apt: “We’re getting there”.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary and the Minister, whom I met to discuss these issues and our bid to the Access for All funding programme. Access for All is providing £300 million of additional funding to make 73 stations more accessible by 2024. Unfortunately, Thirsk is not one of them. I felt that our bid was unsuccessful. Apparently, we fell short of the Secretary of State and the Minister, whom I met to discuss these issues and our bid to the Access for All funding programme. According to the Office for National Statistics, nearly one in five people in England and Wales have some form of disability. Leonard Cheshire estimates that almost 45,000 journeys are made by disabled people at Thirsk station each year. The Equality Act 2010, which I know the Minister is very familiar with, urges the Secretary of State to make regulations to allow disabled persons to travel without unreasonable difficulty in safety and reasonable comfort. I call on the Minister, the Secretary of State and the Department for Transport to ensure that that can happen at Thirsk railway station.

I appreciate that funds are always in short supply; there is no magic money tree. Elected representatives, including my colleagues in the Department, must always consider those footing the bill—the taxpayer—and, of course, value for money. I am keen to work with the Department, TransPennine Express, local authorities and local enterprise partnerships to find a solution. I am very flexible in my approach to ensuring better access to the station. Rather than putting in two lifts, one on either side of the bridge, there is perhaps a business case for putting in a lift on one side of it, and for moving the ticket office on the platform to the other side. That would be a cheaper option. It would save us perhaps around £1 million in our bid. It will be interesting to see what further funding might be made available to facilitate that solution.

As I say, there are alternative cost-effective solutions. I would be keen to hear more from the Department about what can be done. I invite the Minister to Thirsk—it is always a pleasure for anyone to visit Thirsk—to meet the groups I mentioned and help develop a plan. Facilitating access is something we can all get on board with. I look forward to working with Ministers to develop a plan to improve disabled access at Thirsk station and, over time, to see better access to public transport for all.

7.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) on securing the debate and giving the House an opportunity to address the important subject of accessibility on the railway network. I recognise how important it is for his constituents to have access to the railway, not only to travel to and from work but to see family and friends and go about their daily lives. I must place on record what a strong advocate he has been for his constituents. I know that he is bitterly disappointed by the result of the bid, and I hope that he will allow me to try to explain it.

I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) is also in the Chamber. I believe that he was also very disappointed by the result, and that he, too, campaigned very boldly on behalf of his constituents. I hope that he will remain for the entire debate so that he can hear what more can be made available for his local stations.

Delivering a transport system that is truly accessible to all is of great importance to me. I know that my hon. Friend is aware of the Department for Transport’s inclusive transport strategy, which was published last July. I hope that he takes it as evidence of the Government’s
commitment to action to safeguard and promote the rights of all disabled passengers. We do not deny that our strategy is ambitious, but we are determined to deliver it. We want disabled people to have the same access to transport as everyone else by 2030, and if physical infrastructure remains a barrier, assistance will play a role in guaranteeing those rights. I am always told that I am not allowed to repeat this, but I believe that ours is the only country to have such a bold strategy in place. An accessible transport network is central to the Government’s wider ambition to build a society that works for all.

I was pleased to have an opportunity to discuss the specific issues at Thirsk with my hon. Friend back in April. The station was nominated for the additional funding that we are making available over the next five years for the Access for All programme, but it was not successful. As I explained to my hon. Friend when we met, the available funding was heavily over-subscribed. Other stations nominated in the Yorkshire and Humber area had a higher-weighted footfall, which made it difficult to justify Thirsk’s inclusion ahead of other busier stations in the region.

In the event of any future funding bids for Thirsk and, indeed, other stations—I ask my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham to reflect on this—the stations will need to be given a high priority by the industry. The bids will need to be compelling and to have local support, and, ideally, there will be match funding. In the case of most of the new Access for All projects announced in April, significant levels of third-party funding were included in the bids.

As my hon. Friend knows, step-free access is technically available throughout Thirsk station. However, customers must be aware that access to all platforms is via a barrow crossing, which is reliant on staff assistance and cannot be accessed outside staff hours. As my hon. Friend said in his speech, it is not the easiest space to be in for the able-bodied, let alone disabled people. That reflects the fact that most of our stations are Victorian. Those 19th-century stations were not built with the needs of 21st-century passengers in mind, which has left us with the huge task of opening up the rail network to disabled passengers.

Kevin Hollinrake: I understand that other stations are in a similar position, but how unusual is it for a station to provide no access to either platform, for either inbound or outbound trains, apart from a barrow crossing, because there is an island platform and an island ticket office?

Ms Ghani: Thirsk has particular, unique circumstances, but it is not the only station that is not fully accessible at all times, which is why I think it important to ensure that any bid for Thirsk is rated highly by the train operating company and also comes with match funding. However, I entirely accept that it is not the easiest place to be when trains are whizzing past at high speed.

We must recognise that 75% of journeys are through step-free stations, but that is not good enough; we want to ensure that even more journeys are accessible as well. That is why we continue the Access for All programme. The inclusive transport strategy included a commitment to extend our Access for All programme across control period 6 between 2019 and 2024, with an additional £300 million of funding from the public purse. Those funds will allow design work to restart on all the projects deferred by the 2016 Hendy review into Network Rail delivery and to include even more stations in the programme.

We asked the industry to nominate stations and received more than 300 nominations. Often these nominations were in partnership with local authorities and Members of Parliament, and we must not forget the important local councillors as well. Back in April, we announced that 73 stations would be considered for funding, including 46 new stations and 27 stations from CP5 deferred by Sir Peter Hendy.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton will be pleased to hear—I am also pleased to inform the House of this—that I have also made £20 million available for mid-tier Access for All projects. The criteria—{

[Interruption.]

Yes, we will be waiting for those applications for stations to come in, but the criteria for selecting projects will be different from the main programme, as we will focus on stations where accessibility improvements can be delivered with up to £1 million of Government support alongside—I must stress this—significant third-party match funding.

Details of how this funding will be allocated are being finalised now, and we intend to open the nomination process shortly. I will write to all hon. Members to inform them when this happens, and of course I will drop a personal note to my hon. Friends to ensure that they do not miss the deadline for the application.

I want to reflect on the industry’s obligations. It is obliged to ensure that disabled passengers are supported. Each operator is required to have a disabled person’s protection policy in place as part of its licence to operate services; the policy sets out the services that disabled passengers can expect and what to do if things go wrong and commits the operator to meeting its legal obligations by making reasonable adjustments to its services to allow disabled people to use them—for example, by providing an accessible taxi free of charge to anyone unable to access a station.

The Office of Rail and Road recently consulted on revised disabled people’s protection policy guidance, and I have also encouraged the ORR to take enforcement action against train and station operators who are not meeting their disabled people’s protection policy obligations. Every disabled passenger should be confident that the assistance they have booked will be provided. The Department has worked with the Rail Delivery Group to create the new passenger assistance application, which will make it much easier for disabled passengers to book assistance. Many Members will have attended the event organised by the RDG last week to showcase this work.

We also support the ORR’s proposal to introduce a handover protocol as part of the revised disabled people’s protection policy guidance, and we have actively supported the establishment by the industry of an independent rail ombudsman with powers to deal with unresolved passenger complaints.

I hope that I have demonstrated that the Government are committed to improving access at stations for disabled passengers through both specific projects such as Access for All and improvements delivered as part of our wider commitment to improving the rail network. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton has been reassured that the Government remain committed
to investment that will improve rail services and accessibility on the network, and I look forward to receiving an application on behalf of his station, Thirsk, in the next round of funding. I wish him and my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham well.

Question put and agreed to.

7.13 pm
House adjourned.
Orcy Answers to Questions

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Secretary of State was asked—
Future Relationship: Public Vote

1. Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on a public vote on the terms of the UK’s future relationship with the EU. [911589]

2. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): If he will hold discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of a public vote on the terms of the UK’s future relationship with the EU. [911604]

3. Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): If he will hold discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of a public vote on the terms of the UK’s future relationship with the EU. [911606]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): The Government’s position on a second referendum has not changed.

Stephen Timms: I am sorry to hear that. Brexit was supposed to deliver frictionless trade, the exact same benefits as the single market and the customs union and an extra £350 million a week for the NHS, but the Prime Minister was not able to deliver and any actual Brexit deal will fall far short of those promises. Should not the voters get the choice between proceeding on the basis of whatever deal is actually available or remaining?

Stephen Barclay: The voters in the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency, such as those at Tate and Lyle, should get the choice. Eight hundred and fifty people work at Tate and Lyle in his constituency. It is a business that has suffered because of the EU protectionism applied to sugar beet and a business where 19,000 lorries bringing sugar in could be transferred if we moved to cane. He should be listening to voices such as those at Tate and Lyle who want to see us leave because they see what the voters who voted to leave the EU saw, which is the opportunities that Brexit will unlock.

Dr Huq: Prior to the referendum, the right hon. Members for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), and for Wokingham (John Redwood) and the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), none of whom are in their places today—no women are on the Conservative Benches either—plus Nigel Farage from outside this House all argued that, if the result were close, we would have to have a confirmatory referendum to be sure. Three years on from parliamentary stalemate on a deal that the EU will not reopen and in a process that involves election law illegality, surely they had a point, as does the Chancellor who says that a people’s vote is perfectly credible. To break the logjam, the will of the people should now prevail.

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady talks about a people’s vote. What she really means is a politicians’ vote. What she should do is listen to the voice of people such as John Curtice, a very respected voice, who wrote on 23 June:

“Our poll of polls of how people would vote in another referendum continues to report that the country is more or less evenly divided between remain and leave, much as it was three years ago.”

Emma Dent Coad: There are 19,000 EU nationals in my Kensington constituency who have no say over their future post Brexit. They pay their tax, but they have no voice apart from mine. How can I reassure my constituents that I and those who do have a vote will be able to make their representations on the deal?

Stephen Barclay: It is a slightly odd position to take to be talking about how people can be heard in their vote by overturning a vote in which people are seeking to be heard. We have had three questions, all from London MPs, ignoring the fact that, across the nine regions of England, eight voted to leave and only one voted to remain. It is time that we heard more than the voice of London from the Labour Benches.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Perhaps a representative of Leeds might ask a question.

One of the arguments for going back to the people is the economic consequences of a no-deal Brexit. Over the past three weeks, the Select Committee has been taking evidence from the leading industrial sectors of the country representing great British success stories, and we asked them what a no-deal Brexit would mean for them. They said that it would lead to prohibitively high tariffs on farmers and medicine shortages. They said that it would be disastrous, the worst possible option. In the words of Make UK, it would be “nothing short of an act of economic vandalism”.

Does the Secretary of State support leaving the EU without a deal on 31 October, and, if so, what would he say to those industries?
Stephen Barclay: What I say is, it is better to leave with a deal. That has always been my position, which is why I have consistently voted for a deal. The question for the right hon. Gentleman is why, although his party’s manifesto said that he would respect the referendum result, he is against leaving with no deal and is also against leaving with a deal. The truth is that he wants to remain, and he should be candid about that.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): On Monday the Leader of the Opposition asked the Prime Minister a question, but unfortunately she did not answer it, so I am just going to ask the Secretary of State the same question. What would be worse: crashing out with no deal in October, or putting this issue back to the people for a final say?

Stephen Barclay: What would be worse is going back on the democratic decision of the British people—the 17.4 million people who voted to leave. We are committed to honouring that result. The question for the Opposition is: if they do not want to leave on a no-deal basis, why have they consistently voted against a deal when the EU itself says that it is the only deal on the table?

Jenny Chapman: This is questions for the Government, not the Opposition. My grandfather fought in the second world war, and then served in Malaya. When he returned to the UK, he worked at ICI on Teesside. In 2019, there are 7,500 people working in the chemical industry on Teesside. I ask the Secretary of State to put himself in the shoes of one of those workers. For that worker, which is worse: no deal or a second referendum?

Stephen Barclay: The point about the second referendum—is that worse? I have answered this question many times. The choice the hon. Lady presents me with would actually be between no deal and no Brexit, for which a second referendum is a proxy because, as the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) has said, a second vote is actually a stop Brexit referendum. If a Member on the shadow Minister’s own Benches can be honest about that, she should be equally candid. In answer to her question, between those two options, I think no Brexit is worse than no deal. No deal would be disruptive, and I have been clear about that to colleagues in my party, but the shadow Minister has consistently voted against a deal, and it is the deal that would have secured the interests of businesses such as the chemicals industry.

Security Co-operation

Scott Mann: Given that we do not know what our future relationship will look like at this moment in time, can I seek assurances from the Department that, in the event of a clean break from the European Union, we will be seeking mutual co-operation on matters such as security?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I assure my hon. Friend that that is absolutely the case. We have a long history of co-operating with our partners in Europe and are working closely with many of our EU partners on Europe’s key defence challenges through capabilities such as Typhoon, A400M and Meteor.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): According to Mr Barnier, a no-deal scenario would represent “a break in the level of talks...risks to intelligence pooling... inconsistencies in applying sanctions regimes”, and would leave the rules of co-operation with Europol and Eurojust still to be determined. Given the risks that no deal would present to our security, is the Minister happy that both of the Tory leadership contenders crow about their willingness to deliver no deal?

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that we must increase our level of security on the border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, given the threat that dissident republicans pose? In the knowledge that we are now moving to a position where hopefully we will leave in a few short months, we need to be exceptionally mindful of that security risk to all our citizens.

Kwasi Kwarteng: We are absolutely mindful of the risk that the hon. Gentleman describes. He knows that the Government are fully committed to ensuring that the dark days of the 1970s do not return to Northern Ireland.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I see that yesterday the Minister tried to mitigate fears about a no-deal departure by saying that it “is not a world war.” That might be an insight into his thinking, but is “less damaging than a world war” really a benchmark for success? Does he agree with the Security Minister, the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), who said: “A no-deal situation would have a real impact on our ability to work with our European partners to protect the public”?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s questions, as always, but I would like to point out that he has simply not, in my view, considered the reality of the implications of leaving the EU in an orderly manner. That decision, if taken, will have a huge impact on the security of this country.”
Bank of England, the highly respected economist, Mervyn King, has said about our GDP growth since 1800. On an annualised basis, there would be very little impact, even in the case of no deal.

**No Deal: NHS**

3. *Liz Twist* (Blaydon) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on the effect on the NHS of the UK leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement.

*Stephen Barclay*: The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): Ministers and officials in the Department for Exiting the European Union have regular discussions with their counterparts in the Department of Health and Social Care, who are working closely with industry to ensure that the NHS and patients are prepared for all exit scenarios.

**Liz Twist**: Before March, the NHS was stockpiling medical supplies, including body bags, medicines and blood. Many people with long-term conditions fear that essential drugs or specialist food supplies such as those for people with PKU—phenylketonuria—will not be available. What discussions is the Secretary of State having with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to ensure that medicines and other medical supplies are consistently available, on time, for people who need them?

*Stephen Barclay*: The hon. Lady raises a very important point—one that has, sadly, been subject to quite a lot of misleading scare stories. She will have seen the written statement we published yesterday setting out steps we are taking to ensure the smooth flow of goods, and medicines will be the priority within that. She will be aware that it is not simply an issue of flow, but also of stock and of regulation. The Department of Health, in particular, is doing considerable work on these issues.

*Mr Barry Sheerman* (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I remind the Secretary of State that this is not just about medicines, although that is important enough, but also about staff? Is he aware that many distressed loyal servants of the NHS have now decided that this is a hostile environment in our country and are going home to their own European countries? That is very sad. Will he remind the contenders to be our next Prime Minister that they do not have a majority in the House of Commons and when they get back here they are going to get a short shower of reality on them?

*Stephen Barclay*: The hon. Gentleman, like me, cares deeply about the NHS, but it is a fact that there are 700 more doctors working in the NHS today. He shakes his head, but it is a fact. There are 700 more doctors working in the NHS today than at the time of the referendum. It is important that we are welcoming. We recognise the talent, the service and the importance of EU citizens in our NHS. As a former Health Minister, I absolutely agree with him on that. But it is also important that our debate in this place reinforces that positive message and recognises that more doctors have come here, not fewer, since the referendum.

**Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Over 100 third-sector organisations are supporting my private Member’s Bill calling for an independent evaluation of the effect of Brexit in the health and social care sector. They all agree that the UK simply cannot afford to cut itself off from the labour market on which we have become so dependent and will become increasingly dependent. What assurances can the Secretary of State give to the sector that that will not happen?

*Stephen Barclay*: I will not dwell on the specific merits of the hon. Gentleman’s private Member’s Bill, but he will be aware that health is a devolved matter, and we are working closely with the Scottish Government in our planning. In terms of immigration, which goes back to the point made by the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), of course it is important that we retain staff. We are working to do that, and if we look more widely at staff figures, we see that there are 5,200 more EU citizens working in our NHS since the referendum—the numbers are up, not down.

**No Deal: Preparedness**

4. *Marion Fellows* (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the UK’s level of preparedness for leaving the EU on 31 October 2019 without a deal.

*Stephen Barclay*: Only yesterday, I had a bilateral meeting with my counterpart Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and we discussed the advanced plans that that Department has made in this area. I have also had meetings with the Food and Drink Federation, which represents sectors in the industry, and the British Retail Consortium. The Government are making significant plans to ensure that key supplies, including food, are available in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

*Mr Speaker*: The hon. Gentleman is a very busy fella, with a full diary. We are all greatly impressed.

*Jeremy Lefroy* (Stafford) (Con): One of the major risks of leaving without a deal, which I very much hope will not happen, is cash-flow problems, particularly for small and medium-sized businesses. I had understood that the Treasury and the whole Government were making plans to ensure that additional cash flow would
be made available, particularly for SMEs, for delays in payments, customs duties and so on. But at the Exiting the European Union Committee yesterday, we heard from all witnesses that they were not aware of any such plans for their members. Can the Minister set out clearly what those plans are and when they will be made known?

James Cleverly: The Government absolutely remain committed to ensuring that businesses, whether they are large, small or medium-sized, thrive in any Brexit-related scenario. The Governor of the Bank of England has said that we are well prepared. I will ensure that more details are circulated about what mitigating measures the UK Government will put in place for small and medium-sized businesses.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): In the finest traditions of this Government, the Brexit Secretary used an interview in The Times today to publicly air his frustrations with colleagues from the Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy at their unwillingness to waste yet more public money on ramping up preparations for a no-deal Brexit. In the same spirit of openness, can the Minister tell the House precisely how much additional funding his Department believes should be allocated to no-deal planning before 31 October and what it should be spent on?

James Cleverly: The Treasury has made available over £4 billion for preparations for Brexit in all scenarios. As has been discussed at the Dispatch Box before, it is not possible to disaggregate the spending between planning for a deal and planning for no deal. If the hon. Gentleman or anyone else in the Chamber is concerned about the implications of a no-deal Brexit, I remind them that they have had a number of opportunities to take the prospect of a no-deal Brexit off the table, which is what they say they wish to do, by voting for a deal. The fact that he has failed to do so means that the Government have had to take sensible, pragmatic actions to ensure that we are ready to leave in the event of no deal, but it is not too late for him to repent.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Given that the Brexit Secretary who negotiated the last deal was so disgusted with it that he resigned in protest, I think it is a bit much to blame anyone on this side of the House for not supporting it.

As the Minister will know only too well, we are still waiting to see the results of the coronation of the next Prime Minister—a Prime Minister who will be chosen on the votes of less than one quarter of 1% of the people of these islands. The lead contender—in fact, both contenders have made it clear they are prepared to go for a no-deal Brexit. Will the Minister accept that there is no mandate for a no-deal Brexit in this Parliament, and that there has never been a mandate for a no-deal Brexit from the people of the United Kingdom?

James Cleverly: In the 2016 referendum, the mandate was given to this place from the British people to leave the European Union.

Peter Grant: The Minister was asked what assurances he could give about food supplies in the event of a no-deal Brexit, and he gave none. He was asked what mandate exists publicly for a no-deal Brexit, and his answer made it perfectly clear there is none. The man who is about to be imposed on us as Prime Minister promised he would get a deal that would not be a no-deal Brexit, and if the new Prime Minister’s promises are worth nothing, whose are?

May I take the Minister back to the desire expressed a few minutes ago by his boss, who wants this House to listen to more than just the voices of London? “Yeah, tell us about it” is all I can say to that. May I suggest that he listens to one of the equal partners in this Union, where the Scottish National party is the stop Brexit party? The only time no-deal Brexit has been specifically put on the ballot paper in the form of the official Brexit party, the Scottish National party—on a promise to be the stop Brexit party—got more votes than not only the official no-deal Brexit party, but the unofficial no-deal Conservative party and the “don’t know what they’re doing about Brexit” Labour party, all three added together. Does he not accept that the people of Scotland, who his Government accept are sovereign, have overwhelmingly rejected any promise of a no-deal Brexit, as indeed would the majority of the people of these islands if they were given a choice? Why does he not make sure that no deal is taken off the table once and for all?

James Cleverly: I happen to be one of the people in this Chamber who is in the habit of respecting the outcome of referendums. I am conscious that the hon. Gentleman is a representative of a party that is less comfortable with respecting the outcome of referendums. The simple truth of the matter is that the people of Scotland decided to remain an active part of the United Kingdom and the United Kingdom collectively decided to leave the European Union, and we are delivering on that referendum.

No Deal: Resilience

5. Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on (a) ensuring resilience and (b) taking emergency steps in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (James Cleverly): The Government’s priority remains to ensure that a deal is brought before and agreed by Parliament, allowing the UK to leave the EU before 31 October. In the run-up to 12 April, various Departments were preparing civil contingency plans, which were regularly discussed with colleagues, with co-ordination from the Cabinet Office.

Luke Pollard: Devon and Cornwall’s deputy chief constable, Paul Netherton, is the national lead for civil contingencies. When asked by Plymouth Live, “What’s the worst case scenario for Brexit?”, he replied, without a moment’s hesitation, “No deal”. What conversations is the Department having with the Tory leadership contenders so that both of them truly understand the gut-wrenching and dangerous implications of leaving without a deal on 31 October?

James Cleverly: The position that the Government have taken mirrors, without necessarily using the same language, the prioritisation of the hon. Gentleman’s
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Across the Government, but especially in the Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, there is a big drive to improve the nation’s productivity. In the run-up to a potential no deal on 31 October, are there not projects that would improve the nation’s productivity, but also enhance our nation’s resilience to a no deal, especially with regard to transport infrastructure around ports, and better prepare us for a no-deal situation?

Mr Philip Hollobone: Across the Government, but especially in the Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, there is a big drive to improve the nation’s productivity. In the run-up to a potential no deal on what will be an Irish backstop, are there not projects that would improve our nation’s productivity, but also enhance our nation’s resilience to a no deal, especially with regard to transport infrastructure around ports, and better prepare us for a no-deal situation?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The Government are looking at and planning a number of activities that will benefit the United Kingdom, irrespective of the nature of our departure. As we progress those plans, I am more than happy to share them with him.

Mr Philip Hollobone: Is the Home Secretary aware that the British-Irish Council meeting is upon us? Where will we discuss those issues, and ensure that the concerns highlighted by the hon. Gentleman are addressed?

Governments have reached an important agreement with the European Commission and the Irish authorities, to improve the chances of resolution of the issues highlighted by the hon. Member for Strangford. On the basis of the agreement, the British-Irish Council meeting will be held in Dublin this week, and I hope it will give a very constructive contribution.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What recent discussions has the Minister had with the Irish Government regarding co-operation and security on the Irish border?

Mr Philip Hollobone: We have had regular discussions with Cabinet Office Ministers and their Irish counterparts, and with Irish security officials. We are working very closely with our Irish counterparts, and we are very pleased with the progress that is being made.

James Cleverly: The Government have regular meetings with international partners. Indeed, my colleague, Mr Walker—[Interruption.] I apologise, Mr Speaker, I mean my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker). He will be joining others at the British-Irish Council to discuss those issues, and ensure that the concerns highlighted by the hon. Gentleman are addressed.

Carol Monaghan: The scheme is operating well. These rights include the right to vote and stand in local elections. Similar agreements are in place for citizens from Spain and Portugal, but we have not had confirmation for EU citizens from other countries. Will the Minister guarantee that no EU citizen will have their name deleted from the UK electoral roll as a result of a no-deal Brexit?

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady is right to point to those important bilateral agreements. We want to secure more of those, but the Government have no plans to change the register. It is the responsibility of Cabinet Office Ministers to look at the domestic franchise, and they have assured me that they have no plans to change that in the foreseeable future.

Deidre Brock: Is there no back button on the app? I have been told of a citizen who mistakenly clicked to send a hard copy rather than completing online. When he tried to remedy that, the app told him that his application was withdrawn, and that he would have to wait three months to reapply. Will the Government admit that this “computer says no” system is an embarrassment, dump it, and restore some dignity to these citizens?

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady is right to point to those important bilateral agreements. We want to secure more of those, but the Government have no plans to change the register. It is the responsibility of Cabinet Office Ministers to look at the domestic franchise, and they have assured me that they have no plans to change that in the foreseeable future.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What discussions has the Minister’s Department had with the Home Office and the Local Government Association about applying for settled status for children in the care of local authorities? It is feared that some of them are being wrongly refused settled status, offered only pre-settled status, or that the local authority or the corporate parent is not applying for settled status for them at all.

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady makes an important point that has been raised during questions to this Department before. I have taken it up with the Department for Education and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that all efforts are made to make sure that children in care are properly entered into the settled status system by those who care for them. I am happy to forward that correspondence to her so that she can see the follow-up that has already been done on that front.

GATT: Article 24

7. Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): What discussions has he had with the European Commission on the applicability of Article 24 of the WTO General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in relation to the UK leaving the EU?

Mr Walker: The hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton is right to point to those important bilateral agreements. We want to secure more of those, but the Government have no plans to change the register. It is the responsibility of Cabinet Office Ministers to look at the domestic franchise, and they have assured me that they have no plans to change that in the foreseeable future.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I have regular discussions with Home Office Ministers regarding the EU settlement scheme. The scheme is operating well, and I am pleased that more than 800,000 applications have been received, and that almost 700,000 people have already been granted settled status.

The scheme is operating well. These rights include the right to vote and stand in local elections. Similar agreements are in place for citizens from Spain and Portugal, but we have not had confirmation for EU citizens from other countries. Will the Minister guarantee that no EU citizen will have their name deleted from the UK electoral roll as a result of a no-deal Brexit?

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trading relationship must comply with WTO rules. Under the withdrawal agreement, the implementation period is compatible with GATT article 24. In addition, paragraph 17 of the political declaration envisages the UK and the EU forming a free trade area, which will also be compatible with article 24.

Graham Stringer: On an all-party visit to the World Trade Organisation, it was made clear that if there was the prospect of a negotiated free trade agreement in the future, tariff-free trade could continue. Does the Minister agree that if the EU does not agree to that negotiated free trade in the future, which would allow tariff-free trade on leaving, that will be because it wants to punish the UK, not come to the best agreement in the interests of its people?

James Cleverly: I am not in a position to credibly assess the motivations of the European Union. The British Government’s position has been clear—it is a long-standing position—that it is in our mutual interest to come to a trading relationship between the UK and the EU. We will continue to seek to do so.

No Deal: Economic Impact

8. Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the effect on the UK economy of the UK leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement.

9. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the effect on the UK economy of the UK leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): I have regular conversations with Cabinet colleagues on all aspects of our EU exit. The Chancellor has provided £4.2 billion to prepare for all areas of our exit.

Anna Turley: I have spent this week at the Community trade union conference, the steelworkers’ union, trying to reassure steelworkers around the country from British Steel that their industry has a future and that the right hon. Gentleman’s Government are doing all they can to support them. If we leave the European Union with no deal, however, there will be an instant 25% tariff on steel exported to the European Union, which will cost the British steel industry £1 million a day. The industry has been very clear with me: no deal means no steel. Please, will the Secretary of State rule it out?

Stephen Barclay: Again, the way to rule out no deal is to back a deal, but the hon. Lady raises an important issue in relation to British Steel. As she is well aware, the Government have been working very closely with the industry and the owner, Greybull Capital. She will be well aware, given her constituents’ interests, of some of the global issues in terms of demand, but this is a live issue. I am discussing the issue with industry leaders and trade unions, too.

Bill Esterson: Even the International Trade Secretary appears to recognise that article 24 of GATT cannot be invoked unilaterally. There will be no transition period in the event of no deal. That much must be clear to everyone by now. Will the Secretary of State agree that no self-respecting Minister could possibly serve in the Government of a Prime Minister in denial about the reality of a no-deal Brexit?

Stephen Barclay: The clue is in the hon. Gentleman’s own question. He talks about “unilaterally”. Clearly, GATT 24 would need to be agreed. I think all the leadership contenders recognise that.

Diana Johnson: Beckie Hart, the director of Yorkshire and the Humber CBI, said recently that many firms are unaware that it is not just their relationship with EU customers that is at risk from a no-deal Brexit, but relationships across the globe. Tonight, Hull MPs and the shadow Brexit Secretary are meeting the Hull and Humber chamber of commerce to discuss our region’s economic prospects under Brexit. What reassurances can the Secretary of State give to Humber businesses on what is being done to avoid a no-deal Brexit, and what is being done to prepare for it to minimise the damage to the northern powerhouse from years of underfunding and austerity from his Government?

No Deal: Agriculture

9. Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the effect on UK farmers and agriculture of the UK leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): We continue to have regular conversations with ministerial colleagues across the Government on all aspects of exiting the EU. To provide certainty to farmers and landowners, the Government pledged to commit the same cash total in funds for farm support until the end of this Parliament. That commitment applies to the whole of the UK in both a deal and no-deal scenario.

Chris Elmore: After studying the Government’s no-deal notices, the National Farmers Union has said that a no-deal Brexit would be “catastrophic” for British
agriculture. Why then does the Secretary of State talk up a no deal as a viable option and back a leadership candidate who supports leaving on 31 October, “do or die”?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We have had a deal, which the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends and colleagues rejected three times. It makes absolutely no sense for them to complain about the prospect of no deal when they rejected a deal so comprehensively on three occasions.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): What progress has been made in setting up the successor scheme to the EU’s geographical indications system, which has proved so commercially lucrative for food and drink manufacturers, including people who produce Welsh beef and Welsh lamb?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We have made a lot of progress on trying to replace a lot of the EU’s funds and the regional way in which they allocate money. We have the UK shared prosperity fund, details of which will be introduced next year.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): In the recent Tory leadership debate, the Foreign Secretary challenged his rival over no deal, saying:

“Let me ask Boris a question: what would you say to a sheep farmer in Shropshire that I met whose business would be destroyed by 40% tariffs?”

What would the Minister say to that sheep farmer?

Kwasi Kwarteng: We have already made a commitment in this House to support our agricultural industries and our farmers under any circumstances, whether that is a deal or no deal. We have an Agriculture Bill that will allow the Secretary of State to provide the support that our people need.

No Deal: Pharmaceutical Products

11. Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the security of supply for pharmaceutical products in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal. [911603]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (James Cleverly): Our highest priority is for patients to continue to have access to the medicines and medical products that they need. Since the extension of article 50, close engagement with the pharmaceutical industry has continued and we are confident that we will have the necessary plans in place to ensure continuity of medical supply.

Mr Bailey: A no-deal Brexit would see the UK lose access to the falsified medicines directive, which prevents substandard and counterfeit medicines from entering our market. The head of the Healthcare Distribution Association has said that, as a result, the UK would be “less safe”. What steps has the Minister taken to prevent that?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman will be unsurprised to hear that I have had recent meetings with the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry. We have discussed the quantity and nature of cross-border movements of medical supplies and pharmaceuticals. The British Government take this as one of our top priorities, protecting the supply in general and ensuring the quality as well as the quantity of medical supplies, and we will continue to do so.

Citizens’ Rights: Elections

13. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on maintaining the right of EU citizens to participate in local elections in the UK and UK citizens to participate in local elections in the EU after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): The Cabinet Office is responsible for the domestic franchise, but my Department has been pressing to negotiate bilateral agreements on voting rights and I have regular contact with Cabinet Office Ministers on this matter. After writing to each member state, we have now signed agreements, as discussed earlier, with Spain, Portugal and Luxembourg to secure voting rights for UK nationals in EU member states and EU citizens here.

Bob Blackman: In my constituency, I have more than 10,000 Romanian citizens, who are contributing directly to our economy, working hard and contributing to Britain. They want to know when their voting rights will be safeguarded. Given the all-party basis that we have for safeguarding citizens’ rights, why do we not bring forward legislation on a cross-party basis to deliver precisely that?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an interesting suggestion. As he appreciates, it will be for the Government to decide what new legislation is brought forward. It is already the case in law that EU citizens from all member states have the right to vote in our domestic local elections, and it would require a change in the law to alter that.

Mr Speaker: That is usually a polite way of saying, “I hear what you say and will look at it in the round.” If the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) is encouraged by that, he is very easily encouraged.

Article 50 Extension

16. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What the Government’s policy is on extending the Article 50 process. [911609]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): The Government’s policy is not to extend article 50.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that unequivocal answer, because people in Corby and east Northamptonshire are tired of the delay and the attempts here in Parliament to frustrate Brexit. They are particularly frustrated by the fact that that is denying certainty for businesses. I am clear that there must be no more extensions and that we must leave on 31 October—no ifs, no buts. What steps is he taking to ensure that outcome?
Stephen Barclay: I share my hon. Friend’s frustration that we have not left; I have consistently voted to leave. I represent a constituency where 70% of voters voted to leave, and three years on, they are keen to ensure that this House delivers on that. There are over 300 no-deal workstreams in progress across Government. Considerable work is ongoing, and it is important that we prepare while continuing to seek a deal.

Customs Union: British Ceramics Confederation

19. Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): What discussions his Department has had with the British Ceramics Confederation on the UK’s participation in the customs union after the UK leaves the EU.

Stephen Barclay: The British Ceramics Confederation has been clear that what it wants to see is a deal for certainty for the ceramics sector, but as part of that it also wants to see the UK’s participation in a customs union. The benefits of a customs union work for EU-UK trade, but without that common external tariff and the continuation of trade deals with countries such as South Korea, which is now the biggest emerging market for the ceramics sector, our industry will suffer significantly. Will Ministers meet me and a delegation of ceramics providers so that we can look at ways of mitigating those problems if necessary, and ultimately changing Government policy for the better?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am pleased to note that the hon. Gentleman has belatedly come around to the merits of a deal. I hope that we can get a deal and leave in an orderly way. I am always happy to meet him and other representatives of the ceramics industry to discuss the interests of his constituency.

Economic Effect: Scotland

20. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the economic effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU.

Stephen Barclay: The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): Ministers continue to carry out extensive engagement on EU exit across all sectors of the economy, including with the British Ceramics Confederation, in meetings that in many cases have been organised by third parties. I have personally engaged with business and civil society organisations at national and regional levels, and we have met representatives of the security, voluntary and engineering sectors, among others.

Gareth Snell: I thank the Minister for that answer. The British Ceramics Confederation has been clear that it wants to see a deal for certainty for the ceramics sector, but as part of that it also wants to see the UK’s participation in a customs union. The benefits of a customs union work for EU-UK trade, but without that common external tariff and the continuation of trade deals with countries such as South Korea, which is now the biggest emerging market for the ceramics sector, our industry will suffer significantly. Will Ministers meet me and a delegation of ceramics providers so that we can look at ways of mitigating those problems if necessary, and ultimately changing Government policy for the better?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am pleased to note that the hon. Gentleman has belatedly come around to the merits of a deal. I hope that we can get a deal and leave in an orderly way. I am always happy to meet him and other representatives of the ceramics industry to discuss the interests of his constituency.

Patricia Gibson: The Scottish chamber of commerce has warned that the drop in GDP in April and the widening of our trade deficit does not bode well for Scotland’s economic fortunes. When will the Government realise the damage they are already doing to Scotland’s economy and offer business some certainty?

Mr Walker: This Government can be proud of the record high employment across the United Kingdom. Perhaps the Scottish Government need to look at the poor performance of the Scottish economy compared with the rest of the UK.

Topical Questions

T1. [91164] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): Since I last updated the House, treaties on reciprocal voting rights have been signed with Luxembourg and Portugal, and work continues on other bilateral agreements, led by the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker). I attended the General Affairs Council in Luxembourg last week and spoke with a number of senior EU figures. Technical and business groups have met in the past weeks to work on alternative arrangements for the Irish border. My Department is preparing for all scenarios in the run-up to October. I want to put on the record my thanks to officials for their continued professionalism and dedication.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The best chance of getting a good deal is to be deadly serious about no deal. Could the Secretary of State update the House on the current status of no-deal planning?

Stephen Barclay: As I mentioned in answer to an earlier question, considerable work is ongoing across Government. All the primary legislation necessary for no deal is in place, over 500 statutory instruments have already been laid, and work continues to ensure that we are ready for that scenario, while remaining focused on our priority, which is to leave with a deal.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): In a letter to the Secretary of State this morning, I said that he has a duty to give an honest assessment of the difficult choices facing the next Prime Minister. He will be aware that in recent days his preferred candidate for Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), has made a number of misleading statements about Brexit. Therefore, on behalf of the Government, could the Secretary of State make it clear today, first, that it is simply not possible to guarantee no tariffs under a no-deal Brexit—in particular, can he scotch the nonsense spouted about article 24 of the general agreement on tariffs and trade, which, as he well knows, is simply not available under a no-deal scenario—secondly, that technological solutions for the Northern Ireland border do not currently exist; and thirdly, that the UK cannot cherry-pick the withdrawal agreement?

Stephen Barclay: There used to be a scurrilous rumour in the House that when a Minister got advance notice of questions, it was perhaps the work of the Whips Office
tipping them off. I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his courtesy, because he actually emailed me his questions half an hour before Question Time—he has always been a courteous fellow, but this morning he has exceeded himself. Never mind “buy one, get one free”, this is a four-in-one question.

In his letter, the right hon. and learned Gentleman listed a number of issues. Because he sent the letter ahead of Question Time, the first of them has already been addressed by the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), who asked about GATT. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman will know, there is a difference between what is possible and what he may argue is probable, but it is a distinction that the candidates have addressed.

As for side deals and cherry-picking, again there is an inconsistency. I have been asked by the House on a cross-party basis, following what is referred to as the Costa amendment, to seek a side deal with the European Union to protect citizens’ rights, and I am happy to do so, but there is that inconsistency. The House has called for me to reach out to the European Commission, as indeed I have, because I agree with the House that it is right to protect citizens’ rights, but the right hon. and learned Gentleman says that side deals are cherry-picking and should not be sought.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman asked about technology. He will know that, in the Strasbourg statement, the EU itself has accepted that technology has a role to play on the border. Indeed, it stands ready to work with us as soon as the withdrawal agreement has been ratified. What is getting in the way of that is the Labour party’s consistent opposition to the withdrawal agreement—and that is because, notwithstanding the manifesto on which he stood, the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s true position is that he wishes us to remain in the EU. That is what his letter did not say, yet that is what he actually means.

Keir Starmer: I thought that, with a bit of notice, we might get a better answer than that. The answers to my three questions are no, it is not possible to guarantee no tariffs under a no-deal Brexit; no, technological solutions are not currently available in relation to the border in Northern Ireland; and no, the UK cannot cherry-pick the withdrawal agreement. Perhaps, since I am giving the answers, we should swap places sooner rather than later.

Let me ask the Secretary of State just one further question about a claim that has been made in recent days. Will he answer it with a simple yes or no? Can the UK secure an implementation period with the EU without a withdrawal agreement—yes or no?

Stephen Barclay: As the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows full well, the implementation period was part of the withdrawal agreement, which he himself voted against. He talks of swapping places, but the clue is in the name of the Department: it is the Department for Exiting the European Union. However, the right hon. and learned Gentleman does not want to exit the European Union, so it is rather odd for him to be auditioning for a role when his whole purpose is not to do what it says on the tin.

T2. [911615] Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What percentage of Irish exports to the EU come through Great Britain? If the doom and gloom-mongers on the Opposition Benches are right about the dangers of no deal, does it not make sense for the Irish Government to be open-minded about reaching a new agreement with the UK before we leave the European Union?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend has made an astute observation. He will be aware that 40% of Irish exports go through the short straits between Dover and Calais. We hear forecasts of delays at Calais from Labour Members, but it is not simply UK goods that will be delayed there; it will obviously be Irish exports too, as well as the many Irish imports.

There are a number of areas in which it is in Ireland’s interests to avoid the disruption of no deal. There has been very little debate in the UK about the impact on Ireland, and my hon. Friend is right to highlight it.

T3. [911617] Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has just said that considerable work is being done in preparation for no deal, so can he answer this question? Will he rule out accepting any renewed bid from Seaborne Freight during those preparations?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady will know that this is not Department for Transport questions; this is questions to the Department for Exiting the European Union, and she will know from the written ministerial statement we published yesterday that we have set out a framework. But in respect of Seaborne Freight it is worth reminding the House that it was a contract in which payments were linked to performance, and as the performance did not flow the payment did not go with it.

T4. [911620] Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): In Walsall North we like to be prepared for every eventuality, so can the Minister please offer my constituents some reassurance by listing some specific actions that have been taken since 29 March to demonstrate that we are ready for a no-deal Brexit?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (James Cleverly): My hon. Friend asks me to detail what actions have been taken; those actions are so numerous that I would not want to list them all, because I am sure you want to have time to go on to other things this morning, Mr Speaker. But I have already highlighted a number of meetings that I and ministerial colleagues have had with representatives of industry, helping them to understand what actions the Government have already taken and what actions they and their members can take for a no-deal Brexit. We have also had international meetings on both a bilateral and multilateral basis. Discussions among officials and Ministers and at Cabinet level happen regularly to ensure that the UK Government and UK businesses are in a good place to leave under no deal if needs be.

T5. [911622] Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It simply will not do: the answers given to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) simply were not adequate. The Secretary of State was given a simple yes or no question; will he have another try? Yes or no: is it possible to have one of those transition deals such as a GATT 24 deal—the things that Prime Minister candidates have been talking about—without an implementation period for it to come in? Yes or no?
Stephen Barclay: Yes, it is possible. The question is whether the EU would reciprocally agree, and that is what the right hon. Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) is questioning, as he does not feel that it is a probable outcome. There is a distinction between those two positions: I have addressed it, but I am very happy to address it again.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his record of championing the aerospace manufacturing sector. A lot of large businesses have undertaken considerable work to prepare for the possibility of no-deal Brexit.

Stephen Menzies: What preparations is the Minister making to ensure that aerospace manufacturing companies are given full support from the Government in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

Stephen Kerr (Con): Will my right hon. Friend detail the discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the preparedness of British business for a no-deal Brexit?

Stephen Barclay: I have had regular discussions with my right hon. Friend on that issue, and to a degree I would point to the difference between large business and small business. A lot of large businesses have undertaken considerable work to prepare for the possibility of no deal; we have more concern about the extent to which some small businesses have prepared. Often part of what flows into that is the debate in this place, where they are told that it will not happen and therefore the assumption is made that it is not necessary to prepare. It is worth reminding the House—particularly Members who look for a second referendum or for some other outcome—that it is the EU’s decision, to which any one of the 27 member states could object, whether any extension is offered, notwithstanding the position of certainly one of the two Conservative leadership candidates not to seek such an extension.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): In the answer that the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) gave a no-deal Brexit, he appeared to give the impression that the Government would compensate farmers for the cost of those tariffs. Can he please clarify this for the House: is it the Government’s policy, in the event of a no-deal Brexit, to pick up the cost of the tariffs that farmers would face—yes or no?

Kwasi Kwarteng: What I endeavoured to suggest was that the Government would continue to support those industries. We cannot guarantee a specific payment, as the right hon. Gentleman suggests, but there is a broad commitment to support those industries, as we have done for more than 80 years.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Data flows are absolutely vital for business, for health and for security, and in many other areas, but the problems would be immense in the case of a no-deal Brexit. We heard yesterday in the Exiting the European Union Committee that, even in the case of leaving with a deal, the UK would no longer have any influence over the general data protection regulation, even though the GDPR is becoming a standard right around the world, well outside the European Union. Is this a case of giving up control or taking back control?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend makes an important point about data adequacy and the EU Commission’s position on that. Unilateral action can be taken to put standard contractual terms in place, for example, which a lot of firms and organisations have done. The wider point, however, is that 40% of the EU’s data centres are within the UK, and many of the underground cables carrying data go through UK waters. It is important to remember that there are reciprocal benefits in coming to sensible arrangements on data adequacy, because not having a flow of data would be devastating to many European firms if they were to find themselves unable, for example, to send personal data linked to tourists. That is just one of the many examples that I could cite.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) is absolutely right. The Prime Minister failed in her aim to secure a continuing place for the UK on the European Data Protection Board, which oversees GDPR. Is it not a profoundly unsatisfactory aspect of the Prime Minister’s deal that, in that area and lots of others, we would have to comply with loads of EU rules over which we would have no influence at all?

Stephen Barclay: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Within any future trade deal, whether with the EU or further afield, there will always be a trade-off around what access we would get and what sovereignty we would trade. He knows from his time in the Treasury that that is always at the core of the debate around trade deals. In relation to the political declaration, when the debate around medicines and a number of other EU agencies has come up, we have said that we stand ready to work with the Commission on developing...
good regulatory standards. There is no race to the bottom on regulation from this Government, but there is also the question of what the Commission is willing to agree. It is in our mutual interests to come to sensible arrangements on data, for the reasons that I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford.
#### Business of the House

10.33 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride):
The business for next week is as follows:

- **Monday 1 July**—Estimates day (6th allotted day). There will be a debate on estimates relating to the Department for International Development and the Department for Education.
- **Tuesday 2 July**—Estimates day (7th allotted day). There will be a debate on estimates relating to the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. At 7 pm, the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.
- **Wednesday 3 July**—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) (No.3) Bill, followed by motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the Draft Capital Allowances (Structures and Buildings Allowances) Regulations 2019, followed by motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Amendment) Order 2019, followed by debate on a motion on whistleblowing. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.
- **Thursday 4 July**—Debate on a motion ending the sale of new petrol and diesel cars and vans, followed by general debate on the functioning of the existing law relating to assisted dying. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.
- **Friday 5 July**—The House will not be sitting.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for announcing the business for next week. The Chair of the Backbench Business Committee seems to be the de facto Leader of the House once again, because he is setting the agenda with debates on two days—lucky him.

The motion for the House to rise on 25 July was passed on Monday. I understand that the results of the ballot for the Tory party leadership will be out on Tuesday 23 July. The Prime Minister may have to go to Buckingham palace on Wednesday 24 July, and then the new leader of the Tory party will also have to go to the palace—possibly on the Thursday—to confirm with our gracious sovereign that he has the confidence of the House. Many hon. Members are concerned that there may be no time to question the new Prime Minister before the House rises, so will the Leader of the House assure us that he will make time for the new Prime Minister to make a statement and answer questions from hon. Members?

Last week, the Leader of the House said that the House would return on 3 September. Some press reports suggest that he has been involved in discussions about the House not rising for the conference recess. Will he confirm whether those discussions have taken place, whether and when the conference recess will start, or whether the House will sit during our conferences?

It is no wonder that ambassadors are saying that the UK’s standing around the world is diminished. On the one hand, the Government said that they are setting net zero carbon targets for 2050, but on the other hand the Treasury introduced its Value Added Tax (Reduced Rate) (Energy-Saving Materials) Order 2019, which is in effect a steep VAT increase for the installation of energy-saving materials. More importantly, is the Leader of the House aware of the point raised by my noble friend Baroness Smith of Basildon, the Leader of the Opposition in the House of Lords? The Prime Minister said that Labour peers were blocking the motion relating to climate change targets, but it is a regret motion, not a blocking motion, and it seeks to improve the proposals. Baroness Smith said that she regrets the lack of detail in the SI, because it leaves shipping and aviation out of the targets. Will the Leader of the House ask the PM to apologise to my noble friends in the other place? The Prime Minister was plain wrong, and I have the relevant exchange here if it would be helpful to the Leader of the House.

The right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) withdrew the dangerous bendy buses from London, and they have since been removed in Swansea, York, Bradford and Leeds. Despite that, the Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, has proposed bendy buses for a route between Walsall and Birmingham. It is a wholly inappropriate use of public funds, because a perfectly good service already exists and local people are opposed to the decision. Will the Leader of the House use his good offices to ensure that the Mayor understands that bendy buses are dangerous and unwanted? The Mayor said that the buses were being introduced for the Commonwealth Games. The Government have announced a funding package for the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth games, with 75% coming from central Government and 25% being raised locally. However, there was no news of consequential funding for Wales, and the Secretary of State for Wales did not mention that yesterday. I am pretty sure that the Government have to provide such funding, so will the Leader of the House ensure that the Secretary of State writes to the First Minister of Wales to explain whether Wales will receive it?

More than 40 Members have signed early-day motion 2368, which was tabled by the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) and calls on the Government to automatically fund the legal representation of all victims of terrorist atrocities and their families.

[That this House expresses concern that victims of terrorist atrocities are not automatically eligible for legal aid; regrets that a recently published government review rejected introducing automatic non-means-tested legal aid funding to bereaved families after a state-related death; notes that state organisations involved in deaths from terrorist attacks have access to legal teams and experts at public expense; recognises that in France victims of terrorist, and their families, are automatically eligible for state-funded legal representation; and calls on the Government to automatically fund the legal representation of all victims of terrorist atrocities and their families, inclusive of all coroner hearings and inquests.]

Lawyers acting pro bono on behalf of families of the victims of the London Bridge terror attack have had their legal aid applications denied. At the same time, Government agencies have used public funds to hire some of the best legal teams to represent their interests in court. Families of victims of the March 2017 Westminster attack have also been told that they are unlikely to
receive funding for the inquest, which ended last year. This is an insult to victims of terror, and the Government need to reverse it as soon as possible.

It is Armed Forces Day on Saturday to honour the men and women who make up our armed forces, and we had a good debate on that this week. At this very moment, the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Defence Secretary are announcing our five pledges to support the forces and their families—fair pay, decent housing, a voice for servicemen and women, an end to privatisation, and support for forces children—but there has been a real-terms pay cut for our servicemen and women over the past seven years. The starting salary of an Army private is now £1,150 lower in real terms than in 2010.

Sunday 30 June is the United Nations International Day of Parliamentarism. In total, there are 272 Chambers of Parliament, with more than 46,000 Members, and there has been no shortage of demand for you, Mr Speaker, to visit other countries. It has been helpfully pointed out by certain people that your ambassadorial and valuable insight into the workings of this Parliament are so important. On Sunday we can celebrate how the parliamentary system improves the day-to-day life of people across the world. That allows us to raise the plight of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, which I will do every week from this Dispatch Box until she is free. Turning to the hypocrisy of President Trump, he brought his family on a state visit while presiding over a policy that separates families. With Oscar and his daughter Valeria lying dead, I am sure every single parliamentarian and women over the past seven years. The starting salary of an Army private is now £1,150 lower in real terms than in 2010.

I have been feeling somewhat guilty since last week, as I invited several regular attendees of business questions to join me on holiday over the recess but did not extend the invitation to you, Mr Speaker. Do please join us. It is just £500 for the week, which you will be pleased to know includes all flights.

I concur with the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) about the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who has indeed shown his worth in allocating time on the Order Paper. I congratulate him on the important debates he has secured for the coming week.

The hon. Lady specifically asked about the recess motion to which the whole House agreed. The Government are clear that there should be an opportunity for the new Prime Minister to appear before this House before the recess and, in the event that there is any doubt in the matter, I have no doubt that Parliament will express itself. Hopefully that is now sufficiently clear.

The hon. Lady also asked whether there will be a recess to accommodate the conferences. All I can say is that that will of course be a matter for the new Prime Minister, but it is usual for time to be set aside for the conference recess. One might reasonably expect time to be made available in the usual way.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of the VAT rise for energy-saving materials, but she did not point out that, in fact, the rise is due to EU regulations and an EU requirement. In the absence of that imperative from the EU, it is not something we would necessarily have brought forward.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the House of Lords regret motion relating to the climate change targets. I understand her point about the meaning of that motion, which will have been noted by this House. The main point remains that, as a Government, we have taken a leading step on tackling emissions and climate change, and that step should not be downgraded or overlooked in any way.

The hon. Lady also raised the issue of bendy buses in and around Walsall, and I believe she was seeking my assistance in reaching out to the Mayor of the West Midlands. If she needs any assistance, I am happy to do that, but I am sure that if she were to approach the Mayor directly, he would, in his usual manner, be very accommodating and wish to engage with her.

The hon. Lady also asked whether I could prevail upon the Secretary of State for Wales to ensure that he writes to his counterpart on the matter of consequential costs arising from the Commonwealth games, and I will be happy to do that. As this has been raised at the Dispatch Box this morning, I know that that message will have been heard. She also raised the issue of legal representation for the victims of terrorism. I believe that the Justice Committee will shortly be considering these matters in some detail, which may be of interest to her, and of course a lengthy debate on just this subject took place in Westminster Hall a short time ago. I wish to echo the hon. Lady’s words on Armed Forces Day, which is on Saturday. We owe all our brave men and women a huge debt of gratitude for all that they do to keep us safe in these islands.

Finally, the hon. Lady rightly raised the issue of Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who went to Iran on holiday to see relatives and has been incarcerated for far too long. Our thoughts are with her, with her family and with her husband, and I assure the hon. Lady. That the Foreign and Commonwealth Office continues to work hard to try to secure her release. Indeed, the Prime Minister has raised this specific matter with the Iranian authorities and leadership on more than one occasion.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Mindful of the upcoming celebrations of Armed Forces Day, and notwithstanding the reports of Army instructors being accused of historical abuse, will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate to mark Victory over Japan Day, so that we can record the terrible atrocities suffered by prisoners in the Japanese war camps?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of VJ Day. We tend to think about the victory in Europe, but of course the war continued beyond that
point and, as he has stated, many awful atrocities took place that were particularly associated with the Asian element of the second world war. The Royal British Legion and the Government will be working together to ensure that the 75th anniversary of VJ Day on 15 August 2020 will be commemorated in the appropriate way.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): May I, too, congratulate you on your 10 years in the Chair, Mr Speaker? You will recall that I was one of your sponsors, and a very good decision I made at that time.

May I also thank the Leader of the House for announcing what there is of the business for next week? As well as the purgatory of this business, we now have the purgatory of the never-ending Conservative leadership contest. May we therefore have a debate not on bendy buses but on the construction of model buses, historic photography and uncut fields? It has to be said that that would be a lot more interesting than all the unicorn chasing that seems to be going on over Brexit. When it comes to Scotland, it seems for both candidates to be a matter of their telling Scotland, “You cannae dae that”. “We’re no going to let you do this” and “Don’t even think about that.” I am not sure how telling Scotland what it cannot do is somehow going to endear them to the people of Scotland. We know that with just the prospect of Prime Minister Boris support for independence rises to 53%, so we on these Benches are having a particularly good Tory leadership contest.

May we have a debate about Select Committees, given that we are celebrating 40 years since they were established? As you said yesterday, Mr Speaker, they are the key to holding Ministers to account for the Government’s conduct—except that they do not, because Ministers regularly refuse to attend Select Committee hearings, thereby evading scrutiny. The Scottish Affairs Committee has asked for a Home Office Minister to give evidence to our drugs inquiry, to explain the Government’s criminal justice approach to drugs. The Home Office has contemptuously refused to supply a Minister to appear before the Committee. In the next couple of weeks, we are likely to receive the news that there will have been 1,000 drug deaths in Scotland last year, so this refusal is a gross insult to the families of those affected. What sort of message does it send to reluctant Select Committee witnesses when Ministers themselves defiantly refuse to appear before Select Committees? It is a disgrace and it undermines our Select Committees.

Lastly, we have estimates next week. Thanks to the SNP—and perhaps in part because of my intervention—we can now actually discuss estimates on estimates day. A couple of amendments have been tabled that would link the estimates to a no-deal Brexit. Given that we will not couple of amendments have been tabled that would link the estimates to a no-deal Brexit. Given that we will not have another opportunity properly to discuss Brexit, take a view on it and vote on it, I hope that the Government will engage with the process constructively, so that before we break for recess we can have another say on their Brexit plans.

Mel Stride: As usual, it is the same old tunes. As we know, the hon. Gentleman is a gifted musician—I will keep coming back to this—and the House may or may not know that he played in Runrig, which was an excellent band, and Big Country, in which he was not the best-looking member in the line-up, I have to say, but he was none the less—[HON. MEMBERS: “Withdraw!”] All right, it might just have been the way they were photographed. Anyway, he was indeed very talented. I have been thinking about the other bands that perhaps he should have played in at some point in his career. Given his grip on the great issues of the day, perhaps it should have been Wet Wet Wet; given his party’s manifesto, perhaps it should have been Madness; or, given the heartbreak and blubbery anguish that the hon. Gentleman would cause if his scaremongering policies ever led to Scottish independence, perhaps he would have been best placed in Tears for Fears. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh.”] Well, it was better than last week, Mr Speaker, if nothing else. You will have to agree that I am improving.

As for the specific points that the hon. Gentleman raised, he asked for a debate on model buses; I think he was referring to my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) and the cheery faces that he paints on these model buses, apparently. All I can say is that that is one of the most sensible suggestions I have ever heard the hon Gentleman make in the Chamber. We will certainly take that forward as a serious proposal.

More seriously, the hon. Gentleman rightly salutes 40 years since the formation of Select Committees. We should remember Norman St John-Stevas, who was instrumental in ensuring that Select Committees were brought to bear. The hon. Gentleman raised the specific issue of the appearance of Ministers before Select Committees, particularly in the context of the effect of drugs in Scotland. I am sure his comments will have been heard both in the Chamber and beyond the House.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the amendments to the estimates that we will consider next week, and suggested that there should be some discourse on matters relating to Brexit. I assure him that my door is always open to him so that we can discuss whichever matters he would like to raise with me.

Mr Speaker: Notwithstanding the Leader of the House’s gentle teasing, which has been taken in very good part by Members across the House, I think it only right to record that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) is a distinguished member of the parliamentary rock band, MP4—I say this really by way of a public information notice—and he performs with great skill and dexterity on keyboards. MP4 raise money for Help for Heroes and have performed with considerable distinction in my own constituency. Their performance is still talked about widely in the highways and byways of my beautiful constituency. The hon. Gentleman is greatly appreciated and I would not want him to feel unfloved in this place.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Can we have a debate on the issue of transparency and the Heathrow third runway decision? Yesterday, like many Members, I met climate and environmental campaigners. People in my community are simply baffled as to how such an irrational decision to expand Heathrow could have been taken by a Government who, I know, care about the environment. When I put in freedom of information requests, what came back was so heavily redacted that there was little information to tell me how the decision was reached. Will the Leader of the House approach
the Department for Transport to encourage it to be more transparent and to remind Ministers that they should bring people with them on a decision by explaining it fully, not by hiding it away in secret?

Mel Stride: First, let me congratulate my right hon. Friend on the strength and veracity of her campaigning on this matter, albeit that the direction of travel is not exactly as she would wish. She raises the specific issue of transparency. I would be very happy to facilitate a meeting with any Minister whom she may wish to approach in order to discuss that matter.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): As the Leader of the House has announced, the Backbench Business Committee has debates on both Wednesday and Thursday of next week, but, of course, it also determines which Department’s estimates will be debated on Monday and Tuesday, so it is a clean sweep for the week: four days of business determined by the Backbench Business Committee. Under those circumstances, it would be churlish of me to ask the Leader of the House for more time on this particular occasion.

I have a bit of sadness from my locality. I and my hon. Friend for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who is in her place, discovered this week that, as we anticipated, 170 members of the workforce at De La Rue are being made redundant as a result of the Government awarding the contract to manufacture the British passport to a French-Dutch company. In future, the passports will be manufactured in Poland. One hundred and seventy workers lose their jobs in Gateshead, and our post-Brexit blue British passport is to be manufactured in Poland—you just could not make this stuff up.

Finally, let me make a very impassioned plea. A Nigerian mother and her three children live in my constituency. I will not give their names out at the occasion.

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to his prowess in bringing forward the various motions and debates to the House. I just have this feeling that all this will end up, on around 23 July, with the hon. Gentleman standing at this Dispatch Box. It cannot be inconceivable in the impenetrable combinations of what might happen between now and, for example, the end of October.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of De La Rue and the passports, which I know will have been noted and is on the record. As to the very serious matter that he raised at the end of his remarks around the Nigerian family facing deportation, I say not only that my door is open, but that I would be personally very keen to sit down with him and look at that in some detail so that we can determine between us the best way forward.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on reaching the halfway mark in your career as our Speaker.

That we plant trees for those born later seems lost on the denizens of Network Rail who continue, despite a very good independent report, to destroy trees and shrubs trackside on an industrial scale, including in places such as Grantham in Lincolnshire. This is certainly unethical and much of it, given the effect on protected wildlife, illegal. Will the Leader of the House arrange for an urgent statement by Ministers to say how this decimation and destruction can be brought to an end before all that is bright and beautiful is made dark and ugly by the brutal bureaucrats of Network Rail?

Mel Stride: I thank my right hon. Friend very much indeed for his eloquently placed question regarding trees and Network Rail. As we know, he is a lover of poetry, particularly the poetry of John Clare, who wrote a poem called “The Wind and Trees”. I know my right hon. Friend. Friend has a long-term love of trees and a long-term problem with wind, by which I mean, of course, his verbosity in this Chamber on occasion. May I share one small section of that poem with the House?

“I love the song of tree and wind
How beautiful they sing
The lichen on the beach tree rind
E’en beats the flowers of spring,
From the southwest sigh sigh it comes
‘Then whizzes round in pleasant hums’.

On that rather beautiful note, I think I should concede entirely to my right hon. Friend’s request and ensure that I secure a meeting with him and the Environment Secretary as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: That exchange should be framed and displayed in a prominent place in the Lincolnshire abode of the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes).

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): As I am sure the Leader of the House is aware, Hull is a beautiful city and definitely a place that every Member should take time to visit. One way to make it even more beautiful than it already is—if that is possible—would be to introduce butterflies throughout the city. Hull wants to become the first city in the UK to be a butterfly city and adopt the brimstone butterfly, so please could the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the importance of biodiversity, butterflies and the beautiful city of Hull?

Mel Stride: How nice to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I thank the hon. Lady for her question and for raising the matter of the brimstone butterfly, about which I currently know absolutely nothing, but will shortly know a great deal. I would perhaps point her to an Adjournment debate, where an appropriate Minister could be brought to the House to listen to her proposals.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Can we have a debate on the appalling plans being put forward by the Mayor of London and TfL to build tower blocks over the carparks at Cockfosters and High Barnet tube stations, so that I can express my constituents’ very strong opposition to these plans?

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend does a great deal in her constituency, particularly on these issues. These are matters for the Mayor of London, as they relate to planning, but I would be very happy to facilitate a meeting between my right hon. Friend and the appropriate Minister if she would find that useful.
John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware, as we all are, of what seems to be a rise in homophobic attacks across the country. I say, “what seems to be a rise”, because the reporting has probably not yet caught up with the day-to-day reality. This is causing alarm across the country and on both sides of the House. Could we have a statement from a Home Office Minister on homophobic attacks?

Mel Stride: I think the whole House is united in saying that there is no place in a civilised society for homophobia or anything related to it. Let me take this opportunity to refer to the Duke of Cambridge’s recent very positive remarks on this matter. This may well be an opportunity for a further debate in the House—perhaps a Backbench Business Committee debate.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): On 21 June 1824, in the wake of the end of the Napoleonic wars and the mass industrialisation of this country, the Vagrancy Act 1824 was introduced in Parliament and came into effect. The Act criminalised begging and people who are homeless sleeping on our streets. Disgracefully, that law is still on our statute books today. Given the sparsity of legislation that the Government are bringing forward, is it not time that we repealed that Act and modernised the position? Does my right hon Friend not agree that homeless people should be assisted, not arrested?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point. He has campaigned on this issue for a considerable period of time, and I congratulate him on being instrumental in bringing forward the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. I believe he also has an article on homelessness in The House magazine this week. He asks specifically about the Vagrancy Act, which is indeed well over 100 years old and its fitness for purpose is highly questionable. If he would like to have discussions with me, I will have a look at what possibilities there may be along the lines he has suggested.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): These proceedings are being watched live by the pupils of Hillington Primary School, who invited me last Friday to see the outcome of their school project on the keys to unlocking education, which is about ensuring that young people across the country receive education, particularly in poverty-stricken and war-torn nations of the world. May we have a debate or a statement from the Government about how we, as Members of Parliament, on behalf of pupils like those at Hillington Primary School, can advance this cause to ensure that young people across the world receive access to education?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman has raised an extremely important point about the importance of education. We often focus on that in the context of our own country, but it is also extremely important globally in terms of raising young people and families, and people generally, out of poverty. The hon. Gentleman and Hillington Primary School are to be thoroughly congratulated on the excellent work they have done on the keys to unlocking education. I am delighted that the pupils are all watching at the moment. May I say to each and every one of them, thank you for all you have done?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We welcome the pupils of Hillington Primary School to our proceedings this morning. I hope that they think the Chamber this morning has been as well-behaved as they have.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): If my right hon. Friend would like to visit the beautiful constituency of Stafford, he will see that we are contributing greatly to house building in the UK, with a rate more than double the national average. However, developers are taking advantage of rules about councils falling very briefly below the five-year land supply to put in developments that are unwanted by local residents and environmentally unsound, particularly in the village of Penkridge. May we have a debate on the way in which developers are taking advantage of loopholes in planning legislation, and on how we should abide by the plans that have been put in place by our councils, in consultation with residents, and not see these unwanted, unplanned-for housing developments springing up simply because the developer wants to put them there?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises a very important point about housing. We too often speak simply about volume. Of course, the Government have a very clear record in that regard, with 220,000 homes built in the last year for which we have records—the highest number of each of the past 31 years, bar one. None the less, he is absolutely right that quality of development, in the right place, is absolutely key to getting our housing policy right. I would perhaps point him to an Adjournment debate to discuss this and make his points to the relevant Minister. He is no stranger to that, as I believe he has an Adjournment debate next week on the issue of precious metals.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): A constituent of mine sadly diagnosed with breast cancer in her 40s has started a petition signed by over 26,000 people that outlines the devastating impact on her life and calls for routine screening to be extended to younger women. Can we have an urgent debate in Government time on what we can do to increase early diagnosis of breast cancer at all ages?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue. Cancer is one of the key targets that the national health service has in terms of getting survival rates up, and they are at historically high levels. A lot of progress has been made in that respect. She also raises the equally important issue of prevention and early diagnosis rather than dealing with problems later on. That is central to the national health service plan that has been brought in on the back of the record cash funding that we are now putting in.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Early-day motion 2453 has very quickly gained substantial support from 47 MPs to date.

[That this House welcomes the establishment by the UN General Assembly of the UN International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief on 22 August each year, is deeply concerned that acts of violence based on religion or belief are increasing all over the world and often flourish with impunity: notes the concerning findings of the interim report of the Bishop of Truro’s Independent Review for...]

807
the Foreign Secretary of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians; recognises the dire situation of religious minorities in many parts of the world; calls on the Government to mark the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief and use the initiative to develop and implement a comprehensive action plan, across Departments to address religious persecution whenever and wherever it occurs; and further calls on the Government to use all its diplomatic powers to combat religious persecution around the world and bring impunity for such atrocities to an end."

The EDM welcomes the establishment by the UN of an international day commemorating the victims of violence based on religion or belief. Will the Leader of the House also welcome it and consider how this annual day could be appropriately recognised by this House, bearing in mind that it will fall during our recess on 22 August?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I know that she is, rightly, deeply passionate about that matter, and we have discussed it personally on a number of occasions. The Government are entirely committed, and rightly so, to freedom of religion and belief and to promoting respect between people of different religions and beliefs. I wonder whether this would be a good subject for an Adjournment debate. However, as she pointed out, the event to which she refers falls within the recess. I do not have a ready answer to that conundrum, but I would be happy to discuss with her later what options there might be, if that is of use.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House is getting on my right side this morning. As chairman of the John Clare Trust, I was delighted to hear him quoting John Clare’s poetry. My favourite poem, and probably his best love poem, is entitled “I do not love thee”; I recommend that the Leader of the House reads it.

The Leader of the House also mentioned Norman St John-Stevas. I knew Norman St John-Stevas in the early part of my career here. I add my thanks to him for setting up the Select Committee system. He was also a great social campaigner. To read his speeches against capital punishment, social injustice and women in prison is a wonderful treat. He had a sense of humour and dagger-like incisiveness when it was necessary.

There have been many big demonstrations this week, but there was a smaller one by women in prison. On the whole, I do not believe that women should go to prison unless they are very violent. We should not be sending women to prison for not paying television licences or for minor crimes. Can we have a debate on women in prisons? Why can we not have women’s centres up and down our country that support women who get into trouble with the law? At the moment, they come out of prison with no housing, no support, no counselling and no work.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his reference to John Clare and Norman St John-Stevas. As he may know, they have a connection, in that they both come from Northamptonshire. I believe. They are both great, late and much missed individuals.

The hon. Gentleman raised an important point about women in prison. The female prison population is a minority. None the less, there are issues as to whether incarceration in that form for women is appropriate in all instances, as he suggested. He referred to the very effective rally yesterday in the Emmanuel Centre here in Westminster, and I believe that the speech made by the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), was well received. I know that the hon. Gentleman’s remarks will be heard.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): May we have a debate on the Send My Friend to School campaign? Last Friday, I attended an assembly at Hythehill Primary School in Lossiemouth where P6 pupils Jack MacKenzie and Chloe Thomson spoke in front of the whole school about the campaign. Along with deputy headteacher Rachael Blackhall, I received hundreds of brilliantly designed messages from pupils across the school, which I delivered to Downing Street earlier this week. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Jack, Chloe, Mrs Blackhall and everyone at Hythehill Primary School on what they have done for this campaign and, indeed, what schools across the country are doing to raise awareness of it?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the important Send My Friend to School campaign, which recognises the global importance of education. Just as he has entreated me to do, I congratulate Jack, Chloe and Rachael Blackhall on all they have done for this very important campaign.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I ask for your assistance and that of the Leader of the House? Ten days ago, a 73-year-old constituent of mine was on holiday in Zante. He left to go for a walk to a monastery on top of a local mountain, and he has not been seen since. The Greek authorities have pulled out of any search and rescue efforts. The Western Beacons Mountain Search and Rescue Team are willing to leave tomorrow to conduct the search, but they need £5,000. I have contacted the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to see whether any financial assistance is available, but may I ask for your assistance in finding a source of Government funding that would allow the team to leave just after 12 o’clock tomorrow, so that we can at the very least find this gentleman and bring him home?

Mel Stride: This is clearly a matter of the utmost urgency, and I would be very grateful if the hon. Lady met me immediately after these questions to discuss it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The hon. Lady asked if the Chair could do anything to help. I can merely say that this is clearly a serious and urgent matter, and I am delighted to hear what the Leader of the House has said, which I am sure will move matters forward.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): May we have a debate on UK resilience planning in the face of weather emergencies? I ask this because, last Monday, the people of Stirling experienced an extraordinary weather event, which resulted in widespread flooding and flood damage in the constituency. Will the Leader of the House also join me in expressing appreciation of the professional and highly effective response of the Scottish Fire and
[Stephen Kerr]

Rescue Service and Police Scotland; the business community and their employees; and especially the employees of Stirling Council—led by the chief executive, Carol Beattie, as well as Brian Roberts, head of infrastructure, David Creighton, head of roads and land services, and Kristine Johnson in relation to emergency planning—and the staff of Castleview Primary School, and Ochil House and Wallace High School, because it was one of their finest hours?

Mel Stride: There is no doubt that in these changed circumstances, with different weather conditions right across the United Kingdom, including in the south-west—the seat I represent is in Devon—we are seeing just such effects of erratic weather. As Members, I think we all know of the devastation, and the highly personal devastation, that can bring when it has an impact both on people's businesses and their homes. I certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating Carol Beattie and all those at Stirling Council on their work with primary schools and the others he mentioned in his question.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): This week, we saw a report of a leaked A-level maths paper. In my constituency, there have been allegations about questions being shared when one part of the country takes exams before the same paper is sat in another. Will the Leader of the House arrange a debate on the security processes maintained by school exam boards? The situation appears to be deeply unfair to students up and down the country.

Mel Stride: I can but wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady that the situation she describes of tests being taken at different times—with questions common to both tests therefore being available from the earlier stage to the advantage of those taking the second test, as it were—is clearly totally and utterly unacceptable. I believe, although I stand to be corrected, that there have even been some arrests in relation to this particular issue, such is its seriousness. It would perhaps be an excellent subject for an Adjournment debate, with an opportunity to put such points to a Minister from the Department for Education.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Earlier this week, Crawley News 24 reported that the recently relocated main post office in WH Smith in my constituency did not even have any of its self-service counters available—ironically, due to a lack of staff. Can I get an assurance from the Government that pressure will be brought to bear on the Post Office—obviously, it is a Government-owned entity—to ensure that there are adequate staffing levels, particularly where the relocation of main post offices has taken place, as it has in Crawley and other towns across the country?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend’s question does not surprise me in the least, knowing how vigorously he has campaigned locally in his constituency on the matter of post offices and local services, and he is absolutely right that they are vital. As we all know, post offices often provide the vital banking services that are often not present because local banks have closed. They are vital. As we all know, post offices often provide the vital banking services that are often not present because local banks have closed. They are vital. As we all know, post offices often provide the vital banking services that are often not present because local banks have closed. They are vital. As we all know, post offices often provide the vital banking services that are often not present because local banks have closed. They are vital.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Following what the Shadow Leader of the House said about Wales, may I say that Scotland and Northern Ireland are also due full Barnett consequentials from the Birmingham games funding? We recently heard the Tory leadership candidates and their Conservative representatives in Scotland state that only an outright SNP majority would be a mandate for the Scottish Government to implement their manifesto promises, despite the Scottish Parliament having voted to do so. Given those statements, may we have a debate on parliamentary democracy, and on where this minority UK Government’s mandate has emerged from?

Mel Stride: On that matter I would probably point the hon. Gentleman towards Cabinet Office questions. I do not have the precise date, but I know they are coming up before the recess.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): This year marked the 75th anniversary of D-day. It also marked another anniversary—that of the Great Escape, during which 50 prisoners of war were murdered by the Gestapo. One of those 50 was Sandy Gunn, from Auchterarder in my constituency, whose Spitfire has recently been discovered in Norway as a result of the ongoing AA810 project. Sandy served as part of the photographic reconnaissance unit—a highly skilled and dangerous unit that carried out missions across enemy territory to try to bring valuable information back to allied forces in the UK and elsewhere around the world. Despite that great service, more than 70 of those who died are still without any known graves or national memorial. Will the Leader of the House find time for us to debate a national memorial for those men who served in the photographic reconnaissance unit and gave so much to our country?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises the important issues of the Great Escape and Sandy Gunn, and the importance of photo reconnaissance to our efforts in winning the second world war. Sandy Gunn is one of many unsung heroes in that conflict, and the idea of holding a debate on that issue is a good one. Perhaps my hon. Friend might seek a debate in Westminster Hall or an Adjournment debate, or he could prevail on the Government to make a statement on their plans to reduce alcohol harm in the rest of the country?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Last week, NHS Health Scotland published the first data from the official evaluation of minimum unit pricing in Scotland. The figures are highly encouraging, and I commend them to comrades and colleagues in the House. They show that alcohol consumption in Scotland dropped by 3% last year. It rose by 2% in England and Wales where no minimum unit pricing is in place, although it will be introduced in Wales next year. Will the Leader of the House join me in welcoming those results, and will the Government give us an assurance on their plans to reduce alcohol harm in the rest of the country?

Mel Stride: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in welcoming the fall in alcohol consumption in Scotland. He suggested that it has been rising in England and Wales, which I am not sure is the case as I think it may also have been declining, although I may be wrong on that point—[Interruption.] Somebody says I am wrong.
so perhaps I am. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that under our national health service long-term plan, we have signalled our support for improving treatment for patients, and expert alcohol care teams will work in the 2½% worst affected parts of the country, supporting patients who have issues with alcohol misuse and their families.

Thangam Debonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Before he left the Chair, Mr Speaker mentioned the rock band MP4, and I cannot resist segueing neatly into a tiny little plug for the newest entry in the parliamentary musical bloc: string quartet the Statutory Instruments. Modesty forbids me from saying much more, other than that Members should check their emails for an invite to the debut concert next Tuesday.

The Leader of the House may have been forewarned by his predecessor that I have a penchant for asking for the location of missing pieces of legislation. In no particular order, and with no priority, can he say where the Agriculture Bill, the Fisheries Bill, and the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill are? I could go on, but those are the three at the top of my list.

Mel Stride: As with all legislation, I will make announcements from the Dispatch Box about what Bills will come forward in the usual way. I think the hon. Lady is a member of the Labour Whips Office, so she will be party to discussions between the usual channels on those matters.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Currently, two in five pensioners who are eligible for pension credit do not claim it. In my constituency, over £7 million of pension credit payments are not claimed and are therefore retained by the Treasury. All of that is occurring as we witness an increase in pensioner poverty. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out what his Government will do to ensure that all pensioners eligible for pension credit are made aware of this support and how they can claim it?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises a very important and specific point about the non-claiming of pension credit. I totally agree with her. It is very important that those who are entitled to it are aware that they are able to claim it and do make that claim. This is important finance to support them. Given the fact that this is a very specific matter, I will point her to Work and Pensions questions on 1 July.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Eighteen young people from Coventry are to take part in the 53rd international children’s games this summer, which are due to be held in Ufa, Russia, in July. The Coventry team will be competing against 1,500 other children from 90 cities around the world in many different sports, including athletics and swimming. I know these young people will have an unforgettable experience, and will build friendships with children of different nationalities that will hopefully last a lifetime. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing all those young Coventrians all the best? Will he look to arrange a debate in Government time on the benefits of sport, not just for health and wellbeing but for its ability to develop cultural relationships between cities and friendships between competitors?

Mel Stride: I congratulate every single one of those children who have stepped up and said they are willing to travel halfway round the world to engage in what sounds like a fantastic sporting competition involving 1,500 other competitors. I wish them well. Sport and exercise for young people is a very worthy subject for debate. I might direct the hon. Lady to the hon. Member for Gateshead and the Backbench Business Committee.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thought the Leader of the House was very ungracious to suggest that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) was not the best-looking member of Runrig but if I can paraphrase Paul McCartney, he is not even the best-looking member of MP4! [Laughter.] I’m not saying who is, obviously. By some strange omission MP4 have not been booked to play the Glastonbury festival this weekend, but it is a reminder of the importance of music festivals to the economy and to people’s wellbeing. A lot of smaller music festivals are now being hit for the first time by business rates bills, making their survival marginal at best. May we have a debate on why it is that music venues and music festivals now seem to be being picked on for business rates and other costs by the Government, when they contribute so much to our wellbeing and our economy?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman, first, for his observation about the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). I think we have plumbed new depths in terms of his desirability. It is a very cruel observation, but I will check the photographs and see whether it is true. Perhaps I will report back next Thursday with my observations.

On the serious matter of music venues and business rates, I think the hon. Gentleman may be referring to the applicability or otherwise of tax reliefs, which have recently been announced, in relation to business rates. They typically apply to pubs, but currently I do not think they necessarily always apply to music venues. On music festivals, I am not familiar with exactly how the business rating system works in that respect. These are both matters for the Treasury, specifically the Financial Secretary to the Treasury. If he would like to drop me a line, I would be very happy to facilitate a meeting with the Financial Secretary to discuss them.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Following on from the question from the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), I have previously raised the issue of understanding pension credit and doing more to promote it. After the launch of the independent “Credit where it’s due” campaign yesterday, I was shocked to find out that £5 million was not being claimed by pensioners in my constituency. I ask the Leader of the House to find time for a debate and not to refer us to DWP questions—there needs to be a debate so that we can highlight this issue. It affects not just one or two Members, but Members right across the House, so can we please have a debate on this important issue to ensure that pensioners receive the benefits and pension credit that they deserve?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman has quite fairly pressed me to go a little further than I did in answering the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), inasmuch as he points out that this is quite a
wide-ranging issue. I point him to DWP questions on Monday—it is worth being there to ask a question on that point—but equally, perhaps he would consider applying for a Westminster Hall debate. [\textit{Interruption.}]

\textbf{Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab):} As a fellow hay fever sufferer, I send my best wishes to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, because you are obviously suffering from the high pollen count today.

Can we have a statement before the summer recess on progress in the infected blood inquiry? We know that a victim dies on average every four days and that the inquiry will probably not finish for another couple of years. Along with seven Opposition party leaders, I have requested the Prime Minister, and the two people who are standing to be the next Prime Minister, to commit to providing compensation now rather than waiting for two years, when we know that so many more people will die. Can we please have an interim statement?

\textbf{Mel Stride:} The hon. Lady has put an enormous amount of work into the whole issue of infected blood and highlighting how important it is, and she should be congratulated on that. On compensation, the best way to take that forward would be a meeting with a Minister, and I would be very happy to facilitate a meeting with the appropriate Minister so that she can discuss those issues.

\textbf{Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op):} The blistering incompetence of the independent members of Stoke-on-Trent City Council is becoming legendary across Staffordshire. Their most recent wheeze is to instruct a secondary school in my constituency, Birches Head high school, to increase the number of children that it takes but not to provide a single penny of capital funding to build the classrooms for the children to work in, forcing the school to cancel its in-house bus transportation scheme for the rest of the school to make budgets work. Can we have a statement at some point, perhaps from the Department for Education, on the sustainability of capital investment in school buildings, and perhaps a debate on a fit-and-proper-person test for cabinet members such as Ann James and Janine Bridges and whether they are fit to run cabinet, executive-level positions in any authority?

\textbf{Mel Stride:} I do not think I will get too drawn into the—how shall I put it?—cross-fire of the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised in respect of Stoke-on-Trent City Council, other than to say that if the hon. Gentleman writes to me about the general matter of capital investment in schools, I will be very happy to have a close look at whether a debate might be appropriate or whether I might suggest facilitating a meeting with an appropriate Minister.

\textbf{Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab):} It was announced to the press this morning that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has appointed Henry Dimbleby to lead on a food review that will result in the publication of a national food strategy next year. A lot of us have been very excited about this and have spoken to Henry about it, but I am quite disappointed—particularly given the Environment Secretary’s fondness for appearing at the Dispatch Box—that we have not had a statement on that, nor have we even had a written ministerial statement. It is another example of things being announced in the press and not here. Will the Leader of the House lure the Environment Secretary to the Dispatch Box next week?

\textbf{Mel Stride:} The Environment Secretary should be congratulated on all that he is doing in this area. I know that he takes it extremely seriously, and the appointment that has been made is an extremely good one. None the less, the hon. Lady is urging us to make a statement. Her remarks will have been heard by the Secretary of State, and if she wanted me to help to facilitate a meeting with a Minister in that Department to discuss the national food strategy, I would be very happy to do that.

\textbf{Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab):} There is a heatwave rolling across Europe, with record June temperatures recorded in Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic. Yesterday we saw huge numbers of people from across our communities—30 or so from my constituency—travel to Westminster to lobby MPs about the urgent need to respond to the climate emergency that we as a Parliament have declared. May we therefore have a debate, in Government time, on the role that tidal energy could play as part of the UK’s future energy mix? There are many projects all the way along the west coast, from Solway to Somerset, but I am particularly interested in the potential for tidal energy on the River Wyre at Fleetwood.

\textbf{Mel Stride:} The hon. Lady makes an important point, and she is right to refer to yesterday’s gathering of people from across the country to underline the importance of global warming and the need for renewable energy, including tidal energy. She will be aware that we are now the leading economy to commit to net zero carbon emissions by 2050. We have also reduced emissions by 25% since 2010, we have now had the longest period of producing power without the use of coal since the industrial revolution, and we are seeing more and more energy being generated from renewables. I think that tidal energy would be a very good subject for an Adjournment debate.
Point of Order

11.36 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have given Mr Speaker’s office notice of my intention to raise this matter. Yesterday, during Prime Minister’s questions, the Prime Minister not once but twice made an assertion that was not only inaccurate—she might have been misinformed—but really damaging. She twice asserted that Labour peers were attempting to stop the legislation needed for the net zero carbon emissions target. That is categorically not the case. The noble Lord Grantchester had tabled a motion of regret as an amendment to the statutory instrument, and his intention was not to block it, but to improve it along the lines that I was asking the Prime Minister about. I was attempting to make a clear stand so that the members of the public outside yesterday could hear some sort of cross-party consensus, which is what I had been hoping for. I was disappointed that what the Prime Minister said was not just an attempt to make political capital; it was also not the case.

I do not wish to imply that the Prime Minister deliberately chose to mislead the House—I am sure that is not the case—but she has now had adequate opportunity to correct the record, and I understand that has not happened. I therefore seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, on what I can do to ensure that the record is corrected, and not only in a timely manner, but with as much publicity as Prime Minister’s questions allows.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving notice of her intention to raise this matter and, as I understand it, also informing the Prime Minister’s office. She will know that I am not responsible for the accuracy or otherwise of answers given by Ministers at the Dispatch Box. She asks me how she might achieve a correction of the record. She has given her account of the matter and drawn the House’s attention to exchanges in the House of Lords yesterday, which may be relevant. If she wishes to pursue the matter directly with the Prime Minister, she can consider tabling further such questions—the Table Office will be happy to advise her on that. In the meantime, those on the Treasury Bench will have heard her comments, and she has obviously put her point on the record.

Backbench Business

Co-operative and Mutual Businesses

11.39 am

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the contribution of co-operative and mutual businesses to the UK economy; notes that they provide substantial jobs in Britain, generate significant tax revenues and involve consumers and employees in decision making; and calls on the Government to review what further steps it can take to help grow that sector.

It is a pleasure to move the motion in this, the first week of Co-operatives Fortnight. Co-operative and mutual businesses—from retail giants such as John Lewis, Nationwide and the Co-operative Group through to social enterprises, credit unions, energy co-ops, community banks, childcare co-ops, friendly insurers and housing co-operatives—offer a route map to a more democratic and fairer economy. Co-ops and mutuals exist already in every sector of the economy, from financial services to housing, food retailing, public services and sport, supplying affordable and sustainable services to consumers, providing rewarding work and strengthening community enterprise.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My hon. Friend has mentioned financial services. Does he agree that building societies in particular provide an excellent service on the high street? High street banks have vacated many communities en masse, but building societies are a mainstay, and are gaining more business and better understanding from consumers because they are there to support them week in, week out.

Gareth Thomas: That is an extremely good point. Building societies are one part of a co-op and mutual movement that already has a combined income of more than £133 billion, with assets worth many billions more. It is a serious and significant part of our economy, yet all too often Government, regulators, policy makers and thinkers dismiss its huge potential for expansion—expansion that could help to challenge wage stagnation, widening inequality and our growing environmental crisis.

Co-ops and mutuals put economic power in the hands of ordinary people, and, remarkably, those ordinary people, supported by skilful management, can be entrepreneurial, highly productive, and visionary—who knew? There are those on the right who criticise co-ops and mutuals for being some sort of left-wing throwback to the 1970s, and dangerously radical; and there are those on the hard left who think that they are not public ownership at its best, but just a front for business as usual. More generous critics take a benevolent, paternalistic approach, tolerating co-ops and mutuals until bigger, more serious players in the City or the unions enter the room.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent start to what I am sure is going to be a great speech, but may I suggest to him that co-ops are, in fact, dangerous? They undermine the existing order, and empower people to take charge of their own lives. They are dangerous, and they should be.
Gareth Thomas: I was about to say something that I hope my hon. Friend will be able to support even more wholeheartedly. I have always believed that co-ops and mutuals are the future: that they spread wealth and power more fairly, that they strengthen British-owned business, that they provide competition and choice for consumers in a range of critical markets, that they create diversity and enterprise, that they take a long-term view, and that they are a counter to the short-termitist, riskier business models loved by City editors. We in this great Chamber should surely be able to allow our communities to direct and influence the economies that surround them and on which they depend.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend join me in supporting agricultural co-operatives, which play an important role in trying to bring about that is to say, create indivisible reserves—which cannot also allow mutuals to issue permanent investment shares—without demutualising. Clearly we need to protect this unique governance model but moment do the latter without demutualising. Clearly started. Big corporations can access large investment in accessing finance for expansion, and indeed for getting different ownership models they often have real difficulty reserved to co-ops and mutuals, but because of their expertise on the sector in the civil service are the key more Whitehall efforts to raise a wareness and more further legislative reform, better Government funding, my view, but much more is possible. Access to capital, forces personnel. Those are two remarkable stories, inproblem of payday lenders who prey on our armed make. They were established after a long campaign by powerful example of the difference that co-ops can run by Redwood Housing Co-op, subject to some of the size of the sector from between 4% and 5% of GDP to 10%.

The Oxo Tower on London’s South Bank was redeveloped by the enterprise Coin Street Community Builders. It now contains five floors of social housing run by Redwood Housing Co-op, subject to some of the lowest rents in the capital while being in one of London’s prime spots. Armed forces credit unions are another powerful example of the difference that co-ops can make. They were established after a long campaign by the Co-operative party, and are helping to combat the problem of payday lenders who prey on our armed forces personnel. Those are two remarkable stories, in my view, but much more is possible. Access to capital, further legislative reform, better Government funding, more Whitehall efforts to raise awareness and more expertise on the sector in the civil service are the key asks of Britain’s co-op and mutual sector.

I appreciate that finance is not an issue or problem reserved to co-ops and mutuals, but because of their different ownership models they often have real difficulty in accessing finance for expansion, and indeed for getting started. Big corporations can access large investment through debt funding or, crucially, can create capital by selling shares. Co-operatives and mutuals cannot at the moment do the latter without demutualising. Clearly we need to protect this unique governance model but also allow mutuals to issue permanent investment shares—that is to say, create indivisible reserves—which cannot be distributed to members even beyond the lifetime of the mutual. The European Union states offer this already in their mutual and co-operative legal set-ups, and a further five EU states have it in a slightly different form, yet in the UK we do not offer this route to raising significant finance for co-ops and mutuals.

Such a form of co-op and mutual share capital would offer stronger protection against demutualisation and therefore maintain and enhance corporate diversity. Above all else it would allow co-ops and mutuals to compete in the marketplace with other big businesses without one hand tied behind their back. In the UK building societies have a version of this already, called core capital deferred shares, which allows them to access capital markets without risking their mutual nature, but other financial mutuals and co-ops in the UK do not have anything like that.

Outside the EU, Desjardins in Quebec has raised more than $4 billion through this route, and Australia passed legislation on 5 April this year allowing its co-ops and mutuals to issue share capital while protecting their co-operative and mutual nature. If the Australians can do it, if most of Europe can do it, and if British building societies have it already, why should not British co-operatives and other mutuals also be allowed to raise finance in this way?

I recognise that the Minister and his officials have looked at this once already in the light of Lord Naseby’s successful Bill in the other place, and indeed my own and mutuals’ representations, but I hope he might be persuaded, particularly given that similar legislation is now on the statute book in Australia, to bring key experts in this area together with officials again to try to find a resolution to the problems that have stopped this method of raising finance being allowed in the UK. The Co-operative Group, other retail co-op societies, Co-operatives UK, friendly insurers and the Building Societies Association all support progress on this issue, and I urge the Minister, who has been sympathetic to co-operatives and mutuals in the past, to be willing to take a fresh look at this.

Britain’s co-op and mutual movement suffers from a lack of dedicated banking funds. Across Europe, dedicated mutual or co-op banks exist, are highly profitable and have been around for ages. I have long thought that the Royal Bank of Scotland could and should be converted into a mutual to help address this gap in the UK and to challenge the continuing big banking monopoly in the City. The Minister may not yet be ready to join me in making that jump, so perhaps I can ask him to explore whether the British Business Bank might begin to have a dedicated mutual growth fund to encourage the setting up of new mutuals.

Responsible Finance, an excellent organisation that champions Britain’s existing community banks, highlights the need for dedicated finance for start-up worker co-ops. There is at present an absence of patient capital or capital blended with grants to reduce investment risk for start-up worker co-ops. A dedicated fund would enable specialist co-op lenders to take a higher level of risk in this area and mean that more capital would be available.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that almost all start-up businesses have difficulty in accessing finance but that,

27 JUNE 2019
ironically, it is more difficult for co-ops, notwithstanding the fact that the survival rate of starter co-ops over five years is almost double that of other businesses? That is an anomaly that we would reasonably expect the financial services market to correct.

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I pay tribute to the work of programmes such as Co-op UK’s Hive programme, the resources that are available from Stir to Action, some of the local measures that we have seen in Manchester and Preston, and Social Investment Business’s mutual Reach Fund, but these are all relatively small-scale and need to be scaled up.

The Minister will not be surprised to hear me—and, I suspect, other hon. Members—urge the introduction of further legislative reform to help credit unions offer more services to their members and enable them to invest their members’ money in an expanded range of ways to generate a return for savers. Credit unions are the most active, responsible lenders to the poorest and most financially vulnerable and excluded people in the UK, but they are held back from doing more by outdated legislation and a digital approach to regulation by the Financial Conduct Authority.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I declare my interest as a former director of the Staffordshire credit union, which sadly went bust because the FCA’s misunderstanding of the difference between the capital reserves we had to hold and the sustainability of our loan book meant that we could never meet its ever increasing targets and thresholds. That has left a number of former consumers unable to access even the basic banking arrangements that we offered, and I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend’s comments about the way in which the FCA regulates. It needs to better understand what credit unions are, and how they differ from commercial high street banks.

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. There needs to be a significant culture change in the FCA’s approach to credit unions and other financial mutuals. I recognise that there has been some Government support—and, indeed, the Minister has been helpful in ensuring that the FCA’s approach to mutuals is justified.

Mr Sheerman: I do not usually stand up for the FCA’s approach to co-ops, notwithstanding the fact that the survival rate of starter co-ops over five years is almost double that of other businesses? That is an anomaly that we would reasonably expect the financial services market to correct.

As the Association of British Credit Unions Ltd and the Building Societies Association have noted, new primary legislation for credit unions could allow them to provide additional services at an affordable price in areas such as house insurance, where consumers often pay a premium if they pay on a monthly basis. Under the Credit Unions Act 1979, credit unions are permitted to offer credit to their members in the form of a loan, but the Financial Conduct Authority has taken a strict and literal view of this, limiting credit unions to offering cash loans. ABcUL and credit unions such as Plane Saver and London Mutual have noted that credit unions could provide an affordable and responsible alternative to a number of other consumer credit markets, such as secured car lending. Indeed, one credit union highlighted to me that the FCA had effectively stopped it offering an alternative to the high-cost credit that BrightHouse locks its customers into when they cannot afford to pay outright for basics such as cookers and fridges.

There should be a legal right for payroll deduction to join a credit union to be available to an employee if they desire it. I hope the Minister will ask his officials to check that every branch of the Government offers payroll deduction to join a credit union if civil servants want that facility. There should also be a requirement for the Department for Work and Pensions, local authorities and housing associations to signpost those in need to credit unions to help them avoid the payday loan companies and illegal lenders who prey on our most vulnerable people. Further help to allow credit unions to invest in new technology, so that they can provide a good digital offer, is key.

Greater understanding of the needs of the co-op and mutual sector by the civil service, and across all parts of Government, is important, and the Treasury is in a good position to facilitate such an awareness-raising effort. In Homes England, for example, a dedicated group of staff could promote and help housing co-operatives. A co-operative development agency could be tasked with promoting interest in co-ops and mutual entrepreneurialism across the country. The Treasury should be able to check that Government funding announcements do not discriminate against co-operative and mutual models. Co-op schools and energy co-ops have not been helped at key moments. Finally, why oh why are the Government not doing more to promote employee ownership trusts—a move they announced in the 2014 Budget—as a way of enabling the owners of companies to get the exit they want, realising the value of their business while securing its ethos, values and employees for the future?

The Government have sought to dispose of unwanted buildings and other land, but some of that should be allocated for sale or transfer for co-operative housing. We need more community land trusts to lock down ownership of land for those who need it most, and I will give just one example, with Armed Forces Day this Saturday in mind. In the US, homeless veterans are being helped into homes built on donated Government land, subsidised by Government funding and run as housing co-operatives. That has given veterans the chance to take control of the environment, rules, regulations and rents that they live by and pay, while getting proper support to rebuild their lives.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he accept that community land trusts have a particular benefit in rural areas, where they can provide cheaper or affordable
housing? Does he agree that we need to examine how planning rules can encourage, rather than disadvantage, community land trusts in such settings?

Gareth Thomas: I do agree, and I hope that my hon. Friend will catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, to develop that point further.

Soldier On, a US veterans charity, opened the Gordon H. Mansfield veterans community in the autumn of 2017, with 51 homeless veterans moving in. Those veterans received not just the keys to their own apartment in a housing co-operative, but the keys to a new life away from the danger and insecurity of the streets. Soldier On has 14 new units under construction and is looking to develop 100 more units in New York and a further 70 in New Jersey. That model of housing co-ops on, probably, donated Government land could work in the UK and should be happening here. I gently ask the Treasury to encourage the Ministry of Defence to stop some of the sales of the almost 50 empty properties of which it is trying to dispose.

Co-operatives and mutuals are a great British success story, but they could be an even bigger one. I urge the House and the Government to embrace the sector and to champion the doubling in size of its contribution to our economy.

11.58 am

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): It is a great pleasure and a privilege to follow the lead of the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas). I sometimes disappoint him in other matters, but I salute his work on furthering the co-operative movement.

I will never forget the moment when I fell in love with the principles and ideas of the co-operative and mutual movement. Shortly after my election, I had been encouraged to study a book called “Working-Class Patients and the Medical Establishment” by David Green, who now runs the Civitas think-tank, and the moment that I mention came when I read this quote—I hope that Members will for the moment when I read this quote—I hope that Members will forgive the old-fashioned language—from the Oddfellows Magazine in the 1889 of the passage of the National Insurance Act 1911:

“What makes co-ops different is how they allow people to democratically own and control the things that really make a difference—like capital, organisation and scale—so that these create real value for people and planet. They are one of the best tools we have for applying social responsibility, solidarity and democracy in a market setting.”

Perhaps it is that language of solidarity and democracy in the market that frightens off some of my Conservative colleagues, which I very much regret.

The Rochdale principles of the movement’s founding pioneers talk of open membership; democratic control—one person, one vote—not based on share ownership; distribution of surplus in proportion to trade, which is economic participation; payment of limited interest on capital; political and religious neutrality; cash trading, so that people do not get into credit trouble on the basics; and the promotion of education.

Those principles have of course been refined by the International Co-operative Alliance to open and voluntary membership; democratic governance; limited return on equity; surplus belonging to members; the education of members and the public in co-operative principles; my goodness, we could do with more of that; and co-operation between co-operatives.

If we accept, and I am afraid that today it is a question of if, that prices, profit and loss are the only way to co-ordinate a global society of billions of people, and if we accept that we must live in a free market society to best serve one another, it is time to look at civil society—that great panoply of institutions between the individual and the state—and ask how that inclusive spirit of free enterprise shared by mutuals and co-operatives can help to rebuild people’s faith not only in a market economy but in government. We therefore need to recapture the Rochdale principles, and I encourage my colleagues on the Treasury Bench to think carefully about how a Conservative Government can stand for some of these principles in a market economy.

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman and I are bitter opponents over the UK’s future in Europe, but we sometimes put that to one side. We are working together on a new initiative called FairLife—he knows I agree with the Rochdale principles—to open up the system so that people know they are getting a fair deal on financial services, just as they know they are buying ethical products through Fairtrade.

Mr Baker: I always enjoy my moments of agreement with the hon. Gentleman, and of course regret those moments when we disagree. Hopefully I will persuade him one day of the correctness of my cause in that other matter.

Co-operatives and mutuals, throughout the history of society, have played a really important role in standing against tyranny and monopoly power, whether it was the Rochdale pioneers providing good-quality food for themselves, their families and their children or, as I discovered in my research, the African-American communities that used co-ops and mutuals during the despicable Jim Crow era to provide aid to one another when they were denied it by the state, whether through unjust laws or extra-legally. I am advised that the Mondragon co-operatives were founded in the Basque country partly as a response to the oppression of Franco.
More recently, Taxiapp allows drivers in London to fight back against the competition of Uber. Of course, farmers co-operate through co-operatives in a way that should be expanded.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the fantastic work of Drive, the new taxi co-operative in Cardiff? In Wales we call on Drive to take us somewhere, which is exactly what it does. The co-operative is a response to some of the practices of the private-sector hire, the influence of Uber and others. It is doing fantastic work, supported by the Wales Co-operative Centre.

Mr Baker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that, as I was not aware of Drive—I shall certainly Google it after this debate.

We need to ask ourselves why, given all the benefits of co-operatives and mutuals, they have not advanced further. They flourish, but why have they not advanced further? I was reflecting on why the Thatcher Government of my youth did not understand the great value that could come through inclusive free market participation with co-ops. They never got as far as embracing mutuality. That language of “solidarity” and “democratic participation” perhaps frightens off Conservatives. For too long, we have been afraid of some of these ideas of the left, and a more communitarian and voluntarist Conservative party should be embracing this idea of equality and market participation, not exclusively but as an important component of our society. I once heard the term “a parastatal”, and I wonder whether the idea of an enormous “The Co-op”—that enormous group of co-operatives—frightened off Conservative Governments in the past. I am encouraged that the “Open Public Services” White Paper of the coalition years makes provision for more mutuality in public services. I very much hope that when we get past our current distractions we might return to some of those ideas.

It has been suggested to me that one reason the Thatcher Government were not very good at embracing co-operatives was the preceding Labour Government’s failed attempts in the ’70s to turn failing companies into co-ops or co-op-like entities. Although I philosophically really embrace the hon. Member for Harrow West’s ideas about turning RBS into a co-op, and he and I have previously discussed the idea of Channel 4 becoming a co-op—

Mr Sheerman rose—

Mr Baker: I will just finish the point. Enormous sums of capital are involved, particularly in relation to banks, so I have some misgivings that we might repeat the errors of the past. With that, I, of course, accept the hon. Gentleman’s help.

Mr Sheerman: Let me help the hon. Gentleman on the history, because I knew Margaret Thatcher and her attitude to co-ops. We have to remember that she was the daughter of a small shopkeeper and traditionally saw the Co-op as the great competitor. She had an old-fashioned view of co-ops and what they meant, and she would never shop in one; there was a tradition that those on the radical side did not shop in co-ops, because they were the competition. I hope that that bit of history adds to his knowledge.

The proposals from Co-operatives UK include:

“Rather than giving all the funding and power to LEPs”—local enterprise partnerships, in England—

the government could commit 25 per cent of the new UK Shared Prosperity Fund for community development”.

The Government should certainly consider that, along with encouraging LEPs to look seriously at the role of co-ops in their local communities through local industrial strategies.
Co-operatives UK proposes that there should be a social-investment tax relief, suggesting that we should:

"Use the current review of Social Investment Tax Relief to make it more supportive of Community Shares, by making community investment in land and real estate, housing development, sustainable agriculture and renewable energy eligible."

It also suggests employee ownership tax support and help for co-ops with making tax digital, which is something of a curse on a number of small businesses.

I have reservations about the idea of dormant assets being used to support co-ops. My concern is related not to co-ops, but to the idea that dormant assets are someone’s property. We should be a little cautious there, but Co-operatives UK has made that recommendation. It also proposes legal reform to ensure that we bring things up to date and support co-ops in the law.

At this time of great political turmoil, not only in the UK but in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Greece and the USA, we need to think extremely seriously about the institutions that we have and how to make them flourish. A great and wise defender of the liberal market order once wrote:

"Society is co-operation; it is community in action."

I very much hope that, through the kind of collaboration we see in the House today, we might one day educate Members of Parliament and the public as to what that idea of society as co-operation really means, and through doing that reinvigorate our society and better fit it for the future.

12.12 pm

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): It gives me great pleasure to follow that rather enlightened speech by my friend, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker). As I said in my earlier intervention, we work together on the FairLife initiative, which shows the children present today that sometimes we work positively across party lines; we do not just disagree over Brexit or other things.

I suppose my admission today is that as a young academic teaching at Swansea University, I got involved in learning about worker co-operatives and wrote an article about them. I got so enthused that I started to set up worker co-operatives. Eventually, someone said to me, “You’re very political and interested in co-operatives; why don’t you join the Co-operative party?” and I said, “What is the Co-operative party?” The person said to me, “Come down to a Co-operative party meeting at the Elysium buildings”, which were by the railway station in Swansea. It was a pouring wet night—we specialise in those in Swansea—and I got down to this meeting and came out as the secretary. You will understand, Madam Deputy Speaker, how politics works in that sense. I have been a co-operator ever since.

I have also been a bit of a dissonant voice, because I have always called into question the idea of having a single view of co-operation. We all look at Google these days, and when I did I saw this definition of a co-operative:

“A farm, business, or other organization which is owned and run jointly by its members, who share the profits or benefits.”

It is a simple thing, but it is also the most liberating thing I can think of in terms of the politics that I do, because it is absolutely the kind of politics that says, “Politics is not just about general elections, referendums or the big scale; it is about ordinary people deciding that they are going to take control of their own lives and that they are not going to be manipulated.”

I do not want to go too much into the history, but we all know that the industrial revolution pulled people off the rural economy—the farms and the life they knew—and into awful conditions in the factory towns of Britain. They had to shop at the company store: the company not only employed them, but paid them in its own currency so that they could shop only at the company shop. That was called truck. The Truck Acts passed by this House banned the practice of companies having their own currency.

Co-operatives sprung up—one could see at least 50 co-operatives from Castle Hill in Huddersfield. They started as local communities saying, “We are going to be able to buy fresh, good food that isn’t overpriced, and we are going to take control of that by setting up a retail co-operative.” Members will know the old principle: people used to put in a pound and they would have a share, so they were a shareowner in that co-operative. People were then employed to run the co-operative.

I have a criticism of that model. It is a good model, and by the 1950s most people shopped in co-ops. The co-operative retail movement was so powerful that it was the major retailer in our country. Indeed, in 1917, when Lloyd George was Prime Minister and the co-operative shops were not getting their fair share of flour and sugar because the Germans were blockading Britain, people marched down to Westminster Hall and started the Co-operative party. The biggest retail movement in Britain was not getting a fair share. Very soon, the Co-operative party came to an agreement with the Labour party that we would never stand candidates against each other, which is why there is a Labour and Co-operative wing of the labour movement.

That is the history, but let me bring things up to date, because that was an important lesson. People’s lives were in turmoil: the whole social and economic nature of the country changed in the 18th century and into the 19th century. There was radical change, and radical change is now happening again in respect of the assured ways of life. People thought they were going to get a job and probably have it for life, working in the public services or at a big company. In questions this morning there was mention of someone having worked for ICI—Imperial Chemical Industries. I worked for ICI. It is long gone, but many of the people with whom I worked at ICI worked there for life. It was the norm that people joined a company and, although perhaps they would change their job once or twice, by and large the structure of life was stable and secure. That stability and security has largely disappeared for many of the people we represent in this House.

We have to come to terms with things and to change. Human beings are quite good at responding and saying, “This is really difficult; let’s do something to mitigate this and take control of our lives.” What happened during the industrial revolution? Working people set up trade unions to represent them, and housing associations and mutuals—a whole range of things. They set up mutuals and co-ops to make sure that people could have a holiday with their family once a year. They set up mutuals to make sure that people had money for Christmas presents and other big occasions, when they could get their dividend. People set up co-ops for burial, and the
Co-op is still today a big player in that sector. They covered holidays, funerals and all those sorts of things. What is the great cause today? It is housing. Young people, and even people on reasonable incomes, cannot get a foothold in the housing market. In the current circumstances, why are we not going back to those mutual and co-operative ideas to meet that need?

All that brings me to the second part of my speech, although I do not want to keep the House’s attention for too long. As life is changing radically, the opportunities are changing. I am a long-term social entrepreneur: since I have been in this business, I have started more than 50 different social enterprises. A lot of social enterprise is about asking people for money, and it is difficult. It is tough. As a member of the court of governors of the London School of Economics, I was befuddled, because every time we hired a fundraiser, they did not even make enough money to pay the wages of the fundraising team. Eventually, we hired a young American woman—I think she was called Sally Blair—who raised tens of millions of pounds. People gave us whole blocks of buildings around the LSC in Holborn. She was the most magnificent fundraiser. I said, “Sally, why is it that you have been so successful?” She said, “I am an American. If you’re an English fundraiser, you ask someone for some money, and if they say no, you go and sulk forever. We ask seven times, and put a person on the back burner only after the seventh time.”

As a social entrepreneur and a co-operator, I was in the business of asking people for money for good causes, and it was hard. Then we had the big financial crisis. George Osborne always used to say that the Labour party had caused a worldwide breakdown in modern capitalism. I used to say to him that I wished that we were that powerful. The issue was actually something to do with international banking and the corrupt way that banking had emerged.

The point I want to make is that technology has changed the opportunities for raising money for co-operation. I chair the Westminster Crowdfunding Forum. Social media can achieve immediate results. For example, if someone has an idea for a co-operative, they could raise money worldwide. They could identify a particular need in Yorkshire, in Huddersfield, or even in your own constituency of Doncaster, Madam Deputy Speaker. The technology presents us with an amazing opportunity.

Stephen Doughty: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I completely agree with him about those challenges of raising money to get new social enterprises and co-operatives off the ground. In that regard, crowdfunding is a way forward, absolutely, but it also needs leadership from Government. Does he welcome what the Welsh Government have done in the past few days in announcing a new £3 million fund for the Social Business Wales New Start initiative to kick-start hundreds of new social enterprises and co-operatives across Wales? It was, in fact, launched at a restaurant called The Clink, which is next to Cardiff prison and is itself a social enterprise. Does he agree that that is exactly what the Government should be doing—kick-starting the co-operative economy in the UK?

Mr Sheerman: I was amused by that intervention because, of course, my origins in co-operation are in Wales. It is a delight to hear about that initiative. There is also a Clink in London—in Pentonville I think.

The point that I am trying to make is that there are new opportunities. I got fed up talking about co-operation and how wonderful it was. I worked with John Smith, who was a passionate supporter of co-operatives and who started the Co-operative Commission with an international committee on mutuals. We had lots of debates and we set up the Co-operative Development Agency. The problem now is that the co-operative movement is too conservative these days. It clings to the old model, the basics and the values of which are right, but sometimes, I think, we miss the point.

When I went into Co-op shops, I felt that the conditions for the workers were worse than those in Woolworth’s, Asda or Morrisons, which was wrong. I made myself unpopular when I said, “Why don’t we do what John Lewis does?” John Lewis, as I am sure everyone on the Government Benches know, is a workers’ co-operative; it is owned by the workers. They call them partners, but it is a workers’ co-operative; and it works and it is successful. It is still doing relatively well even with all the pressure on the high street. So, we have to be critical about the co-operative model and we have to modify it, but, essentially, we have to energise the workers. Worker co-operation is essential if we are to make an organisation work. That blend of everyone having a share as a consumer along with measures to energise the staff is absolutely the way forward.

Finally, now that we have all these new opportunities—we have not only crowdfunding and crowdsourcing, but blockchain and digital currency—there are real possibilities for transforming the economy big time, not little time. I am not talking about a couple of small shops or a couple of little start-ups; we need massively new ways of doing business. If those new ways of doing business are rooted in empowering people as individuals and as communities, a brilliant future will lie ahead.

The flag of the co-operative movement worldwide is now that we have all these new opportunities—we have not only crowdfunding and crowdsourcing, but blockchain and digital currency—there are real possibilities for transforming the economy big time, not little time. I am not talking about a couple of small shops or a couple of little start-ups; we need massively new ways of doing business. If those new ways of doing business are rooted in empowering people as individuals and as communities, a brilliant future will lie ahead.

The flag of the co-operative movement worldwide is a rainbow of colours. The United Nations has understood the power of our co-operative ideals to transform people’s lives not only in wealthy countries such as the United Kingdom and in Europe, but across the world. If we are to do something to stop what is happening in central America—the tragic picture of that father and little girl was still in my mind this morning—and if we are to bring wealth and power to people who do not have it at the moment, co-operation must be at the very heart of what we do.

Let me finish by saying that co-operation is wonderful, it must be updated and forward looking, and it has got to be, in the best sense, empowering and revolutionary.

12.26 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As always, it is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman). I thank the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) for bringing forward this really important debate.
Over the years that I have been in business and, indeed, in this House, I have come to see more and more the importance of the co-operative and mutual movement. Perhaps some Members know this, but I wonder how many people know which bank in the world is top of global sustainability ratings. It is Rabobank, a co-operative bank from the Netherlands, which, last year, had a net income of €3 billion and a balance sheet of more than €40 billion. That shows that a co-operative can be a global player. I have had the honour of working with the Rabobank Foundation in Tanzania where they supported a shallow well drilling project, which my wife was helping to run. I also have seen its work in other countries both as a commercial entity and through its magnificent foundation. That is one thing that a co-operative bank on that scale can do; it can give back enormous sums to the communities in which it works, both through better and cheaper services, financial services in this case, and also through supporting community work.

Further afield across Europe in Switzerland, the two biggest retail groups are both co-operatives: the Co-op itself and Migros, which has more than 100,000 employees. They show how co-operatives can work on a major scale and provide great benefit to their communities and to their staff.

On the international scale, I want to draw attention to Fairtrade, which I have been involved in for many, many years. Without the co-operative movement in the United Kingdom and, indeed, across Europe, Fairtrade would simply not be where it is. We need to remember that the UK has the greatest level of sales of Fairtrade goods of any country in the world—more than £2 billion a year—and the co-operative movement deserves huge credit for that.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Is he also aware of the role that the co-operative movement and co-operative MPs have played, along with MPs from across the House in the all-party group for Fairtrade, in highlighting corporates, such as Sainsbury’s, that are trying to downgrade the role of Fairtrade products? We highlighted the fact that it was selling tea that it called “fairly traded” which was not Fairtrade tea. It is not only about boosting Fairtrade globally, but about defending its position. That is at the very heart of the co-operative principle.

Jeremy Lefroy: I welcome what the hon. Gentleman says, and he is absolutely right. I would say that Sainsbury’s has also been a strong supporter of Fairtrade, but we do not want to see any dilution or diminution of those principles. Fairtrade is like a brand. People will pay that bit extra because they know that what they are buying has been reliably sourced from farmers or other producers who have been properly paid for their work. It is a brand like any other brand, but it is more than that; it is something that we have to have trust in, and we do not want to see any diminution of that at all.

I want to talk briefly about the role of co-operatives in financial services, in three specific areas. First, my constituency is home to the excellent Stafford Railway Building Society, which was founded in 1877. It is local and exists to provide mortgages to local people. It was set up, obviously, by the railway workers of Stafford—Stafford is one of the major railway junctions in the whole UK rail network—and it is still there, providing excellent financial services, profitably, to my constituents and the near neighbourhood. I pay tribute to all those who have made it what it is, because people give up a lot of their time to serve on the board or as staff in the building society. Particular credit goes to Mike Heenan, a friend of mine who was very much involved in the building society for many years; Susan Whiting, who took over from him as the chief executive; and the current board and management of the building society.

Stafford Railway Building Society will be around for the next decade, two decades and three decades, because it is run responsibly and its capital is built up every year as it does not have to pay dividends. Where it can help is by providing cheaper and better services to its members through the retention of that capital.

The second area I want to discuss is credit unions, which have already been mentioned by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell). I declare an interest in that I was a member of the Staffordshire credit union and was very sad indeed when it closed. I have to give credit where it is due; it was closed in a responsible manner and people got their investments back, but it was very sad that it had to happen. I ask the Government to look at why such an important local institution has to close because of regulation. We all know that there has to be regulation, but are there ways in which regulations could be changed so that they would not have such a dramatic effect on a very important and loved local institution? I very much hope that we will see the return of a Staffordshire credit union at some point in the near future.

The third area where the co-operative and mutual movement has a very important role to play is in small business finance, but it is not able to do that enough at the moment. The Co-operative Bank clearly has an excellent record in lending and providing accounts for small business, but the co-operative and mutual movement should have a much greater role to play in the provision of loans to start-ups or equity capital for small businesses. I pay tribute to the Black Country Reinvestment Society, of which I am a member. The society provides lending to businesses in Staffordshire in my constituency and across the Black Country. It is an excellent institution, but we need more such institutions and we need them to play a greater role in the provision of the equity capital that is so often as important—particularly for modern, high-tech businesses—as the loan capital that they more traditionally provide.

I pay tribute to the role that the co-operative and mutual movement has played in the history and economy of the United Kingdom. All speakers, including my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe have mentioned the fact that it is about not just the money and the business, but the co-operation. It is about building our social fabric—goodness knows we need to bring people together more and more at the moment, in times of quite considerable division. I urge Members on both sides of the House to support mutuals and co-operatives in their constituencies, as I know many do, as much for the fact that they bring people together to work for the benefit of their community as for the undoubted financial and economic benefits that these great movements bring to our country.

12.34 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): What a pleasure it is to contribute to this debate. I congratulate the previous speakers, who have all, in
their own particular ways, not only articulated the benefit of co-operatives, mutuals and so on, but played a part in promoting them during their careers. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Mr Sheerman) is possibly one of the few people, certainly in the Commons Chamber, whose longevity and experience exceeds even that of my own.

I joined the Co-operative party well over 40 years ago. I spent 18 years as a political organiser in the party; first, trying to combat the process of Thatcherism and privatisation; but secondly, I have to say, trying to convince those within my own political party—the Labour party, which is the sister of the Co-operative party—of the benefits of co-operation and mutuality. It is not a fight that has had just one front.

I joined the co-operative movement all those years ago because I saw it as some sort of middle way. It was different from state ownership, which I felt lacked buy-in from both employees and consumers, and which, while it still had a role in our economy, did not satisfy all the values and aspirations that I felt were incorporated within the Labour movement. On the other side was the shareholder proprietary model, under which it seemed to me the benefits of consumers’ purchasing power and employees’ skills were inappropriately spread, with the shareholders getting a far greater benefit from that combination of organisations. Co-operatives, mutuals and employee share ownership companies were, in their own different ways and in their own different sectors, incorporating those values, and locking in the benefit of employees’ skills and consumers’ purchasing power, in a way that reinforced the quality of the businesses they were engaged in.

It is worth reflecting for a few moments on the sheer longevity of some of the businesses involved. As we all know, the co-operative movement started in Rochdale in the 1840s. Even though there is now a much reduced number of co-operative societies—the largest being the Co-operative Group—they all have histories of well over 100 years, with some in excess of 150 years. Building societies similarly started in the middle and later part of the 19th century, and although there has been a process of amalgamation and in some cases privatisation, they are still a huge player in the financial services market. They may be much changed from their origins, but they still incorporate the basic community-based values that we have discussed.

John Lewis is an employee share ownership company that started in the second half of the 19th century. It started giving its employees shares in the 1920s and is still going strong today. When I look at companies being founded nowadays, I wonder how many will still exist in the next 150 or 200 years. The fact that the basic model of co-operation, mutuality and employee share ownership has survived all the social changes and economic vicissitudes over the last 150 to 200 years is a testament to its resilience, adaptability and relevance in the current economy.

Having said all that, there is a recognition that despite the success of some of the major companies in the sector, and the proliferation within the movement of a whole range of co-operatives, we are still not living up to the potential that the model has in our economy. Ironically, the co-operative and mutual sector plays a far greater part in economies such as those of the United States and Germany, which are by no means considered socialist economies. It is reasonable to look at why that is the case and why we have underperformed in our development of this area.

Previous speakers have highlighted some of the barriers that have existed. The raising of finance is a crucial one, although I will not repeat the lucid exposition of that problem by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas). Ironically, the economic rationale for the privatisation of the building societies in the 1980s was their inability to raise capital to expand, so we had that process and we know where it ended up. One cannot help but think that if Governments of that time had looked at providing the financial mechanism by which the building societies could have raised more money, that rationale would have been destroyed. I am not saying that human greed would not still have prevailed in some cases, but it would have been far more difficult to prosecute the case for it.

On company law, the submission by Co-operatives UK and the New Economics Foundation has made it clear that one of the obstacles is an outdated industrial and provident society legal framework. There seems to be a disparity between the way the Government approach this—which is basically not to do much about it, notwithstanding the efforts of my hon. Friend through his private Member’s Bill—and the way in which company law legislation is continually looked at and revised. If it is appropriate for that to be done for the corporate, private sector, why is it not appropriate for the co-operative sector?

Partly as a result of all this, lack of understanding is a big barrier. Ironically, co-ops, building societies and organisations like John Lewis have strong brand identities and public faith in them, yet the public do not really understand what makes those companies different from others, and how, if they wished themselves to organise within a co-operative, they might go about it. We have had a huge proliferation in the number of people going self-employed. Many of those people might well feel that if they knew more about co-operation, they would be better at working with like-minded people in a co-operative structure to deploy their skills even more effectively.

The New Economics Foundation has pointed out that there are some 120,000 family businesses with owners of an age that means that they are likely to retire. Of course, those businesses may go to management buy-outs or be passed on to younger members of the family, and so on. But there should be an opportunity for management to understand and get support for a potential co-operative model in the event of a buy-out post the retirement of the existing owners. The report by the New Economics Foundation points out that if only 5% of the businesses where owners retired went on to co-operative management, that would double the number of such companies. That is a staggering statistic.

Local economic partnerships and other bodies set up to promote business in different areas seem to be either unaware or under-aware of the potential that co-operatives will offer to businesses in their area. This comes back to thinking about a co-operative development agency that would provide a centre for advice and contacts for access to that, and would be proactive in looking for co-operative opportunities. I am encouraged that the Mayors in Manchester, Aberdeen and South Yorkshire are now considering having co-op commissioners with a
brief to look at ways in which they can work with their local regeneration agencies to regenerate under co-operative models.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op):
I congratulate my hon. Friend on outlining the benefits of co-operatives. The Mayor of Greater Manchester has identified that about 160,000 residents of Greater Manchester are members of co-operatives. He says that that offers a huge opportunity, beyond just having a commissioner in place, and has now launched a call for evidence for the people who co-produce whatever model is developed there. That is a good example of working together.

Mr Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for that example, which underlines the point I am making. Given that these local government structures, and the policies that they are adopting, are in their infancy, it demonstrates the potential that might be available in those areas for other local government structures to actively promote co-operation.

Mr Baker: I should have intervened earlier, but I wanted to check something before I put it on the record. A few moments ago, the hon. Gentleman pleaded for updated legislation, pointing out that the industrial and provident society legislation is out of date. I remind the Minister, who I can see is listening very closely to his speech, that in 2010 we promised a co-operatives Bill, but then, when it came forward, it was just a consolidation speech, that in 2010 we promised a co-operatives Bill, but then, when it came forward, it was just a consolidation Bill—a tidying up exercise. I was very disappointed by that, as I expect the hon. Gentleman was. Let me say gently to my hon. Friend the Minister that if we do promise a Bill again, we really must make sure that it is a meaningful Bill that brings the legislation up to date.

Mr Bailey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that example, including from my fellow west midlands Co-op MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), there is a wonderful building society in Stoke-on-Trent called Hanley Economic, which was formed in 1854 and originally called the Staffordshire Potteries Economic Permanent Benefit building society. Its purpose was to enable people who worked in the pottery industry to own a home, get on the housing ladder, have savings and manage their money better. It still exists today. Much like the Stafford Railway building society, it was to enable people who worked in the pottery industry to own a home, get on the housing ladder, have savings and manage their money better. It still exists today. Much like the Stafford Railway building society, it is to at least double it and then go even further with growth of the co-operative and mutual sector in our economy, and the greater good of the United Kingdom. We should also focus on the small co-ops and the little interactions of co-operative goodness that improve the everyday lives of individuals in our communities.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Like many people, my first interaction with the co-operative movement was going to the local Co-op store with my gran when she was doing her weekly shopping. At the end of the walk around the supermarket, the shop assistant would put the things through the till and say, “What’s your divvy number?” and she would say, “207619”. That was her getting her slice of the dividend back. I did not really understand what that was about until I was a bit older, when she explained to me that every Christmas, she got back her dividend from how much she shopped in the Co-op.

I did not think about it much until I reached my teenage years and went to university, where I remember other people talking about it. That number has always stuck with me. I grew up in a relatively poor household, and the Co-op basically funded our Christmas, because my grandmother used the dividend she accrued throughout the year to buy the nice things we had at Christmas that we did not have for the rest of the year. I am sure I am not the only person who has memories of enjoyable Christmases because of the dividend points that their families received through Co-op shopping. That is not something we should dismiss.

There have been a lot of excellent contributions—including from my fellow west midlands Co-op MP, the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey)—about the huge opportunities in the co-operative movement to contribute to our economy, and the greater good of the United Kingdom. We should also focus on the small co-ops and the little interactions of co-operative goodness that improve the everyday lives of individuals in our communities.

Labour has made a commitment to “at least” double the size of the co-operative sector—my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) on the shadow Front Bench will realise that doubling it is not the end point in itself. Our aspiration in government is to at least double it and then go even further with growth of the co-operative and mutual sector in our economy, and I am sure that, having heard the many great contributions today, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury will seek to replicate that.

There are so many great examples. Much like the one described by the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), there is a wonderful building society in Stoke-on-Trent called Hanley Economic, which was formed in 1854 and originally called the Staffordshire Potteries Economic Permanent Benefit building society. Its purpose was to enable people who worked in the pottery industry to own a home, get on the housing ladder, have savings and manage their money better. It still exists today. Much like the Stafford Railway building society, it provides affordable, low-cost, sustainable and ethical financial products for a number of people in north Staffordshire who ordinarily may be viewed by high street banks as being a bit too much of a risk. Because
they can access suitable finance, they are able to make a better life for themselves. By building societies’ own admission, they are not going to change the world or overturn the economic hegemony of our current banking system, but they are making a difference to my constituents every day through the way that they operate and their business model, which is sustainable, ethical and fundamentally about trying to improve individuals’ lives.

That is where I want to add my contribution. I agree with pretty much everything that has been said by Members on both sides of the House about the opportunities if we were to properly unleash the co-operative movement and harness its economic potential. There are other things that we can do with the co-operative model. Someone—I think it was my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), but I do not want to attribute it to him, in case it was not—once talked about drainpipe devolution and the idea that if a decision is made in Westminster and Whitehall by half a dozen people, and then that decision is devolved to half a dozen people in Greater Manchester, the west midlands or north Staffordshire and called devolution for the purpose of devolution, we have not really devolved anything: we have just moved the decision makers to another office. We can harness the co-operative and mutual benefit by expanding the number of people who make the decisions in the first place.

Jim McMahon rose—

Gareth Snell: Perhaps my hon. Friend wants to correct me.

Jim McMahon: My hon. Friend is right. During the EU referendum, people were talking about feeling powerless and wanting to take back control and have more say over their lives. We need to look at public services, and the Co-operative Councils’ Innovation Network is leading on that.

Gareth Snell: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, because he takes me neatly to my next point, which is about learning from good practice on a smaller scale that directly benefits our economy. The Co-operative Councils’ Innovation Network, of which he and I were both members when we were council leaders, demonstrates overwhelmingly what can be done if we put a small amount of investment into local projects. Tudor Evans, who leads the council in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), and Sharon Taylor in Stevenage are just a few examples of people who are pushing this agenda nationally.

If we put a small amount of investment into a group of people who want to change the way that their town works, we can get huge dividends back. If we move away from a simple contractual relationship for a new business towards profit share for rental purposes or an equity share in lieu of rent, we can suddenly start to sustain our high streets better. We can see empty units revitalised by businesses that can think about long-term business planning, rather than short-term business planning to meet next month’s rent and rates bill. We end up with a greater economic benefit to the local community.

If the Government thought about how they could help local authorities to do the sort of work that the Co-operative Councils’ Innovation Network is doing across the country, they would see an increase in potential tax take, because there would be more thriving small businesses. What do we know about thriving small businesses? We know that the people they employ spend their money in the neighbouring shops, and we have a circular economy, whereby one or two different thought processes about how we include more people in decision making in a community leads to economic benefits for not only the Treasury but local communities. That should surely be looked at by this Government or the next Government or as part of Labour’s commitment to at least double the co-operative sector.

The mutualisation argument extends to not only high streets but things such as public services for buses and trains. There is an argument for utilities to be mutualised, because these are things that we all use. If we mutualise and say that the people who use those services should have a stake in the control of them, those services can be driven to a higher quality and standard. There can be financial dividends for the users, but there can also be improvements in standards of delivery, because the people using the services are in control of how they are used. That is a fundamentally simple model that is not being exploited sufficiently by a number of Government bodies at the moment.

Jeremy Lefroy: The hon. Gentleman is making an extremely important point, and I agree with everything he is saying. One body that is, in effect, a mutual and is growing month by month almost under the radar is the National Employment Savings Trust—NEST. It is growing by several hundred million pounds. Last I saw, it had £5 billion, and by the end of the next decade, it will probably be one of the largest financial institutions in the country. It is doing a great job in many ways, yet almost all the top 10 investments of NEST are in overseas companies, not ones in the UK. It may have operations in the UK, but they are overseas investments. Does he agree that, given that it is a mutual, or at least owned with social purpose in the mutual interest, at least some of those investments could be put into precisely the things he is talking about?

Gareth Snell: I agree entirely. The hon. Gentleman, as always, has touched on a pragmatic and simple way of fixing something that should not be a problem to start with. He talked about the Staffordshire Credit Union. The reason the Staffordshire Credit Union ended up folding was that we were unable to meet the Prudential Regulation Authority’s 3% threshold rule between capital and assets. With a very small investment that a body like NEST could have provided, we would have been able to continue helping the thousands of people who were members, offering secure, low-return financial products to people who need it the most—people in communities such as Stoke-on-Trent, where payday lenders prey because they know that people want to borrow money quickly. While credit unions do not provide an immediate alternative to payday lending, they are part of the mix that is available. I can immediately think of a number of organisations that would benefit from the sort of investments the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and then the mutual role of NEST would get to grow and become even greater.

I want to go back briefly to my point about railways and buses. I may end up falling out with my Front-Bench colleagues on this issue, as on many others. State ownership is still a monopoly, and if we are talking about ways in which we could open up public services to be democratically
controlled by the public, we need to mutualise them. We should allow and facilitate worker and management buy-outs of existing companies that are looking to be sold, and enable places to allow municipal bus companies to come back into the mix. This would help to sustain the market and—again, I go back to this point—make sure that people using those services have some semblance of taking control of those services and delivering them in a way they think is appropriate for their communities and sustainable in the long term.

This goes not just for public services. We have not touched on the potential economic benefits of things such as fan-owned football clubs and how we should do more to push fan-owned stadiums. In many other countries, it is not uncommon for sporting facilities and sports clubs to be owned, operated and managed by the users of those facilities. In this country, we have not particularly got into that model, as far as I can see, with the depth and the courage that others have.

Finally—I am conscious of the time—about 18 months ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) ran a very clever social media campaign pointing out that the 5% profit of some of the largest companies in the country was shared among their employee base, each employee would receive a certain amount of money, emulating the French profit-sharing law. To turn full circle back to my first point, if we had such a law in this country—it is not necessarily a co-operative solution, but it is about profit sharing and sharing the values of co-operation—what would happen to that money? Most people who work in such companies and small-scale industries will spend that money locally: more money in their pockets means more money going into their local high streets, shops and facilities. I am sure the Government have already looked at the circular effect of an economic benefit coming from a co-operative solution, even if it is not a co-operative model, and if they have not already committed to looking at the French profit-sharing law, I would encourage the Minister to do so.

It would be wrong of me not to talk about the Co-operative Group as a whole. As has been mentioned by a number of my colleagues, it is not just about the financial products and services it offers, but the values and ethics it brings to them. The Co-operative Group is leading the way on dealing with modern slavery, food injustice and food hunger, and retail crime. It knows that, at the heart of everything it does, is its staff and its consumers, and those are the values that I am sure the Minister will have heard about in every contribution today and will want to make part of any Government strategy on co-operatives.

1.2 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I add my thanks to the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and for Wycombe (Mr Baker) for securing this debate.

We have heard many times already from Members right across the House that co-operatives and employee owner companies demonstrate a radically different way of doing business and how it organises its resources. As the hon. Member for Harrow West said in his opening remarks, these companies and enterprises come in all shapes and sizes and cover almost every—indeed, perhaps every—sector of the economy. Of course, one of the most welcome aspects of co-operatives and employee owner companies is that they allow people to democratically own and have greater control over the things that really make a difference to their business. In addition, by sharing and fairly distributing wealth, they promote employee wellbeing far more than perhaps traditional company models do.

We on the SNP Benches will always support measures that give workers a genuine and more meaningful stake in their organisations. Any measures that enable everyone who has a stake in a company to have a say in how that business is run will find support here. The benefits to business are obvious—from increased productivity and innovation to being able to attract and, perhaps just as importantly, retain high-quality talent, which in turn can help safeguard the long-term future of businesses and bring benefit to the communities where they are based.

There is an awful lot to like about co-operatives and worker or employee-owned businesses, and I believe Governments should do whatever they can to support their voluntary expansion through both start-ups and conversions. In this, I think the UK Government should look at how it can learn from the success of the Scottish Government, who have been promoting employee ownership conversion as a mainstream option for ownership succession of small and medium-sized enterprises.

I am really pleased to see that, in the last five years, the number of such employee-owned companies operating in Scotland has more than trebled. That trend shows no sign of slowing down, with Scottish Enterprise reporting recently that it has been working on a deal a month over the past year. Currently, there are about 100 worker and employee-owned businesses operating in Scotland, which together create about 7,000 jobs and contribute around £1 billion to the Scottish economy. I am delighted that the Scottish Government have shown their commitment to helping more companies become employee-owned or worker-owned enterprises by announcing a programme that will seek to achieve a fivefold increase in the number of employee-owned businesses in Scotland by 2030.

At the end of last year, when the Scottish Cabinet visited the Isle of Arran, the First Minister launched Scotland for EO. It is a collaboration between the Scottish Government, Scottish Enterprise and business, and its ambition is to make Scotland a world leader in employee ownership and other co-operative models.

The Scottish Government have shown their commitment to helping more companies become employee-owned or worker-owned enterprises by announcing a programme that will seek to achieve a fivefold increase in the number of employee-owned businesses in Scotland by 2030.

Sarah Deas, a director of Scottish Enterprise and the head of Co-operative Development Scotland, who is a member of this leadership group, said:

“Promoting employee ownership helps drive growth in the economy and create greater wealth-equity in society.”

Thanks to Co-operative Development Scotland, a dedicated team working within Scottish Enterprise, any company wishing to explore employee ownership, or indeed any other co-operative-based model, will now have expert advice on tap. Any business or firm that submits an inquiry about moving to an employee-owned model is able to access up to three days of free support from the team at Scottish Enterprise. Thereafter, Scottish
Enterprise will provide the company with a report, which will examine potential ownership structures, governance, management, funding and how a possible transition to employee ownership could occur. As Nicola Sturgeon said when she launched Scotland for EO, the Scottish Government “want to make it easier for companies and workers to find out more about this model and to move towards it if it’s right for them.”

It is generally accepted that one of the biggest barriers to the development of co-operatives and employee-owned enterprises is the absence of readily available, impartial advice and support. Yet there is evidence to show that when entrepreneurs and businesses are given the right information—in the proper context, with access to expert help—they are more likely to choose the model of employee or worker ownership for a business. I urge the UK Government to look at what the Scottish Government are doing and, I hope, match the ambition being shown by the Government in Holyrood.

Despite the recent growth in the UK’s co-op economy, by international standards the UK still lags far behind most OECD countries in both the scale and the economic impact of our co-operative sector. Germany, for example, has a co-op economy four times that of the UK, while in France it is six times larger. As I have said, I believe one of the main causes of that is the lack of awareness and a paucity of good, impartial advice. All the evidence tells us that employee ownership delivers real benefits to businesses, to the people who work in them and to the communities in which they are located.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) knows only too well, one of the great success stories of a company transitioning to become an employee-owned business is the Auchrannie Resort in her constituency.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a wonderful speech showing the potential for success in this area. I am the proud MP for the beautiful island of Arran. Does he agree with me that Auchrannie is a wonderful enterprise and that everybody would benefit from it if they had the good fortune to have an opportunity to visit it?

Brendan O’Hara: Probably the best reply to my hon. Friend comes not from me but from Linda Johnston, co-founder and managing director of the Auchrannie Resort on the Isle of Arran. She successfully transferred over to the employee ownership model a couple of years ago, and said:

“The staff were involved in the process from an early stage and were given the opportunity to input throughout. They are delighted that Auchrannie’s legacy will be protected and that they have the chance to play an active part in, and benefit from, Auchrannie’s future success. They also realise that what each of them does will affect the future success of the business and that this is directly linked to their own success. There is no, ‘them and us’ now, we’re all in this together.”

I commend the words of Linda Johnston and support this motion.

1.10 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) for his powerful speech. There is always much to learn from our colleagues north of the border, and we have much in common on this agenda. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) for securing this debate, and I put on record my thanks, and that of all co-operators in this place and across the movement, for his service as chair of the Co-operative party for 19 years. He has been a passionate and loyal advocate and champion of co-operation in this country and across the world. We thank him for his service, and know he will continue to champion co-operatives in any future role. It gives me great pleasure to succeed him as the new chair of the Co-operative party. That is a huge privilege and responsibility, and I am proud to add my contribution to this debate.

This has been a fascinating debate with values shared across the Chamber between people who have taken differing positions on other issues. It is fascinating to see how co-operation has led to many shared views, and I found myself in agreement with the hon. Members for Wycombe (Mr Baker) and for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). We may disagree on other things, but we agree about much of what drove some of the anger, frustration and despair that we have seen in our communities over the past few years, and which expressed itself in the Brexit referendum in 2016. Whatever we think about how to fix things, there has been a sense of powerlessness, and lack of agency and control over people’s ability to influence and shape their lives and the economy in which they live and work.

In my area, SSI, a Thai company, was able to pull the plug on the steelworks, with 3,000 job losses overnight. People have the sense that their lives are being buffeted by global forces over which they have very little control. It is no surprise that the “take back control” mantra that was used by those on the other side of the debate from me held such sway, and it was a huge driving force. For me, the co-operative agenda is all about taking back control, self-responsibility, democracy, ownership, and having agency in one’s life, and it is rare that people feel that about public services or about the wider economy. I think that the co-operative values and principles we have heard so much about today are the solution, and provide many of the answers to the challenges we face in our society and across our world. I am excited to help champion that agenda as we develop our policy thinking in the House.

I wish to focus specifically on the expansion of the co-operative sector, which I believe is necessary for us as a country. Labour Members have committed to at least doubling the size of the co-operative sector, and I am proud of that commitment. The Labour party’s boilerplate is “sharing power and wealth”, which points to why I do not believe the radical growth of the co-operative sector is an end in itself, but rather the beginning of the different kind of economy we seek—an economy that puts people at its heart. To support our growth we are lucky to find strength and solidarity from our movement, values and principles, but there is more to be done. The Co-operative party, working with the co-operative movement more widely, has taken a serious look at our infrastructure needs, and at the supportive environment required to grow the co-operative sector.

I pay tribute to the fantastic report recently published by the New Economics Foundation, “Co-operatives unleashed”, and I recommend it to the Minister as a good read. It sets out a series of steps that a supportive Government could take to support the co-operative
sector. We must also consider what legislation we could pass, and we have heard fantastic examples of co-operative action around the world. We must reflect on the fact that our own sector and movement is not at the scale of those inspirational examples, because of this country’s legislative environment.

In many countries across Europe and beyond there is a basic legislative duty on the Government to promote the co-operative model. That will not be a panacea or cure all our issues, but it could signal intent and be a key driver of change to stimulate the co-operative economy. The framework in which co-operatives operate is not subject to constant review and updating in the way that company law is, for example. We have already heard about the Law Commission’s tidy-up job on co-operative and community benefit society law in 2015, which brought many disparate parts of the law together. The situation needs to be corrected, and a more visionary and forward-looking legislative framework should be sought—something we have not seen in this country’s legislative process for many decades.

There are also technical deficiencies in our current arrangements. For example, company law allows companies to act in the way they see fit where the law is silent and there is no guidance. When co-operative law is silent and has no guidance, it reverts to company law, and we could liberate our co-operative movement from that basic inequality. We should take more risks, and take more control of the environment in which the movement operates.

Stephen Doughty: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her election as chair of the Co-operative party. It is fantastic to have her in that role. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas). Does my hon. Friend recognise the issue with devolution? We heard examples from Scotland but there are also some from Wales. Scotland and Wales have wanted to lead the way on much co-operative thinking, but they have sometimes been hampered by the devolution—or not—of powers. When we considered the new rail franchise, in Wales and the borders there was a lot of appetite for putting that in a co-operative or mutual model, but we were unable to do so because those powers had not been devolved by the UK Government. With Welsh Water we have the example of at least a semi-mutual. That shows the advantages of devolution in driving forward co-operatives, but perhaps we need some changes to allow innovation to take place.

Anna Turley: I completely concur with my hon. Friend. We see a lot of passion and commitment for the co-operative sector and its values and principles in Wales, and we should be doing everything we can to allow people the freedom to develop those ideals with a supportive and co-operative approach from the Government.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) who has worked with Ministers to try to persuade them of the need to lift unfair and unnecessary regulatory burdens on small and medium-sized co-ops—we heard a great deal of detail about that today. Such burdens should not exist in the first place, and we should endeavour to remove them. One aspect of the co-operative growth agenda that comes up repeatedly within the Co-operative party and the co-operative movement is the need for access to capital, which many other types of businesses can access in a routine way, while co-operatives cannot.

Of course there is a difference in the way the co-operative business model operates, but I encourage the Minister to listen carefully to ideas for new capital instruments as they come forward. In some countries around the world we can see that new capital instruments have been put in place relatively easily, and they are both attractive and maintain the integrity of the co-operative model. For example, I recommend that the Minister look at the developments in Australia, which is leading the way on this issue.

A second aspect of assisting the co-operative sector to grow and develop concerns the development of co-operatives themselves. We often look at small and medium-sized business development and support, and regional and local infrastructures are in place to facilitate that activity. The amount and type of bank lending is often scrutinised, which helps, and specialist support is available for entrepreneurs. It is evident, however, that such support is focused on just one type of private business. There are great co-operative development professionals around the country, but sadly there are not enough, and nor is the infrastructure in place to focus on how to grow more co-operatives around the country. It is clear that we would benefit from a more rigorous and systematic approach to co-operative development.

The wider benefit of co-operatives and mutuals to our economy is clear, and new co-operatives are more likely to last into their second and third years than private small businesses. Too often, those giving professional business advice know too little about the co-operative model, and as a first point of call for advice and mentoring they are highly unlikely to suggest a co-operative approach. All that needs to change.

One route to achieving that, which has already been mentioned today, is through a co-operative development agency for England. Such an agency could be a starting point for advice or grants, and advise Governments on the type of public policy that would help to create an enabling environment for co-operatives. I hope the Minister will take that idea from this debate and work with the co-operative movement to ascertain the best shape and form for such an organisation.

Jim McMahon: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her appointment as chair of the Co-operative party; she is a fantastic choice. Is this not a win-win for Government? For a small amount of investment and energy, they could double the size of the sector. She will be aware that the Co-operative Group, the Nationwide Building Society and Co-operatives UK have recently revised up the figure for the value of co-operatives to the UK economy to £60 billion. Imagine what even a small amount of growth could do to the UK’s GDP.

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I
in smaller towns, and co-operative economies could play a role in keeping money in local economies. There is a very important economic argument here for the Government.

Another issue I would like to raise with the Minister, which I hope he will look into further, is the shared prosperity fund. Co-operative organisations, including Co-operatives UK, Locality and the Plunkett Foundation, have a campaign called “Communities in Charge”, which calls for a shared prosperity fund to include targeted funding to ensure it is made available for people and in places that need it most; for local people to be able to scrutinise spending decisions through citizens’ panels; and for at least 25% to be controlled by local communities to spend on local priorities. This is a really welcome campaign and I hope the Minister will endeavour to look more closely at it.

In conclusion, I would like to make a point about the type of campaigning, work and activity that co-operatives add to our communities. It is in their DNA to go further than any other business type to add to, rather than take away from, the communities they serve. Their operation and their model lead them to lead campaigns on loneliness, modern slavery, food justice, fair tax, employee safety and community safety—to name just a few. Some of those areas have been championed by one of the largest co-operatives, which I note, recently won the title of co-operative of the year. That is the difference co-operatives make and for at least 25% to be controlled by local communities to spend on local priorities. This is a really welcome campaign and I hope the Minister will endeavour to look more closely at it.

In conclusion, I would like to make a point about the type of campaigning, work and activity that co-operatives add to our communities. It is in their DNA to go further than any other business type to add to, rather than take away from, the communities they serve. Their operation and their model lead them to lead campaigns on loneliness, modern slavery, food justice, fair tax, employee safety and community safety—to name just a few. Some of those areas have been championed by one of the largest consumer co-ops in the world, the Co-operative Group, which, I note, recently won the title of co-operative of the year. That is the difference co-operatives make and the wider benefit they bring. It is an inspiration for all of us here who want more. The smaller co-operatives fighting to compete in non-traditional sectors, co-operatives aimed at disrupting exploitative markets, and our larger co-operatives serving members and their communities so well are all part of the fantastic co-operative difference that we are proud to support today.

1.22 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great honour to follow the current chair of the Co-operative party, my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley). I am glad that her predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), was able to secure the debate. I am grateful to him for all he did, including taking the party through some quite difficult periods. The movement has also suffered, because of some of the well-known controversies that we had to face down. I thank the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), who is no longer in his place. It is good that there is at least some support from those on the Government Benches for something that some of us, as proud Labour and Co-operative party MPs, feel is very important. We feel that the co-operative message is not always heard as much as it should be, in this place or, more particularly, in wider society.

I just want to touch on three quick points, but I will just mention what has already been said, which is that we need to see the growth of co-operation. It is an alternative to capitalism and state socialism, and it is important that we see it as an answer to the problems of the 21st century, rather than as purely a historical legacy. I hope the Minister will say some nice things and respond in kind to the suggestions I will make. I am not going to talk about credit unions, but it is important we recognise that they have a part to play in financial arrangements. I was one of those who set up the Stroud co-op union, which is still flourishing. It needs to grow and we need some help to make it grow, but it is an answer for those who find it difficult to access finance in other ways.

My first substantive point is on what I have always felt is a great problem with co-operation: where to get advice to set up. State business support organisations, whether local enterprise partnerships or their previous incarnations, have all suffered from the same problem, which is that the people offering advice have either had no experience at all of co-operation, or their experience has been limited to what they have read about it. Co-operators need to be able to advise other potential co-operators. I hope the Government will consider this issue, because too often this is a huge lacuna. There is no one to go to who knows enough about the opportunities that the co-operative movement as a whole can bring. Since the loss of co-operative development agencies, which many of us have sadly witnessed over the past few decades, this issue has become much more acute.

Secondly, co-operative housing can be a solution, particularly in rural areas where community land trusts have now come into their own, but we need a number of things to happen to make them more available than they currently are. First, we need changes to the planning system. The Government have now looked at small sites and made them more accessible to this form of provision, but at the moment the planning system is such that too often communities and neighbourhood planning groups who want to have a small clutch of housing either give up because it is too bureaucratic, or they get turned over and it ends up as executive housing in villages, which is just what they did not want. They want affordable units. Dare I say it, they want social units.

The great benefit of community land trusts is that the land remains held mutually in perpetuity. That is very important, because losing the land means losing control. It would therefore be very helpful if the Government looked at the planning system in that regard and at what financial help they could provide to such groups. It is expensive to go through the rigours of trying to set up a community land trust, so I hope the Government will be generous and consider ways to help such communities solve these problems. They do not want masses of housing; they want 10 to 12 units and they have them to remain affordable in perpetuity. That is why community land trusts, as a form of co-operative housing, are so important.

My final point is on the role of co-operation in farming. The Agriculture Bill will one day come back to this House, but so much of it is predicated on public moneys for public goods and none of us quite knows how that will work. We are waiting to examine the environmental land management trusts in more detail so we can know how they will work in practice, but the simple fact is that farmers are already co-operators. More than half of all farmers belong to some form of co-operative. They may not always recognise that. They may think that NFU Mutual is a pure insurance company, so we can know how they will work in practice, but the simple fact is that farmers are already co-operators. More than half of all farmers belong to some form of co-operative. They may not always recognise that. They may think that NFU Mutual is a pure insurance company, but it is a mutual. It is a co-operative.

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend describes a situation that applies to many people, not just farmers, who are members of a co-operative organisation. I think of the Asian community in Stoke-on-Trent, who have a savings
scheme for funding family funerals. They would not think of it as a co-operative, but that is exactly the sort of mutual and co-operative model we are talking about.

Dr Drew: Exactly. That is partly the problem of the movement, because it is not overt enough. It does not broadcast the fact that they are mutuals and co-operatives. On farming, the changes that are going to come will, to some extent, demand upscaling. Some of us may worry about that, but the reality is that with the change in the funding mechanism there will be a drive towards larger units. The only alternative to that is some form of greater co-operation among those who practise farming at the moment. We want more people to come on to the land and particularly younger people, because the average age is 59. It will hardly be a burgeoning, growth-inspired movement without younger people coming in to do the exciting things that we all know could happen to provide more of our own food.

I hope we will look at how co-operatives are not only built into the Agriculture Bill, but given encouragement. All the pressure is on selling smaller units, whether that is what is happening to the county farms estate, where they are being gradually cut away one by one—some of us worry about that—or the fact that when land comes up for sale, the big guys come in and buy it.

Jim McMahon: I congratulate my hon. Friend on all his work on the Agriculture Bill and everything around that. Does he agree that with the increased awareness of climate change and environmental impact, food miles are becoming more of an issue in people’s consciousness, and that the more we can grow and produce here, the better it will be for the climate and the country?

Dr Drew: Of course. It is really important that we provide food as locally as we can, and many people want to do that, including through the Landworkers’ Alliance and all sorts of innovative schemes. The loss of the bank was sad for many of us, but the saddest day for me was when we lost the co-operative farm estate. We lost Stoughton and Down Ampney, which were model farms that showed the way and how co-operation can work. This was the nation’s biggest farmer for generations. Sadly, all that was lost, although it has gone to the Wellcome Trust, which is welcome in its own way. However, we ought to be encouraging co-operation and seeing it as a solution to many of the problems.

I hope that the Government are listening and are further prepared to change the Agriculture Bill to make it even friendlier to co-operatives, so that different farmers can find a way of staying in the marketplace, and that may encourage younger people, who, I am sure, will be keen to be co-operators.

1.31 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my fellow south-west MP, fellow co-operator and fellow shadow Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). As we have heard from hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber, there is a real energy and dynamism around co-operatives and the values that they stand for. We need to grasp the opportunity to stop just talking about co-operatives and mutuals as a worthy activity that happens on the periphery of our economy; we should have it as a mainstream activity and work on nearly every single area of public and private organisation. That is what we need to look at much more and I am really glad that so many Opposition Co-operative MPs, in particular, have spoken so passionately about the opportunities that lie ahead. That is what I want to talk about today, because the time for co-operatives is now, and we must seize the nettle.

Before that, I echo the praise and thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) for serving for so long as chair of our Co-operative party—he would have got less time for murder. He has done a very good job. I also put on record my thanks to the outgoing general secretary of the Co-operative party, Claire McCarthy has served our party and movement incredibly well. We all wish her well for the next stage of her career and wish the best of luck to all the contenders who are being interviewed to replace her. As a Labour and Co-operative MP, I am very proud to have stood on a manifesto that pledged at least to double the size of the co-operative sector. As Plymouth’s voice in this debate, I will tell the House a bit about what Plymouth is aiming to do, because we have a Labour and Co-operative-run city council that has pledged to double the size of the co-operative economy in our city by 2025. The Minister will know many other things well, as a former Conservative candidate for a Plymouth seat, and I know that he will welcome and pay special attention to my remarks.

Doubling the size of the co-operative economy is a worthy ambition of our times. To achieve that, we need not only to accelerate community wealth-building initiatives, reviewing procurement and providing support to grow the capacity of co-operatives to engage in procurement exercises, but to focus on economic development policies. For folks that are really passionate about co-operative politics, it is sometimes frustrating that co-operative politics tend to be put just in “procurement”—if only we procured differently, we could grow our economy. Yes, that is right—we should and we must—but we must also not neglect the importance of co-operative economic development policies. That is really where Plymouth City Council has led the way.

In Plymouth City Council’s strategy, “Doing it Ourselves”, which was published recently, the ambition to double the size of our co-operative economy has been laid out. We want to grow from the 23 co-ops that we have in our city to 50 co-ops; from a turnover of £18.6 million to £40 million; from 9,500 members to 20,000; and from 226 employees to 500. That is a really good ambition and I want every single Member in this House to challenge their own councils—whether Labour, Labour and Co-operative, or of the blue team persuasion—by saying, “What are you doing at a local level to encourage the economic development, growth and starting up of new co-operatives?” Plymouth is rightly very proud of its focus on the wellbeing economy, community-owned infrastructure, worker-owned tech and creative industries, public-facing and cultural hubs and a municipal co-operation, but that is not Devon-specific. It can work in every part of the country, and that is what many of things that I want to discuss relate to. Before I continue, I should say that I am a very proud
member of the co-operatives that I am speaking about today. I hope that other hon. Members will consider joining them after they hear what I say.

I will first mention a co-operative that I have spoken about in the House before: the Plymouth Energy Community. It was set up in 2013 to provide radical and green solutions to fuel poverty, which affects 13.4% of the people who live in Plymouth. Since it started, it has done amazing things. In 2014, it invited members of the public to buy a stake in that co-operative. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) said, crowdfunding is really important. At the time, we had the lowest buy-in level—£50—of any crowdfunding co-operative in the country. That was nearly £450 lower than any other at the time, and it made co-operative ownership and innovative projects available to more and more people.

Having raised more than £600,000 and received a £500,000 loan from Plymouth City Council, Plymouth Energy Community provided solar panels to 21 schools and community buildings. It has gone further, adding 15 primary schools to that list, and we now have new solar panels on the roof of our Olympic-quality sports centre—the Life Centre. It has also opened its first solar farm at Ernsett, which is incredibly exciting. It has also become a real champion for insulation and energy efficiency, particularly helping communities on low incomes—not only in Devonport, in the patch that I represent, but in St Budeaux and Ham in the north of the city—to reduce the energy costs of their homes by investing in infrastructure and upgrades. It is very proud of that and it should be.

I spoke to the Plymouth Energy Community during the “The Time is Now” demonstration on Lambeth Bridge yesterday. As well as being an organisation that has excited people to invest in infrastructure, it is exciting people to get involved in the fight against climate change, and rightly so.

Plymouth is not just about solar panels on primary schools; it is also about how we use co-operatives to challenge the big evils of our time, one of which is hunger among our schoolchildren. That is where CATERed, the co-operative owned jointly by Plymouth City Council and 67 of our primary schools, has been pioneering. It has pooled all the school catering contracts for the entire city. That includes all the different types of school, as Plymouth has one of every school that every Government since 1945 have ever thought of: diversity of provision is not our problem in Plymouth, although a lack of funding is. CATERed now provides wholesome, healthy food all year round, including over the summer. To its great credit, instead of providing meals for kids who cannot afford to feed themselves properly over the summer from empty school buildings, it does so from parks, reducing the stigma for families who really struggle for food.

**Jim McMahon:** I congratulate Plymouth on the work that it is doing. It is genuinely leading the way on many of these issues and the council is fantastic. Is my hon. Friend not highlighting what makes co-operatives special? Not only are they an enterprise and profitable, but they are a movement that people take part in and feel really connected to.

**Luke Pollard:** Absolutely. There is the opportunity to engage more people in that energy and dynamism. As a response to what we have seen with Brexit and in a globalised world, where we can call anyone around the world from our phones but very few of us know our neighbours in depth, as we once used to, we need to build community cohesion and do that in an environment that supports business growth, enterprise and innovation through co-operatives has to be part of the solution.

I also want to talk for a moment about Nudge Community Builders, which is one of Plymouth’s newest co-operatives and, again, I am very proud to be a member of it. From the Minister’s time in Plymouth, he may know about Union Street, a famed drinking haunt that used to have pubs from one end to the other. When the fleet came in after its manoeuvres, it used to be seen having a few cheeky beers. We are now down to one pub on Union Street. Fortunately, Union Street echoes Stonehouse’s story of poverty and deprivation.

The fantastic team at Nudge Community Builders have used a community share scheme to take over the Clipper Inn, once one of Plymouth’s most notorious drinking haunts—I would never have been found there in my youth—and have turned it into a real hub of community regeneration. The Clipper now provides low-cost space for people to demonstrate their products, bring creative arts to the market and grow their business. For example, the No Whey! co-operative, which provides incredible gluten-free, healthy food, has taken up residence at the Clipper and, having grown and grown as a business, is doing incredible things. That regeneration was crowdfunded by £204,750 from 151 investors in just 67 days, thanks to multiplier effects. Wendy, Hannah and the rest of the Nudge team have done something incredibly special. Again, that is not specific to Plymouth; it is a great example of what can be done everywhere.

In the true spirit of the Rochdale pioneers, Plymouth is going above and beyond. Plymouth City Council is the shareholder of the South West Mutual bank—it does not just talk about financial inclusion and what happens after the decline of high street banks; it is opening its own bank to serve the four counties of the far south-west. Plymouth is leading the way in that respect.

There is a co-operative renaissance happening in our towns and cities, which is sometimes lost on policy makers in London. I therefore encourage the Minister to send his officials to Plymouth, and to other cities and towns across the country that are really leading in this respect. We often host Government officials who come to see Plymouth’s co-operative story, and more welcome, because that success story needs to be told.

That story is also a temporary one for local government. When Labour recently lost control of Plymouth City Council, we lost our status as a co-operative council. It is a matter of great regret—the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) spoke about this—that some of the same values and passions have not always been felt by the Conservative councillors who replaced the Labour ones. I am very glad that the Labour council is back, under the incredible leadership of Councillor Tudor Evans, who, alongside Councillor Chris Penberthy, is driving forward the innovative co-operative agenda.

The opportunities to double our co-operative economy at least also work for fishing and I have argued and 1,000 fishing jobs in Plymouth—my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud spoke about agriculture, which is his passion, so let me speak for a moment about fishing.
We already have an incredible co-operative success story in our local fishing industry, but we must now seize the opportunity to double the number of jobs that come from increased processing and catching, and from sharing opportunities and innovation, especially in tackling ghost gear and plastic pollution.

That is where I think the Minister has an opportunity to spread the narrative that doubling the size of the co-operative economy does not just mean creating another Co-op group; it means giving the tools, skills, funding and support to innovators right across our country to do interesting and innovative things alongside our communities, to innovate and change. That is certainly happening in Plymouth.

We have a real opportunity to mainstream co-operative values. I do not want my time as a Member of Parliament to be defined by an annual debate on co-operatives in which well-meaning Members on both sides of the House express their hopes and dreams about what the future could look like. I want us to put this into every single debate, whether about mutual social care provision or new mutual models for the future ownership of our public utilities, because the time for mutuals and co-operatives is now. I encourage the Minister to grasp this opportunity with both hands, because although Opposition Members share a lot of familiarity and common cause with co-operative values, I believe that Members realise just how important credit unions are in Northern Ireland or the massive contribution they make. Credit unions are, of course, common to all parts of our United Kingdom, but they have woven themselves into the fabric of society in Northern Ireland in a way that has not happened elsewhere across our nation. Credit unions are a feature of my constituency, as we now have three or four of them. When one of the branches closed down in Greyabbey, a village just down the road from where I live—I opened accounts there for my three boys many years ago—it integrated with the branch in Newtownards.

People such as my old running mate Tommy Jeffers in Dundonald have given a lifetime of hard work to establish, run and expand credit unions across Northern Ireland. He was the instigation and strength behind that credit union, and although he is now in his mid-70s and no longer a councillor—that is how I first got to know him, as well as through party connections—he is still involved in it. The movement has been built by hundreds and hundreds of hours of work by volunteers. They have made a massive contribution.

**Jim Shannon**: One credit union that spoke to me ahead of the debate wants to open more branches on the high street, to help plug the gap left by mainstream bank branch closures, and it wonders aloud whether the Government might be sympathetic to the idea of extending business rates relief to credit unions seeking to open business branches. Does the hon. Gentleman think that could also help facilitate the greater spread of the credit union movement in Northern Ireland?

**Gareth Thomas**: I thank my honourable colleague for that intervention. I am sure that the Minister is listening and hope that he will take on board that suggestion, which could be very helpful. I wholeheartedly support that suggestion. This is not the Minister’s responsibility, but I have had discussions with other Ministers about help with high street rates. It should be borne in mind that credit unions are for their members. The members invest their money to lend their money. It is a fantastic opportunity, and a fantastic example of how lending should be looked upon. The big banks should note that example. It should not be all about dividends for shareholders; it should be about the customers—those who are involved.

The Northern Ireland movement is massive in comparison with its counterparts in Great Britain. Statistics collated by the Bank of England in each quarter show...
the scale of credit unions in Northern Ireland in comparison with that of their counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom. Of the 437 registered credit unions in the UK, 145 are located in Northern Ireland. A third of all adult credit union members in the UK are in Northern Ireland, and four in 10 juvenile members are from Northern Ireland. We are encouraging our young people to open accounts early—although, to be fair, that will probably be done by their parents or, perhaps, by their grandparents, who open accounts for them to start them off. It is good to encourage young people to be part of a bank, to save money, and thereby to see the benefits of credit unions. As I have said, it is a fantastic opportunity. If Members have not had an opportunity to investigate or gain knowledge of what is happening in Northern Ireland, I suggest that they should.

Jim McMahon: I had the pleasure of being in Belfast over the weekend for a Co-operative party event organised by Toibín McMahon, a fantastic advocate for co-operative banks. The party has published a manifesto for co-operatives in Northern Ireland. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will read it and convey to the UK Government what we might take from Northern Ireland’s leadership in this regard.

Jim Shannon: I should be more than happy to do that. I read in the paper that the hon. Gentleman was the guest speaker at that event.

Our credit unions are clearly punching well above their weight, as so often happens in Northern Ireland. This is yet another example of what we do well there. I know from experience in virtually every corner of my constituency how vital credit unions are in helping some of the most marginalised in our society to save their money and borrow at very competitive rates. As was pointed out by the hon. Member for Harrow West, they have often filled the gap left by bank closures. They prey on the most vulnerable among us, and have ruined countless lives. I want to place on record my thanks to the credit unions throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland whose service is helping many to break away from the grip of criminal moneylenders.

Despite the apparent strength of loan sharks, however, there are still significant opportunities in credit unions in Northern Ireland. Again, I agree with the motion: we must look to Her Majesty’s Government to work with the credit union movement, and the co-operative and mutual sector as a whole, to fulfil that untapped potential. More can be done with a little help. We have heard two suggestions in interventions, and other ideas are being presented.

The regulation of Northern Ireland’s credit unions moved from Stormont to the Financial Conduct Authority in 2016. I ask the Minister to engage with the credit unions in Northern Ireland—and, indeed, throughout the United Kingdom—and to help them to, in turn, work with the FCA to help them to grow further, and, furthermore, to help us to deal with problems such as financial exclusion.

Let me say in conclusion—and I realise, Madam Deputy Speaker, when I hear that cough I must take note of it—that there is an increasing desire across our nation for a different growth model for our economy. The hon. Member for Stroud referred to an alternative. We need a good alternative that can be successful, and this is the one: one in which the interests of workers and people are not overlooked, but rather are to the fore; one in which there is a greater sense of partnership between all the actors in our economy. Co-operatives and mutuals are already an incredibly important part of our economy, and they can be greater still. Northern Ireland is an example of their importance. I join Members in all parts of the House in recognising their existing contribution, and calling on the Government—and the Minister in particular—to work with the sector and help it to grow even more and benefit more people.

1.55 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): As ever, it is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I congratulate the hon. Members for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and for Wycombe (Mr Baker) on securing this important debate, and thank all Members who have contributed to it.

I should declare an interest, as a member of a credit union, and, indeed, should declare an interest in the Auchrannie Resort, which was referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). As a delighted former customer, I have to say that it is an amazing venture.

The Rochdale pioneers have been mentioned frequently this afternoon, and I feel that I would be failing in my duty if I did not point out that they were inspired by the work of Robert Owen of New Lanark, who set up the village store in 1813 for the benefit of his community, and used the profits to fund educational projects. He thus inspired the co-operative movement across Rochdale, and look where that has brought us!

There are a few Members scattered around the Chamber—or maybe not—who will be able to recite their mother’s, or their grandmother’s, co-operative dividend number, such as, in my case, 4308. I must declare another interest, as my father was a milkman who worked for the Kilmarnock Equitable Co-operative Society. However, things have moved on considerably in the co-operative and mutual movement since I was but a girl. There are a number of useful and well-meaning co-operatives in my constituency, which help my constituents enormously. They include Forgewood and Garrison People’s Housing Co-operatives, Bridges Housing Association, three credit unions, Motherwell United Services Club, Clyde Supporters Trust and the Motherwell FC supporters club. I am particularly interested in the last-named, as I have just purchased my season ticket, and look forward to supporting Motherwell in a very successful season.
I am very grateful to Co-operatives UK and the Employee Ownership Association for the work that they do in raising awareness of the benefits of co-operatives and mutuals. Co-operatives UK’s 2018 annual report shows that there were 7,226 independent co-ops operating across the UK, with a combined turnover of £36.1 billion, an increase of more than £800 million on 2017. They employed 235,000 people, and there were 13.1 million members of co-operatives overall. As we all know, those numbers are increasing. The data indicates that co-ops of all shapes and sizes are thriving throughout the economy. Exciting new co-op clusters are emerging in industries such as digital and creative, in social care and in the community ownership of land, assets and enterprise, while they remain strong and continue to innovate in areas of traditional strength such as retail, wholesale, housing and agriculture.

The co-op economy in the UK is diverse, well-established and growing, but it is small by international comparisons. Globally, co-ops are a significant force, with a combined turnover of more than US$2.1 trillion and 1 billion members. The UK lags behind most OECD countries in the scale and impact of our co-op sector. Germany’s is four times the size of ours, while in France it is six times larger. According to Co-operatives UK, and as has already been mentioned, there are unnecessary barriers preventing the use and spread of this type of organisation, especially in England.

The corporate frameworks for co-ops are not as user-friendly as they should be. The registry function for co-ops, under the aegis of the FCA, can be cumbersome and is not linked into the increasingly important digital nexus between Companies House and HMRC upon which so many improvements for businesses, such as single filing and Making Tax Digital, are predicated. Also, co-op law is in need of both routine maintenance and strategic reform. That can add to negative perceptions about co-op options.

There are examples where the operating environment for co-ops is more challenging than for other models, including banks not understanding legal forms, and difficulties and unwarranted disadvantages in procurement—private and public—due diligence and credit scoring, adding to negative perceptions about co-op options. There can be some distinct challenges for co-ops in raising start-up and growth capital that go beyond those experienced by businesses generally, although that applies more to some types of co-op in some circumstances than to others.

In Scotland, with approximately 7,000 employee-owners generating a combined turnover of £940 million, the appetite for employee ownership has never been greater. As my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute said, in the last five years the number of employee and worker-owned businesses operating in Scotland has trebled and in this past year Scottish Enterprise has been working on a deal a month on average.

Employee ownership gives employees a meaningful stake in their organisation, together with a genuine say in how it is run. It roots business in Scotland, drives performance and delivers economic wellbeing. In moving to a co-operative model, owners, the business, and the employees can benefit from the following: a competitive price and guaranteed exit for the owners at their own pace, which is particularly useful for SMEs; the safeguarding of jobs and improved employee engagement; safeguarding the future of the business; ownership and leadership transfer at low risk; enhanced employee engagement, as we have heard; and increased productivity and innovation while attracting and retaining high-quality talent.

While Westminster descends further into chaos, the Scottish Government are racing ahead with support to achieve a fivefold increase in employee and worker-owned businesses by 2030. Scotland aims to become a world leader in employee ownership and other co-operative models. The Scottish Government aim to increase the number of employee-owned and worker-owned businesses to 500 by 2030 through the new Scotland for EO industry leadership group backed by the Scottish Government and co-chaired by Jamie Hepburn, Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills. Co-operative Development Scotland, a dedicated team within Scottish Enterprise, has a practical remit to promote awareness of employee ownership and other co-operative models and provide advice to businesses considering adopting these models. Scottish Enterprise is running a series of workshops explaining employee ownership to build awareness and demand for this inclusive business model.

Any firm can submit an inquiry about moving to employee ownership and Scottish Enterprise provides up to three days of free support. Where employee ownership is identified as a potential exit solution for business owners, it will undertake an employee ownership feasibility study. Scottish Enterprise will then provide a report examining potential ownership structures, governance, management, funding and how a transition would occur.

The biggest issue facing co-operatives and mutuals in Scotland and across the UK is a Tory no-deal Brexit, which could slow down exports, lead to a hike in interest rates and cost our economy up to 100,000 jobs according to the Fraser of Allander Institute and the Bank of England. Under no deal, a Treasury analysis suggests exports would decrease by 15% and warns that disruption to cross-channel trade could lead to delays in UK food supply, 30% of which comes from the EU. The Bank of England has warned that crashing out of the EU without a deal would be worse than the 2008 financial crisis. The irresponsibility of the Tories is on full display with the claim of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) that there could be a temporary “standstill” in the current trade arrangements with the EU while a new trade agreement is struck, and that premise being rejected by two Brexiteer Cabinet Ministers. All these things will impact negatively on co-operatives and mutuals and inhibit their productivity and contribution to our economy.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister whether he agrees that we should focus on what the UK Government can do to support the voluntary expansion of employee and worker ownership through both start-ups and conversions using worker co-ops and employee ownership trusts. Will the Minister address the biggest barriers to awareness, understanding and available advice and support, as evidence shows that when entrepreneurs and businesses are given the right information in the proper context with access to expert help, they are more likely to choose employee and worker ownership?

In this matter, the UK Government can learn a lot from the success of the Scottish Government in making employee ownership conversions a mainstream option.
of ownership succession among SMEs. I again urge the Minister to look at the good work being done in Scotland on this and to follow suit.

2.6 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to close this debate as a proud Labour and Co-operative Member of Parliament and as a member of the Opposition shadow Treasury team. What a good debate we have had to mark Co-operatives Fortnight. We have rightly heard that the co-operative and mutual tradition is one of the most significant in the economic and social history of this country. It is a tradition that was of course begun and built on the east side of Manchester in towns like mine—Stalybridge and Hyde—and Mossley, and I should also mention Ashton as my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) is sitting beside me. But we have also heard that it is a tradition with much to offer for the future.

I want to be clear about what a co-operative is, because I am always conscious that while there is huge expertise in the Chamber today, there will be people listening to this debate who perhaps do not know exactly what co-operatives or the mutual sector are, and why they are different and why that is important. For the benefit of those people, let me say that co-operatives are enterprises that trade for the common good as opposed to the private benefit of their shareholders.

Legally, there are several differences between a company and a co-operative, but the most important are the following. First, the members of a co-operative are all equal and have one vote each, irrespective of the number of shares they hold. They all have the same right to participate in the affairs of the co-operative, which they democratically control. The members of a company, by contrast, of course hold their rights of control over the company in proportion to the number of shares they own. Greater power and control over the company can be acquired by buying more shares, but that cannot happen in a co-operative. Secondly, it is members, rather than shareholders, who provide the capital to a co-operative, and the distribution of profits is made by way of a dividend to those members based on their annual trade with the co-operative. In a company, profits are distributed in proportion to the shareholding a person has.

These legal differences point to a fundamental difference of purpose. A company carries on business for the private benefit of the shareholders at the time, whereas a co-operative is a trading mechanism for the benefit of its members; it is essentially a self-help mechanism enabling people collectively to meet their shared needs in a broader social context. It has a purpose that goes beyond the immediate business itself. This means looking outward to wider interests including others affected by the business, wider society and, crucially, future generations—that last point is especially significant.

Parliament has long recognised these differences. In 1852, Parliament passed the first Industrial and Provident Societies Partnership Act, and this provided a formal basis for the establishment of co-operatives, many of which had already been established on the Rochdale model.

The co-operative party exists as the political wing of the co-operative movement. Established in 1917, we took the decision in 1927 to form an electoral pact with the Labour party and, as a result, members including me and some hon. Friends are elected on ballot papers that say “Labour and Co-operative”, and we represent both parties here in Parliament.

In modern times, we advocate not only for the strict legal definition of co-operatives, but for the whole mutual sector. My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) made the point well about how widely that concept has grown. While we are on the subject, may I also formally offer my thanks to our outgoing general secretary, Claire McCarthy, for her commitment and passion and for what she has delivered for the co-operative movement? We will miss her a great deal.

I know that I speak for all of us when I say that we take great responsibility and honour in continuing to advocate the great co-operative tradition, but in my view, co-operation is a political tradition that appeals to those on all parts of the political spectrum. The thoughtful speech from the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) made that point very well. In many ways, it was an intellectual case for a free market economy that goes beyond that straightforward Friedmanite definition of the concept of business, and I would welcome continuing that discussion in more detail.

Many of my hon. Friends also spoke in the debate today. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), who secured the debate, gave an excellent overview of the entire sector. We would expect nothing less from him, and his expertise is widely recognised and respected across the House. He made some specific asks, and I am with him on all of them, particularly on his point that we need to modernise co-operative share capital in order to fulfil the potential of this sector.

I often think of my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield as the father of the Co-operative group in Parliament. As ever, he was fizzing with co-operative passion and energy, and that is why we admire him so much. He talked about the insecurity that is a feature of so much of the modern economy and about how the co-operative movement can be an answer to that, as it was in the past. I very much agree with him on that point.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) made the absolutely excellent point that co-operatives can operate on a significant global scale. They can be significant players. Some people feel that this can be a niche sector of the economy, and it is important to make the point that some of the biggest co-operatives are bigger than some multinational businesses.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey), who has delivered more as a Co-operative parliamentarian than almost anyone in his time in this place, mentioned the fact that we are still not living up to the potential of the sector. I think we all agree on that. He particularly highlighted how the trend towards self-employment could create more opportunities. That is a crucial point. He also mentioned the work of the northern city Mayors and their Co-operative Commissions, which I agree is very exciting.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) mentioned his family experience. Mine is similar, except that it was the Northern Rock building society that we used to go to on a Saturday morning.
As a child, I certainly did not appreciate or understand demutualisation. It felt like everyone in County Durham was receiving free money overnight. I thought that there must surely be a catch to that, and of course there was. My hon. Friend is a fluent advocate of co-operation, and his points on public services were particularly well made and something we should all take heed of.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) talked about how the role of co-ops in Scotland continues to expand. He said that the crucial issue is the need for better advice, and that is something that has come across strongly in the debate today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), the newly elected chair of the Co-operative party, talked about the powerlessness and frustration that a lot of people feel as a result of their inability to get a say in the world around them when they are buffeted by such strong global economic forces. She is entirely right, and in many ways that is the biggest issue of all facing our economy. She showed why she will be such an effective chair of the Co-operative party.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), as ever, made some very good points. It was great to hear him mention agriculture, and particularly the need to build on the parts of the mutual sector that already exist there, such as NFU Mutual. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) talked to us about the plans in Plymouth. That level of ambition sounds truly superb. I almost think I should suggest a day trip down to Plymouth for the Co-operative Members of Parliament. He did not offer us many pubs, but perhaps we can see what they have done with the former ones. What an impressive advocate he is for the work going on in Plymouth! I commend him for that.

It was great to get a UK-wide perspective from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and I could not agree more with his points on credit unions. I take my children to a credit union, which is part of their school, every week, and I want every school in the country to have that kind of practical example. That is relatively easy to do. The hon. Gentleman was right to say that it is in Northern Ireland that credit unions have been most successful, and there is much that we can learn from him and from Northern Ireland.

For my own part, I have always relished my role in promoting co-operative and mutual policy in Parliament. I have tried to legislate for co-operative housing tenure, for example, and I have lobbied for greater powers and resources for credit unions. It is that enthusiasm and conviction that I bring to my work in the shadow Co-operative party. I am ambitious about the co-operative movement, and it could be the norm for every worker. It is the norm for executives, and it could be the norm for every worker. Under our plans for inclusive share ownership, it will be. I also want to ensure that our plans for a national investment bank, which will be organised through a network of regional investment banks, draw on the success of banking sectors and co-operative movements such as Germany’s. There is so much that could be done, and we should welcome the diversity, vibrancy and social purpose that the co-operative sector can bring. It has been a pleasure to respond to this debate today, Madam Deputy Speaker. We are, as ever, yours in co-operation.

2.17 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): It is a privilege to respond to this debate today on behalf of the Government. I would like to thank the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) for securing the debate, and the 11 Back-Bench Members who have spoken this afternoon about the enormous positive contributions that co-operatives and mutuals make to our economy and society.

I start by paying particular tribute to the hon. Member for Harrow West for his nearly two decades of leadership of the all-party parliamentary group for mutuals. In my rather more modest tenure of not even 18 months as Economic Secretary to the Treasury, he has lobbyed effectively and constructively on these matters, and I will respond to the points he and other hon. Members have made in the course of this debate. I would also like to congratulate the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) on her recent election as Co-operative party chair and thank her for her contribution today.

The House has heard some impressive figures on the economic contribution made by co-operative and mutual organisations in this country and more widely across
the globe. I would like to acknowledge the experience of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who brings great insights through his work in this country and also in Tanzania. That came over strongly in his thoughtful contribution and his suggestions.

Jeremy Lefroy: I thank the Minister for all the work that he does. Another major co-operative that is important to my farmers is an overseas-based one called Arla. It is based in Denmark, but it is a co-operative that works across borders for the benefit of all farmers—in Britain, Denmark or wherever else.

John Glen: Once again, my hon. Friend makes his knowledge clear. We should be looking to replicate the principles behind that model and to examine how we can extend it.

The all-party parliamentary group for mutuals found that mutuals generate over £130 billion of income each year but, of course, the contribution they make is about so much more than the raw numbers. Crucially, the House has also heard about the positive difference that such organisations make to people’s lives across the UK. I have been fortunate in my time as Economic Secretary to witness their impact at first hand. Last year, I visited 1st Class Credit Union in Glasgow, where I saw the effect of its work to help its members save and borrow responsibly. In my constituency, I am delighted to see my local co-operative, Chalke Valley Stores, flourishing as a community hub, providing a shop, café and post office to local people who might otherwise be underserved in this rural location. Various Members made the point about the welcome opportunities that exist, given the changes on the high street.

From fishing and school meals provision in Plymouth to funeral savings in Stoke, we have heard a large number of relevant examples this afternoon. Whether it is a young family able to buy their first home thanks to a mortgage from their local building society, a community that comes together to keep their local pub or lido running, or an individual able to pay off their debts and start building up savings with the support of their community credit union, mutuals and co-operatives bring choice and agility to our financial system and economy, ensuring that it can meet the varied needs of society.

As we have heard, mutuals are diverse organisations, found in almost every sector of the economy, meaning that the opportunities and challenges can be different. Let me first talk about building societies. Earlier this year, I was pleased to attend a reception to mark the 150th anniversary of the Building Societies Association, which has been the keeper of the flame for the building society movement since 1869. Building societies have been around since almost a century before that, with largely the same core purpose as they have now: helping people to buy their own homes. Building societies provide almost a quarter of UK retail mortgages, including one in three of new mortgages approved in the last quarter.

Although the core purpose remains unchanged, building societies have not stood still. Modern branches offer video mortgage advice and banking on iPads. They are also driving some of the most interesting innovations in the mortgage market. For example, the Saffron Building Society has launched a guarantor mortgage, while Marsden is the latest building society to offer a joint borrower, sole proprietor mortgage. Those two schemes take into account the financial circumstances of family members in order to give first-time buyers a leg up on the property ladder. Meanwhile, the Ecology Building Society offers green mortgages for self-build properties and discounted borrowing for home improvements, which is another great example of how the mortgage market can respond to the needs of society and of the generations to come.

As for retirement lending, it is hugely encouraging to see regional building societies, such as those in Leeds, Nottingham and Loughborough, offering retirement interest-only mortgages.

Mr Sheerman: I was chairing a Committee in another part of the House, so I was out of the Chamber for a little while, but I came back for the winding-up speeches. I think it would be a shame if Nationwide was not mentioned today, and Liverpool Victoria or LV=, which has an office in my constituency, is a great insurance mutual. We have talked a lot about little co-ops, but big co-ops are important, too.

John Glen: As ever, the hon. Gentleman has anticipated my future remarks. I have met representatives from those institutions on several occasions recently.

The examples given today show that regulation and innovation are not mutually exclusive, and that building societies are able to adapt to serve the changing needs in our society. Members have highlighted the need for a proportional regulatory approach, so that building societies can effectively compete with the big banks. The Government are committed to ensuring that capital requirements are implemented proportionately in order to support smaller lenders, such as building societies. The recent updates to the Basel international standards are a clear positive step towards more proportional capital requirements.

The Government have a clear commitment to implementing those standards and refining capital requirements in the UK. That is demonstrated by the inclusion of the capital requirements regulation II in the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill. Where we identify other barriers holding building societies back, we have acted to remove them. For example, one of the first pieces of legislation that I brought forward as Economic Secretary was to enable building societies to join central clearing houses.

I know how vital credit unions are for the people and communities they serve, and I am pleased to see the strength of support across the House today. Building up savings with a credit union, or having the opportunity to take out a reasonably priced loan, is one way that we can prevent people from having to turn to high-cost credit or loan sharks. The Government have acted to support credit unions by legislating to increase the common bond from 2 million to 3 million potential members and raising the cap on the interest rate credit unions can charge from 2% to 3%.

The hon. Member for Harrow West asked about insurance mediation and the provision of hire purchase, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford referred to the impact of regulation on credit unions. ABCUL, the largest credit union trade body, is currently carrying out a sector-wide consultation on the future of credit unions and will complete its work in September. The consultation will consider the legislative framework and opportunities for further change. I will consider the
outcome of that consultation with interest. I visited ABCUL’s conference in March and have had an active dialogue with the organisation while in office. The co-ordination of its requests has been somewhat fragmented over multiple trade organisations, but it has been helpful in conducting the consultation, and I look forward to taking things forward.

In last year’s Budget, we announced an affordable credit package to support social and community lenders. The package included a £2 million affordable credit challenge fund designed to generate innovative FinTech solutions to address challenges faced by social and community lenders, including credit unions, as they try to match the broader innovations in financial services. It also included a measure to make it easier for registered social landlords to refer tenants to credit unions, and a two-year pilot of a new prize-linked savings scheme offered through credit unions. The package is designed to support the credit union sector through increased membership, awareness and deposits, as well as encouraging participants to build up savings to help them cope with financial shocks. We used examples from other jurisdictions—the US in this case—to inform that policy.

I am pleased to announce today that we have selected 15 credit unions from across Great Britain to take part in the prize-linked savings pilot. They are East Sussex, Lewisham Plus, London Capital, Clockwise in Leicester, Nottingham, 1st Alliance, Merthyr Tydfil Borough, Riverside in Liverpool, South Manchester, Central Liverpool, Bradford District, Westcountry in Portishead, Commsave, Police, and Plane Savers. I congratulate the successful credit unions and look forward to seeing the pilot up and running as quickly as possible.

Jim Shannon: I am sure that I must have missed it—I hope I have—but did the Minister mention whether Northern Ireland is in the pilot scheme?

John Glen: I did not mention Northern Ireland in that list, but Northern Ireland obviously has a strong tradition in this area. There was a competitive process, and I would be happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman about a specific credit union.

Members from across the House have spoken of the benefits of the co-operative model and its potential to improve our public services and strengthen our communities. This Government have a strong track record of support for co-operatives. We passed the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014 to reduce legal complexity for co-operative and community benefit societies. My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe spoke about the apparent inadequacy of that legislation, but we have introduced a range of legislative measures in addition to the consolidation Bill since 2014, including making it easier to register digitally as a co-operative.

We have also reduced red tape by equalising the audit treatment between small co-operatives and small companies. I am pleased that the Financial Conduct Authority, which runs the UK mutuals register, recently made several practical changes to support mutuals, including simplifying the forms, creating an online portal and removing the fees to access documents. Members also raised the challenges that co-operatives face when raising capital. We recognise that that can be an issue, which is why in 2014 we increased the amount of share capital that an individual member can put into a co-operative society from £20,000 to £100,000, and I am happy to consider further proposals. We have looked at some proposals before, but I am happy to re-examine them.

Some Members called for changes to social investment tax relief, which is designed to incentivise investment in social enterprises that are constituted to provide a social or community benefit. Community benefit societies, a form of mutual, may therefore be eligible, as their purpose is to benefit the wider community. Although other forms of co-operatives and mutuals may have a wider community benefit, it is not central or essential, and their primary purpose is to benefit their members.

The Government are currently conducting a comprehensive review of social investment tax relief to better understand what impact it has had on access to finance for social enterprises. The public call for evidence is currently open, and it closes on 17 July. We will publish a summary of responses later this year.

I recently met representatives from across the mutual sector at a session hosted by Co-operatives UK and Nationwide. We discussed some of the opportunities and challenges facing mutuals, many of which have been raised by Members today. Following the session, Treasury officials will host a mutuals workshop with Co-operatives UK in July to investigate in more detail some of the barriers faced by mutuals. This will be a good opportunity to explore how the sector and the Government can work more closely together and, importantly, how mutuals can build closer links across the sector.

The latest estimates show that public service mutuals in healthcare and other sectors are delivering more than £2 billion-worth of services across England. They are driving innovation, too, with two thirds saying that they have created new products or services over the past year. Over the last three years, the Office for Civil Society has been delivering a £3.5 million programme to help new mutuals to emerge and existing ones to thrive. It has run several roundtables to create a proposal on the future definition of public service mutuals, which is planned for launch this summer.

I thank all Members for their contributions today and for their ongoing support for the co-operative and mutual sector. I am pleased to see that the sector continues to thrive, from the building societies that can trace their origins back hundreds of years to the newest entrants to the market. I recently met the executive director of South West Mutual, who is from Plymouth and is working with the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce to develop proposals for regional co-operative banks across the UK.

The demand for a new form of co-operative finance is a good sign, and the public appetite for co-operative and mutual services remains strong. This Government will continue to be a strong supporter of the mutual sector. Like hon. Members present today, I will continue to advocate for the sector’s considerable contribution to ensuring that our economy serves the needs of everyone in society.

2.32 pm

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful for the opportunity to wind up this debate and, in particular, to thank the Minister for three specific things. First, the winners of
the additional funding to offer new credit union services will be delighted by his support for their work. I also welcome his interest in further proposals for the legislative reform of credit unions to help them expand, as well as his willingness to look again at finding a solution to help co-operatives and mutuals to raise new share capital.

Nobody would suggest that the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) and I constitute any sort of dream team, but I am genuinely grateful for his support in making this debate happen. He, my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) and the hon. Members for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) rightly talked about how the philosophy of co-operation could help to address the loss of faith in markets and politics, as well as re-energising employees, exciting customers and helping to rebuild or build the social fabric of our country, which we all know is under pressure.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) rightly alluded to the considerably greater contribution made by co-ops and mutuals in America and Germany, and he also began to explore, as others did, the barriers in the UK to enabling the sector here to be as big and widespread.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) rightly praised the Co-operative Group’s leadership on modern slavery, on preventing retail crime and on addressing the hunger in too many of our communities. It is good to hear the hon. Members for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talk about the contribution of co-ops and mutuals in Scotland and Northern Ireland. I say in passing that I hope both Members and, indeed, the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw are able to support my plan to turn RBS into a mutual.

My south-west Co-operative party allies, my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and for Stroud (Dr Drew), along with my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), highlighted the huge potential of energy, agricultural and food co-ops.

Lastly, I welcome the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), who I have no doubt will be a star as chair of the Co-operative party in pushing a co-op development agency. Time prevents me from referencing the huge contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), who is a current star of the co-op movement.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House welcomes the contribution of co-operative and mutual businesses to the UK economy; notes that they provide substantial jobs in Britain, generate significant tax revenues and involve consumers and employees in decision making; and calls on the Government to review what further steps it can take to help grow that sector.

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**Children’s Future Food Report**

2.35 pm

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Children’s Future Food report.

My sentiment differs from that expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) when he was winding up our previous debate on co-operatives and mutuals. He talked, naturally, of his huge pride and pleasure in contributing to that debate, but few Members will rise with pride or pleasure to contribute to this one. This is a very necessary debate, but it is not, I hope, one in which we, as a House of Commons or as a country, can take much pleasure.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for scheduling the debate so that we can properly consider and debate the report, and press the Minister on the Government’s response to the report’s important recommendations. In doing so, it is worth our remembering that hunger in this country did not feature as a topic in our debates prior to 2012, so today we are debating something that has happened very quickly in our society. We are considering how the bottom of our society has fallen out, and how those at the very bottom have been subjected to not only hunger, but destitution. Obviously there are reasons for that, although they are not the point of today’s debate. When George Osborne, the then Chancellor, moved to try to prevent the opening up of our markets to much increased international competition by introducing a living wage, it was an important way of trying to counter the collapse of certainties and standards for the poorest people in our communities. Of course, we know that employers try to get round the living wage in various ways, such as through the gig economy. However, I hope that the Government will soon look seriously and carefully at their role in the hunger we are debating today.

We have had a series of cuts—four years in total—to the income of people on benefits. That had never, ever happened before since the beginning of the welfare state between 1909 and 1911. This is an immensely important issue, and in the review of public expenditure, we expect Ministers to fight very hard for the idea that those who have paid most will be at the front of the queue for future payouts.

It is with real pleasure that I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) for co-chairing the inquiry that led to the report. It is also appropriate to thank not only those who made sure we had a report to consider, but the Food Foundation, which is led by Laura Sandys, who was until recently a Member of this House, for its work in raising the whole issue of hunger and destitution. The report not only does that, but makes practical proposals for what we might do about the situation. Likewise, I wish to thank the hundreds of children and young people who contributed to the inquiry, particularly those young people who, with their co-interviewees, not only brought about a report for us, but are continuing the work by becoming ambassadors on this big issue.

Let us recall how new a topic hunger, including school hunger, and the destitution that follows it is for the House of Commons. If we look at the index of our
Frank Field: I am immensely grateful to my hon. Friend for his speech thus far—it is impossible to disagree with a single point of it. In recent months, my constituency, which has traditionally been seen as a relatively well-off part of London, has seen real evidence of hunger, with people needing our food bank and now school hunger projects. Has he looked at the low take-up of Healthy Start vouchers, which represent Government support for people on benefits with newborn children? Almost 45% of eligible people do not take those vouchers up. Does he not think there is more that the Government and the supermarkets should be doing to promote the scheme?

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I commend my right hon. Friend. For his speech thus far—it is impossible to disagree with a single point of it. In recent months, my constituency, which has traditionally been seen as a relatively well-off part of London, has seen real evidence of hunger, with people needing our food bank and now school hunger projects. Has he looked at the low take-up of Healthy Start vouchers, which represent Government support for people on benefits with newborn children? Almost 45% of eligible people do not take those vouchers up. Does he not think there is more that the Government and the supermarkets should be doing to promote the scheme?

Frank Field: I am glad that my hon. Friend has intervened, because Coventry has the terrific Feeding Coventry project, which not only deals with the issues he set out, but has set up a citizens’ supermarket to cater for people in desperate need while giving them real choice about how they build up their budgets, or at least the food with which they feed themselves and nurture their children.

The Government will rightly say—they should claim some credit for this—that they have been sponsoring pilots for two years. Birkenhead was successful in gaining funding from the first pilot, but we were not successful in gaining any of the large dollops of money the Government gave out this time. We have therefore had to look at other ways of raising money, because an important job remains of feeding children during the school holidays and enabling them to have fun. Members will be raising points about the importance of various aspects of this report, and I hope that the Minister will be able to say something about how he wants to develop those two pilots so that we are not dependent on bidding for funds. I hope he will provide a universal service for all children of people on low incomes so that they are fed during the school holidays and can have fun, like richer children. Once that has occurred, I also hope that the education system will be able to report to him that poorer children have not dropped behind richer children when they come back to school, especially after the long summer holidays, due to a lack of food and nutrition over the holidays widening the educational disadvantage they suffer.

I wish to set out an example of a school governor in my constituency because it tells us about the journey that many of our constituents have travelled, and which we have travelled with them as Members of Parliament. We are grateful that the Government sponsor breakfast clubs at five schools in Birkenhead. Today, however, the fact that 27 schools and community groups could pick up 80,000 breakfasts in Hamilton Square in Birkenhead was made possible by money raised by Feeding Birkenhead and the provision of supplies from that person’s church. This one school governor reported that there was initial amazement that there was a need to start a breakfast club. However, later came the realisation that children did not want to go home during the winter months because their home was cold and there was no food, so they wished to stay in school. It was therefore decided that schools should provide a form of tea for those children so that they would get at least one good meal between going home and coming back the next day for their school breakfast. Sadly, many of our constituents will have made that journey, and many good-minded people in our constituency have done their best to try to counter it.

Following the report and the #Right2Food charter, we very much look to the Government to respond, particularly given the report’s list of recommendations, to which other Members, including our co-chair, will speak. They include the recommendation that there should be a children’s food watchdog. When will that person be put in place? What part will the young food ambassadors play in ongoing work so that we can regularly monitor progress when there are reports to this House?

Let me end my speech by discussing free school dinners. This topic concerned me when I worked for the Child Poverty Action Group. I have been around for some considerable time, so I have experience of the discrimination that poor children suffer through free school meals and how the face of that discrimination has changed. In the early days, children might have been brought in through separate doors, sat at separate tables or given tickets of a different colour. Today, in this age of IT, we find that children are discriminated against through the new IT system.
With thanks to the academics watching the debate from the Public Gallery, I shall end on the following issue. If a child’s parents pay for their dinners and the credit is put on to a card, but that child is not at school to have their school dinner for a particular reason, the money on the card is rolled over. However, for a poor child, the school dinner money for that day is cancelled. Our good academics have found that something like £88 million a year is lost to those children, and that goes somewhere—presumably to the companies that run the cards used to operate the dinner system. I am very concerned about this issue, and the sum itself is horrendous.

Yesterday I wrote to the new Comptroller and Auditor General to ask him to undertake an inquiry on behalf of MPs who are interested in the issue so that we can establish whether £88 million is the floor or if the sum is even larger. If a poorer child does not attend school on one day, it is probably because they are ill, so we would think, as ordinary human beings, that they would need extra food the following day. For them, however, unlike their richer peers, the money that they did not spend the previous day disappears from their cards. I very much hope that the Minister will support the National Audit Office carrying out an inquiry into this new, nasty, vicious little twist that stigmatises poor children who draw on our school dinner system.

2.51 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I rise to speak briefly. I am not going to say that there is not a problem; I have too much respect for the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) not to acknowledge that there is. The causes are deep rooted. It will not surprise Members or the Minister if I say that I think one reason is the fact that family life in this country is not as strong as it was generations ago. My grandparents grew up and lived in poverty in Burnley, a very poor mill town, but from my understanding, and having witnessed how they fed themselves on a very modest income as pensioners, I know that hunger was not prevalent in those homes.

The Minister knows that I have said time and again that we need to look into what we can do to strengthen family life. Let me give one example before I address some specific issues relating to the report. In recent years, we have undermined—our Government have done so, too—the role of mothering, the value of a mother and the vocation that many women have to be a mother in the home. Through our financial recommendations, regulations and incentives, we have almost encouraged many women to go out to work, but for some of them there is fulfilment in being at home, where they can care for their children and think about what goes into building and making a home and nurturing. That includes home cooking, which often can be far more nutritious, at a lower cost, than the easier takeaway meals to which those who work, and who work long hours, often resort. I am conscious that if those from the poorest homes go out to work, they often have to work the longest, most antisocial hours. They often have to leave their children to come home alone or to buy something on the way home from school.

I know that the children’s Minister has looked seriously at our “Manifesto to Strengthen Families”, and I urge him to do so again in this context. There is a place for saying that mothering should be valued and esteemed in our society and not, as I fear it has been, rather reduced in respect over the past few years. Many of the children who are now experiencing some of the challenges that we have heard about are doing so because of the reduction in that role. It is not just the immediate family who benefit when mums are able to give suitable support to the wider family, including cousins and grandchildren—we know the important role that grandparents can play—and the wider community often benefit too. We have all lost out.

I am pleased that Ministers have said that they will look at the report very seriously, and that they will not respond to it in a knee-jerk way. They say that they will carefully consider the findings of the report and respond later in the summer, before the beginning of the next school year. Perhaps the Minister will take into account the wider context of what we are saying about today’s society.

I was particularly interested to see that one of the recommendations relates to supporting pregnant women, which is a really important concern. I am very concerned that we do not pay enough attention to helping women in pregnancy feed themselves and care for themselves. As vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on foetal alcohol syndrome, I know that it is a particular concern that we have noted. Even though there is a Government recommendation that women should not drink during pregnancy, they do, so there is a place for Ministers to speak out much more clearly and strongly about healthy eating during pregnancy.

I have mentioned that I respect the fact that the Government are themselves respecting this report and taking it seriously, and I note that they are already working with Public Health England to look at how nutrition can be better improved. It also appears that it will work with the Food Foundation to explore the creation of a working group to look at how greater oversight of children’s food can be achieved, including engaging with all relevant Government Departments. That is another thing that we do not do enough of in this context: we do not look across Government; we often work in silos. I hope that the Minister will extend his reach right across the very many Departments that need to be engaged if this issue is to be tackled. I am pleased that Ministers have said that they will involve the young food ambassadors, too, because at the end of the day, if we do not hear the children themselves, we are missing something.

Let me look at some of the things that the Government have done. I am pleased that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead referred to the funding of holiday clubs. Although he said that it was not sufficient, it is interesting to note that, last year, the Government awarded £2 million to holiday club providers to deliver free and healthy food, along with enriching activities for children, and that, I think, helped around 18,000 children. I am encouraged that, this year, the Government have extended that to more than £9 million to help 50,000 children. It was certainly a move in the right direction; the funding for holiday clubs has quadrupled.

The Government are working with 11 organisations across England. I am interested to know which they are. It is interesting to note how many organisations are still working voluntarily. Will the Government do any kind of value for money exercise to find out which organisations are providing holiday club food for the best value? Although £9 million is a lot of money, it is still reaching only 50,000 children. Finding a way to support the
organisations in local communities that really are providing best value would be an exercise worth including in the work that the Government are undertaking over this summer.

The Minister also said that the Government are investing £26 million in the national school breakfast programme. That is an important scheme, because breakfast helps children to start the day, concentrate and learn. It is sad that so many arrive at school without having had breakfast. We could address that as part of the strengthening families programme by ensuring that parents—not just women, but their husbands or partners—are skilled up in feeding their children well and taught about the importance of breakfast for children during antenatal classes. In fact, much can be done under that umbrella.

I mentioned what it was like generations ago. I was fortunate to inherit a few good habits so that I knew how to feed my children well. I was just lucky. My children seem to have survived—they are 26 and 23—even though I did not formally learn very much about how to feed them well, but there has been a lack of role models in so many areas over recent generations, so there is now a need to use antenatal classes and family hubs to teach about good nutrition. Some family hubs are already doing that. I welcome their establishment in many parts of the country.

The Minister has greatly supported the family hubs, many of which are teaching good nutrition, which is particularly important because childhood obesity is affecting disadvantaged children more than others. However, something more structured could still be done to help young families and young parents to feed themselves and their children better and more economically. I am therefore pleased that there is more money going into the national school breakfast programme, which I believe will benefit about 250,000 children, but many more children could benefit if we taught people how to feed themselves better. I am interested to hear that the free school meal scheme is being extended, with 1.5 million more infants receiving a free school lunch. The programme is also being extended to further education colleges, and that is very important.

I commend the Government, because they are doing things to address the issue. The soft drinks industry levy appears to have been quite a success, incentivising the industry to reduce the sugar content of soft drinks. The levy has provided money that has enabled us to invest in the PE and sport premium for primary schools, and it is already improving young people’s teeth.

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I commend the Government, because they are doing things to address the issue. The soft drinks industry levy appears to have been quite a success, incentivising the industry to reduce the sugar content of soft drinks. The levy has provided money that has enabled us to invest in the PE and sport premium for primary schools, and it is already improving young people’s teeth. In my constituency, school kitchens were opened during school holidays. The kitchen was positioned at the front of every school, so children never had to go inside: they would queue there to get a hot meal. Their mothers were working in our potbanks and their fathers were working down the pit, so their grandparents and wider family were looking after them. Because of that, we never had to come up with a Government solution—or at least we felt no need to. It has only been in the past decade that this has become a heartbreaking issue that we now need to tackle it.

One of the challenges for all of us is that as soon as we touch on one of these issues, we receive stories from up and down the country about other people’s experiences. I truly believe that every one of us in this place should campaign on something that makes them want to cry—something that is so devastating to us as individuals that we cannot ignore it. For me, that is child food poverty, as it is for many others on the Labour Benches, and across the House.

When I first got selected to run to be the Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove, I started talking to some of my local families. Someone who worked as a school catering assistant told me the story of a child who collapsed—fainted—one Monday morning when he walked into school. It took a while to understand what had happened. It was 11 o’clock in the morning. He had not eaten since his free school meal on
Friday. He was given a sandwich and an apple due to how close it was to lunchtime. He ate the sandwich but did not eat the apple—he put it in his rucksack. People said, “It’s okay—you are going short of food. We have poverty at every level, but as soon as it becomes about service because it was 1 tonne short of food. We have millions of people going through a catering establishment, it will take longer than 20 minutes to ensure that everyone is served a meal and can eat it. As a result, children are getting food to grab and go. That is not in the spirit of free school meals, and it definitely does not encourage healthy eating.

The five recommendations in the report made by children, and another disconcerting issue they told us about was the short period of time they are being given to eat. It could be as little as 20 minutes. If hundreds of people are going through a catering establishment, it is heartbreakingly devastating, and it is why we so desperately need direct intervention.

Since the introduction of universal credit in my constituency, demand at the food bank has gone up 46%. My food bank considered cancelling its Christmas service because it was 1 tonne short of food. We have poverty at every level, but as soon as it becomes about food, it is devastating for communities. That is why I am so grateful that the Government launched the holiday hunger pilots. They did not give any money to Stoke-on-Trent, but I am sure that will be rectified next year, Minister.

Instead, work has been done through the opportunity area board, and the wonderful, extraordinary, fantastically brilliant Carol Shanahan has launched a charity in order to provide such a service in my constituency. Last summer, 16,500 meals were provided by volunteers during the summer holidays. It is important that we look at child food poverty in the round, and I want to tell one story from last year’s projects.

In Kidsgrove in my constituency, the holiday club was going to open at 11:30 am—we cannot call it “holiday hunger in the community”, because people will not come. By half-past 10, there was a queue of 30 people, who knew that it was not going to open for another hour. There was only enough food for 40 people, and 30 were already queuing. Thank God for Tesco, which delivered food and staff to help cook and serve the food, because there were not enough volunteers, never mind enough food. On that day, having expected 40 people, 191 came through the door. There is a need. There is a desire. We have a responsibility to help.

One of the most shocking things to come out of the children’s future food inquiry was access to water, which I know the Minister has been contacted about. There is a limited amount of money available—I listened in horror to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for the importance of this debate, and for his excellent and passionate speech. I am thrilled to be following my very good friend, my hon. Friend. The Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth). It has been an honour to work with her over the last few years on an issue that we are both so very passionate about. I remember that when I met her, as a brand-new MP, she said she would focus on this issue more than on any other, and she has been true to her word. I know the children in her constituency are all the better for it, as are those across the country, because she is not just doing this for the children in her constituency, but fighting for all children.

I, too, want to thank the young people who participated in this inquiry, and I congratulate them on doing so. We have heard some moving testimonies about what those children told us. Without their hard work, bravery and determination, we would not have had such a groundbreaking report; it would just have been another report written about children by adults. Listening to those young food ambassadors was eye-opening—and eye-watering—for everyone, including those of us who think we are more seasoned to some of these issues. Finally, I thank everyone involved in the inquiry,
with special thanks to the Food Foundation, and to Lindsay Graham, whose idea was the genesis of the inquiry.

As co-chair of the children's future food inquiry—along with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who is not in her place, sadly—I have spoken many times about the shocking things that we heard from the food ambassadors about their experiences of hunger and food insecurity. I am pleased that other Members have shared some of those examples in detail. Today, I will focus on issues that I did not mention when we had the Westminster Hall debate on this issue last month, so I will mainly focus on holiday hunger and breakfast clubs.

First, I would like to hold the Minister to account on some of the things he said in response to that debate. [Interruption.] I think he is a little bit distracted, so perhaps I should wait until he is listening, so he knows what I am going to ask him. Minister, hello! [Interruption.] Wonderful. I know the Minister was distracted by his Whip, but I will be asking him some direct questions, and it would not be fair on him if I did not give him a chance to listen to those questions. I was referring to the debate we had in Westminster Hall, to which he responded, and I am going to reiterate some of those responses and ask him to comment on them further.

As hon. Members will know, the young food ambassadors put together the #Right2Food charter, to outline their demands on Government, and the committee made up of MPs, peers and charities calls on the Government to establish an independent food watchdog that will examine the cost of the policies in the charter. During the Westminster Hall debate on this issue, the Minister said that he had asked his team “to work with the Food Foundation to look into setting up a working group”.—[Official Report, 8 May 2019; Vol. 659, c. 312WH.]

Can the Minister please provide a progress report on that commitment? Will he also please restate his commitment to continue listening to and working with the young food ambassadors themselves? The Minister also said that the free school meals allowance will be looked at in the spending review, so can he reaffirm this commitment? Can he give the House an insight on when the spending review is estimated to take place under the new Prime Minister? That may be a little more difficult, but he might have a bit of an idea.

As the chair of the all-party group on school food, I am very interested in this issue, as is my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), who is a vice-chair of that all-party group. Unfortunately, she was not able to be in her place today either, due to commitments elsewhere in the House. However, she has asked me to put on record her support for a radical change in how we do school food.

As we heard in the closing remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead, today I have a report from Feeding Britain, and the excellent academics from Northumbria University, led by Professor Greta Defeyter who is in the Public Gallery today. The report found that in just one year, £88.3 million allocated to local authorities to provide free school meals for eligible children disappeared. The issue was first brought to my attention a number of years ago, and I have tried to get to the bottom of it through Children North East, which is an excellent anti-poverty charity from my region. It raised the issue with me because children had raised it with them. Where does that money go? Who benefits from it? Certainly not the children for whom it is intended.

The young food ambassador spoke to the Minister about that issue directly. Has the Minister had time to consider it further? I am sure he agrees that children should have access to the full benefits they are entitled to and that are intended for them, not for whoever else is managing to pocket the money. He promised that he would write to all schools, and earlier this month he did just that and set out the schools’ responsibilities on food, especially free drinking water. I thank him for that. We all hope that the letter will have had an effect on schools and that we will see immediate changes, especially free water.

It is not only during school time that children go hungry or do not have access to healthy food. Many children up and down the country will be counting down the days to the summer holidays, but for many parents and guardians, those holidays bring not joy but dread. Children who usually receive free school meals do not have access to them when the school gates shut, which is for a total of 170 days per year. Holidays can be an expensive time for all families, especially those who are trying to make their food stretch.

The summer holiday is thought to contribute to many weeks’ worth of learning loss. Professor Greta Defeyter has done studies into that, and it has been academically proven. Many teachers report the effects of that learning loss when the school term begins again after the summer. Andrew McCreery, a youth worker in Portadown, told the Committee that when they asked children to bring a packed lunch for the holiday programmes they were running, 10% to 15% of children brought no lunch, and those who did often brought in bread, cold microwave chips, biscuits, or even an empty lunchbox. That is why I was proud to play a small part by campaigning, lobbying for and securing the holiday hunger provision pilots, and I am pleased they are going ahead again this year.

My hon. Friends the Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), and for Stoke-on-Trent North do amazing work in their local communities over the summer holidays to ensure that children and families are fed. Because of them, thousands of children who would otherwise go hungry are fed every day in the summer holidays. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead has also done that over many years, and they should all be proud of their work. I will try to replicate that and learn from best practice across Sunderland next summer. However, such work should not be down to my hon. Friends, or to the local authorities, charities or communities that step in to do what I believe to be the Government’s job. Will the Minister look at creating a holiday provision framework, or create a holiday provision framework, or even a national framework, across the UK, to ensure that those children and families who need it can be fed healthy food over the school holidays?

I move to breakfast clubs, and once again I thank the Minister for giving up some of his valuable time when I met Carmel McConnell from Magic Breakfast and David Holmes from Family Action. I know he was busy, but he gave some of his time to speak to them,
which they both appreciated, as did I. Carmel McConnell and David Holmes are doing excellent work, and they currently feed 250,000 school children each day through the national school breakfast programme. However, that funding is scheduled to come to an end in March 2020. This week, the Minister said that funding would be decided in the upcoming spending review—this comes back to his crystal ball.

Is the Minister able to provide any reassurance to children in schools that the funding for the national school breakfast programme will continue beyond March 2020? The programme is a lifeline for children, parents, families and teachers, who see the immediate benefit of a child having breakfast before they start their school day with regard to their learning and, ultimately, their health and long-term outcomes. There can be no better measure to help to close the gap we all talk about than making sure children are not hungry and are able to learn.

Last year, I visited Surrey Square Primary School with my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) to see the excellent work the school does in feeding, clothing and caring for children and their families. It is an excellent school and I encourage the Minister to visit if he wants to see a local school that does everything so well. It looks after everyone, all children and families, but especially those with no recourse to public funds. Will the Minister please ensure that children whose families have no recourse to public funds are not forgotten when we design policies for school food? No child, no matter what their family situation, should go hungry in our schools. He may be aware—it was raised in the report—that those children are not entitled to free school meals. They have no recourse to public funds and they are not even entitled to a free school meal unless the school decides to feed them anyway. A lot of schools do. Unfortunately, children across the country are going hungry for lots of reasons and I know the Minister knows he needs to address that.

Having spoken to the young food ambassadors, I know that the Minister is very aware of how important this issue is to them, their peers and their families. The Minister has committed to formally responding to the report in the autumn term, and I thank him for that commitment. I hope he is still a Minister then. If he is able to commit to anything further today, before the summer holidays—before any reshuffle—I know that the young food ambassadors would really appreciate it.

Finally, I would like to welcome today’s launch of the national food strategy, led by Henry Dimbleby. I worked closely with Henry on the excellent school food plan and that work has continued. Cross-departmental considerations on food security and safety are a welcome step towards ensuring that everyone, including children, has access to healthy and affordable food. I very much look forward to working with Henry on this new endeavour.

This has been an excellent debate. I look forward to hearing those who have yet to speak, and to a positive and decisive response from the Minister.

3.28 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for putting his case so well. I also commend the hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeth) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for their contributions. No one could listen to their contributions and not be moved. Minister, I am going to say some things fairly firmly. I am not a person who shies away from that, but I am no nature—but I want to speak honestly about how things are. I think everyone has done that. I need to do that too, and in a way that I hope the Minister can respond to.

I am well known for supporting working class people and, increasingly, the so-called middle class who are living hand-to-mouth. It is beyond shocking to me and others that in this day and age children are starving and their families have to turn to food banks to put food in their bellies. Children are suffering for their parents’ financial position. Through no fault of their own, children are sitting in school classes hungry and unable to concentrate. When you are hungry, you are unable to concentrate. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North referred to the wee child who fainted because he had no food. It is clear that children are unable to concentrate and frankly that is cruel.

It is heartbreaking that 4.5 million children across the United Kingdom live in poverty. We in this place and the Government are not doing enough to tackle the issue. That is somewhat vindicated by the fact that we foist responsibility on to charities, but why is this the case?

To the surprise of the mainstream media, which often portrays the Church as out of touch and not involved in communities, the Church is stepping up to the challenge. That is the case in my constituency and, from what I have heard so far, I suspect that churches in everybody else’s constituencies are filling the gap and taking responsibility. Despite some saying that the Church indoctrinates children, the only thing that it seems to be indoctrinating children into displaying is compassion.

For me, that is clear. It is bringing up the next generation to care and take action when they see people in need and are in a position to help.

I am very proud to be the Member of Parliament for Strangford, which is stepping up to the challenge on child food poverty. Our local churches in Newtownards have stepped up where local and national Government have failed. The Thriving Life Church, the Ards Congregational, the Ards Baptist Church, the Glen Community Church, St Mark’s, Londonderry Primary School, Greenwell Street Presbyterian, First Ards Presbyterian Church, Ards Reformed Presbyterian, Scrabo Hall, Scrabo Presbyterian Church, St Patrick’s tennis skills and Northdown Christian Fellowship Church have all advertised that they include free food with their Bible clubs.

Other Members have referred to the summer, which was in my mind before the debate, because it brings added problems for children and their parents, who do not have schools to fall back on. That is why what the churches in Strangford and Newtownards specifically are doing to come together collectively, cross-religion, is so important. They have all seen the need and have stepped into the gap. They should not have to do that—it is not their responsibility—yet they are, because that is what their Bible teaching, beliefs and faith tell them to do. We need to ask ourselves in this place: are we doing all we can? The Government have not delivered for these poor children who need food, which is a sickening thought.
Whatever is being done to solve this pressing issue is clearly not working. Thanks to charities such as the Trussell Trust—it set up the first food bank in Northern Ireland, in my constituency in Newtownards—and other various organisations in the community, the problem is minimised. Without them, the issue could be far worse, which is a scary thought, to say the least.

The situation is particularly disappointing, bearing in mind that there is not enough focus on the options to minimise the problem. Recent data published by UNICEF shows that one in five youngsters under 15 now lives in a food-insecure home. How is that possible in this day and age? This should be a red flag for Government and for everyone else, yet they continue to employ—I say this respectfully, Minister—austerity measures that only make matters worse. It really does not take a genius to realise that the cuts and changes that the Government continue to employ are paramount to the problem. That is the feedback I am getting in my constituency about universal credit. The food bank tells me that the changes in benefits are putting the pressure on, so I have to say that in this House because it is true. It is happening and we cannot ignore it. When someone works different hours and their tax credits claim materially changes, they migrate to universal credit with a five-week embargo on payments. That puts people over the poverty baseline and it is really unfair.

I asked my local food bank for its up-to-date figures. This is what is happening in my area:

“So for the last year we have fed 1,992 people...846 were children”—

so 45% were children. It continued,

“this is a 3% rise on the last year. The rise is on the increase as we see more and more families switching to UC. And as we head to the summer, kids off school—414 of those kids from low income families = summer hunger with no free school meals.”

That is going to be the issue this summer. The churches stepping in, running their Bible classes and Bible clubs and having the meals alongside those, is so important.

The food bank continued:

“Last summer June-August we saw 152 low income families alone! The problem we see is families going without.”

The reality of today’s society is that families are going without. Parents do not eat so that their children can, or children do eat not because their parents are not eating either.

The food bank continued:

“Last year we began partnering with Ards Community Network to help families with free uniforms. And this year we are launching with local churches and their holiday bible clubs to offer lunches.”

I suggest that is true community spirit at work, alongside the churches and faith groups, offering practical, financial and emotional help when it is needed most.

I urge the Government to do the right thing by helping to better the lives of those who are left with no option but to line up at food banks. More funding is needed, along with better understanding. One of the fundamental purposes of government is to help the people. Frankly, that is not being achieved at the moment.

Twenty years ago, Tony Blair—people have their own opinions about his—pledged to end child poverty, calling it a “20-year mission”. Three Prime Ministers later—the fourth is on the way—we are nowhere near accomplishing that mission. Children have to go home after school and sleep on an empty stomach. That is a disgrace. Never would I have expected child poverty to be such a problem in 2019. Nations are meant to develop, not to go backwards, but I am afraid that is what I see.

The National Housing Federation, using Office for National Statistics data, has found that roughly 847,000 children from working families—a 30% increase from 2010—live in poverty due to the sole reason that their homes are too expensive. We need to look at the reasons for that as well. One of the reasons is the cost of rental accommodation. Many parents have to choose between paying the rent and feeding their children. We have recently had debates about that—last week in Westminster Hall, I think—when there has been some talk about how the Government could help people under rental pressure. It breaks my heart that parents have to make that choice.

With all due respect, we must stop approaching these life and death issues in a daze. I gently suggest that this House needs to wake up to what is happening, because children are starving and families are having to turn to food banks. For heaven’s sake, we are in the 21st century and this is one of the richest countries in the world. When will we get it right for those children and families? I am sorry if I am being a bit harsh, but we must take a good look at the important underlying crisis in this country. More importantly, we must make better decisions. We need to be aware of how decisions made here affect children throughout the whole United Kingdom.

I am speaking today from my knowledge of the matter in Northern Ireland, which comes from seeing it directly in my constituency office every week. The Thriving Life Church food bank in Newtownards tells me that the organisation that points the most people to it is our advice centre. That tells me, and hopefully this House, that I have my finger on the pulse of what is happening in my constituency, and that I understand that the food bank is doing an incredible job, but I also understand that people are under pressure.

We must take a better look at this important underlying crisis. The issue is not one that we can poke with daisies—if we poke it with a daisy, it will not move, because daisies have no strength. I say this with respect to Opposition colleagues—they may agree with me and they may not—but of course Jeremy Corbyn would make the matter worse, with his Marxist manifesto—

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have not.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You are normally a very caring Member of Parliament. I think we need to keep to what we are discussing, rather than getting into what we think another Member may do, especially when we have not given notice.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Let us not look at this issue as if it could be worse; let us look at it as if the state of this country for poor children could be better, should be better and must be better as soon as possible.
3.38 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am pleased to have this opportunity to participate in the debate, although I agreed absolutely with the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who is a long-time campaigner on these issues, when he said that this debate should give us cause for shame.

The children’s future food inquiry has done a considerable amount of work, gathering evidence from workshops with nearly 400 children across the UK, alongside polling young people’s views and academic research on food insecurity to produce the report that we are debating today. Much of what it tells us, as well as being shocking, is, sadly, unsurprising. I know that the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) means well, but I am afraid that I had to disagree with her when she said that in previous generations things were not quite so bad. I may not be old enough to have a memory of the generations to which she is referring, but I suspect that things were equally bad if not worse, and people just talked about it less.

Fiona Bruce: I am not saying that there was not poverty, but what I am saying is this. My grandmother was born in 1900, and what I witnessed was that she knew how to make a little money go a long way in cooking nutritious meals that fed a family. That seems to be something that we have not passed on from generation to generation, but it is one of the solutions that we could seek to achieve for today’s generation.

Patricia Gibson: What I will say in my speech may explain more fully why, although I respect very much what the hon. Lady has said and understand the point that she has made. I do not agree with it. I think that the problem of children growing up in hunger has always been with us, regardless of what generation we are talking about, but in this day and age we are no longer willing to accept it. That is why we have debates like this, and why the report was undertaken in the first place.

We can go back even further. I am a great lover of Charles Dickens. A mere glance at his work tells us that every single novel he ever wrote features a deeply neglected child in challenging circumstances. That is a direct result of his having been sent out to work at a very young age himself, an experience born of necessity to keep hunger at bay. He understood that the sanctity of childhood was lost for ever through poverty, hunger, and an uncaring society. Indeed, his childhood experience—his own truncated childhood—scarred him to such an extent that he never forgot it, which is why he always included in his novels a child who was a victim of a society that did not do enough to protect its children from poverty and want.

In her moving speech, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) shared with us some real-life and very sobering examples from her constituency, which sounded as though they could have been lifted directly from a Dickens novel. That, in this day and age, is utterly and truly appalling. I agree with the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who said that the Government’s role was critical if we were to face down hunger in our children. That view was echoed by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

We know that parents want to do the best for their children, but we also know that it is much easier to do the best for our children if we have a reasonable standard of living and enough money to live on, which in turn will give us enough food to eat. In my constituency, child poverty levels average about 30% across each of the distinct towns. We know that that figure is set to rise, just as the figures will in every other constituency in the United Kingdom, which is absolutely disgraceful. My local authority area has the third highest rate of child poverty in Scotland, which is indeed sobering.

Let us not forget that poverty is not just about money. Today we are talking about the importance of food for children, but poverty does not just rob children of access to proper, nutritious, healthy food; it robs them of self-esteem, it robs them of opportunities, it robs them of hope, and it robs them of the secure sense of wellbeing that every child has the right to enjoy. That casts a shadow over them for the rest of their lives.

I know this, because I myself grew up in poverty, the youngest of eight children. After my father’s death, my mother endured struggles with poverty that no one should have to endure—although, to her credit, I had no idea just how poor we were until I was grown up. That is not a hard-luck story. I share it as a way of showing that I understand, as many in the Chamber do, what poverty can do to a family. I know about the barriers that it creates for parents and, in turn, for their children.

The austerity agenda, which a number of Members have mentioned today, and the fact that families all too often feel punished for their poverty, only adds to the damage, the hopelessness, and the erosion of the idea that life could be so much more. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead spoke of people who have not only been condemned to hunger but all too often been condemned to destitution.

We know it is hard for parents to source healthy and nutritious food on an extremely tight budget that can hardly stretch over a normal week. This kind of hunger does not affect just those children whose parents are on benefits; we must face up to the fact that the working poor exist and many of their children are living in poverty.

To help combat this I am proud to say that the Scottish Government have expanded the provision of free school meals to those eligible for free early learning and childcare and free school meals for infants, and plan to monitor food standards in schools. I am pleased that the children’s future food inquiry report acknowledged that.

In addition, there is to be more funding for more children to have access to healthy food during the school holidays. A six-week holiday for Scotland’s schoolchildren with no free school meals can place an intolerable strain on families who are struggling. We cannot sit by and watch our children go hungry, so the children’s charity Cash for Kids is being granted £150,000 to help local community organisations to support children during the school holidays with activities and access to meals, and this funding is the first allocation of £1 million over the next two years to tackle food insecurity outside of term time.

Every child in Scotland attending a local authority school has a right to a free school lunch in primaries 1, 2 and 3, regardless of their family’s circumstances.
After primary 3 these free lunches continue if the child’s parents receive certain benefits. Many Members today have called on the Minister to similarly invest in support for children in England and Northern Ireland and I hope he listens to those pleas.

Alongside the £3.5 million fair food fund to tackle food insecurity, we are working hard in Scotland to ensure that everyone can feed themselves and their families to reduce the reliance on emergency provision. These initiatives matter as we see food bank usage rising. Largely in my constituency food bank usage has soared by between 200% and 300% since November last year. In this day and age that is an absolute disgrace. I cannot understand how any elected representative can be blind to or unmoved by the evidence showing the suffering and hardship caused by recent welfare reforms. It is no accident that the roll-out of universal credit, with its five-week wait for payment, has coincided with an increase in the use of food banks.

All claimants are expected to be on universal credit by 2023, including almost 10,000 more North Ayrshire and Arran households. That means that, sadly, this trend of food bank use looks set to continue, with no sign that the UK Government are prepared to pause and properly fix this system which is not fit for purpose and causes unnecessary hardship.

The food our children eat has implications for life chances, as does the food they do not eat. There is little point in trying to tackle the attainment gap if children go to bed hungry—it cannot be done—and I welcome the Scottish Government’s joined-up approach in that regard.

The SNP Scottish Government announced only yesterday that there will be a new form of support, the Scottish child payment, which will provide £10 each week for all eligible children from low-income families under the age of 16 by 2022, and that payment will increase annually in line with inflation. This benefit will be fast-tracked so all eligible under six-year-olds will receive it by 2021. When delivered in full, 410,000 children will be eligible for this payment. This is yet another front we can open up in the war against hunger in our own country. One hungry child is one too many, but it is also a political choice to do more to tackle child poverty and the resultant hunger that is poverty’s bedfellow. It is an absolute disgrace that anybody ever has to go hungry in the United Kingdom. The mark of a civilised society is to combat that in a sensitive and robust way. The Scottish Government are choosing not to pass by on the other side when they see families in need of this basic necessity, and I urge the Minister today to do as much for other families.

3.51 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): This is my first appearance at the Dispatch Box as Labour’s children and families spokesperson, and I am glad that it is in a debate on such an important issue. It is shocking and unacceptable that child hunger still exists in our country to this extent. I would like to take this opportunity, if I may, to thank our previous spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), for her work in this role. She brought her experience as a social worker to the position, and she made a significant contribution to our manifesto in the general election.

I am grateful to all Members who have spoken in the debate. From my own party, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) drew on his vast experience and powerfully highlighted the extent of child hunger, the damage it does to children and the link to welfare reform and benefit cuts. He called on the Government to act. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) reminded us how widespread holiday hunger has become for children from low-income families, particularly over the last decade. She shared some powerful and moving examples from our own experience. My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) emphasised the importance of listening to children talk about their experiences. She asked the Minister a series of direct questions, which I hope he heard when the Whips were not distracting him. We look forward to his answers.

Members of both Houses and from all sides of the political debate have contributed to this important report, and I would like to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) on co-chairing the inquiry, as well as the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), my hon. Friends the Members for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) and for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead, and my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North and for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), who served on the committee. I must, in particular, thank the 15 young food ambassadors who also gave their assistance and their experience.

The committee’s work now joins a body of important literature that highlights the shocking levels of poverty in our country. One hungry child is one too many, but UNICEF estimates that 2.5 million British children live in households where food is not always securely available, and the Trussell Trust points out that more than 500,000 emergency food parcels went to children alone last year. It is staggering that that can be happening here, in one of the richest countries in the world.
Food insecurity blights children’s immediate and future lives. It can trigger mental health problems, and it can damage a child’s physical health. It can lead to obesity and restricted growth, and it can retard healthy development. It affects children’s school attendance as well as their ability to learn. Ask any teacher, and they will tell you that a hungry child cannot concentrate in class. In a BBC report on child poverty last year, one headteacher described their pupils as having grey skin. Another described the unhealthy pallor of the students in their school. Something is going badly wrong in our society if we are allowing this to happen to so many of our children. A society that loves and cares for its children does not let them go hungry, especially not to this extent.

The report reinforces the importance of the early years of a child’s life, particularly the first 1,000 days. Those early years have a defining impact on a child’s development, affecting everything from educational achievement to economic security to health. The report states: “The food, energy and nutrients which children eat during this period determine how well they grow, how well they do at school and are also a good predictor of long-term health.”

I invite the Minister to tell the House what has happened to the Government’s review of the first 1,001 critical days—an excellent initiative commissioned by the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), the former Leader of the House. The Department’s approach to early years has been lacklustre to say the least. A thousand Sure Start centres have been closed since 2010. As the Minister knows, they were places where young mums could receive advice and support on breastfeeding, healthy nutrition and their child’s critical early development.

The report highlights how free school meal provision is inconsistent, and it expresses concern about how the free school meals policy works, including worries that the allowance is not always enough to buy a meal. As my right hon. and hon. Friends have said this afternoon, the allowance is not always enough to buy a meal. As my right hon. and hon. Friends have said this afternoon, it is important to find out how much money is not spent and what happens to it, so that it can be redirected to support the children for whom it was originally intended. One way of tackling child hunger would be to introduce universal free school meals for all primary school children, paid for by removing the VAT exemption on private school fees, as proposed in Labour’s manifesto. The outgoing Prime Minister is somewhat belatedly talking about increasing education funding, so perhaps the Minister can start today by matching Labour’s commitment on free school meals.

As Members have mentioned, several months have passed since the inquiry published the final report. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East held a Westminster Hall debate on 8 May to discuss its findings and recommendations. During the debate, the Minister stated that he had asked his team in the Department to work with the Food Foundation to look into setting up a working group. I am sure that Members across the House would appreciate an update from the Minister on how that working group is proceeding. Members will also want to know whether the Government intend to involve the inquiry’s young food ambassadors in future work, and what the Government intend to do with the five key asks of the #Right2Food charter.

Since the publication of the Food Foundation’s report, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, has published the UN’s findings on poverty in our country. That report exposes the cold reality of poverty in Britain today. It reinforces the findings of the Food Foundation, observing that children are showing up at school with empty stomachs and that schools are collecting food and sending it home because teachers know that their students will otherwise go hungry. Teachers, the report states, are not equipped to ensure that their students have clean clothes and food to eat, not least because many teachers rely on food banks themselves. The UN also predicted that, without urgent change, 40% of British children will be living in poverty by 2021. What a damning indictment it is of this Government that they are allowing that to happen in one of the richest countries in the world.

Jim Shannon: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise the good work done by faith groups? Their physical and financial contribution enables food to go directly to those who need it most. They play an important role.

Mr Reed: I absolutely acknowledge the amazing work done by faith groups, but many other parts of civil society, such as charities and other community organisations, are also stepping in to alleviate child hunger that, frankly, should not exist in the first place.

One hungry child is one too many, but 2.5 million British children regularly go hungry. The Food Foundation report shames this Government, but it is also a wake-up call, and it must lead to action.

3.58 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) on securing this important debate and thank all colleagues who participated in the inquiry, including the hon. Members for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). We have heard contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and the hon. Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson).

I welcome the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) to his role as shadow Minister for children and families. We may come to our roles from different policy perspectives, but we share a passion for wanting to do the best for the children and families whom we ultimately serve.

I know that hon. Members in the Chamber have a sincere and long-held interest in this area. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead was a member of the inquiry, and I thank him for his work and his continued significant contribution to shaping my tenure in office and, of course, to children’s health and wellbeing.

The inquiry’s report is the result of a detailed and thorough examination of how we ensure that all children and young people have access to healthy and nutritious meals. I extend my thanks to all the children, young people, practitioners and, of course, researchers who were involved in its production. I also thank the many hon. Members on both sides of the House, and colleagues in the other place, for their contributions to this important work.

I was pleased to attend the launch of the report in April, at which I was truly privileged to be fortunate enough to meet some of the young food ambassadors in
Finally, my letter highlighted the range of resources and guidance that is available for schools, including on meeting the mandatory school food standards and supporting children on free school meals, and curriculum resources for schools to help children to lead healthier lives. The Government have recently taken significant action to ensure that all children can access healthy food at school and beyond.

MRS HODGSON: On the Minister’s point about ensuring that schools deliver the healthy food required under standards set out in the school food plan, will the Minister ensure that Ofsted is suitably tooled up and equipped with the most knowledgeable staff, so that when they go into schools to do their inspection, no school will be rated as outstanding unless its food delivery and the food given to children is outstanding?

NADHIM ZAHAWI: The hon. Lady makes her point powerfully, as she has done in the past. She is right—we have to look at every lever available to make sure that we nudge school leaders towards the best behaviour in delivering healthy food.

In 2018, our holiday activities and food programme awarded £2 million to holiday club providers to deliver free healthy food and enriching activities to about 18,000 children across the country, as was mentioned earlier. Following the success of this first year, we have more than quadrupled the funding for the summer of 2019. As my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton mentioned, we are working with 11 organisations in 11 local authorities across the country—I am happy to write to her about those organisations. Both the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead said that they were disappointed that there had not been a successful bid from their constituencies for a holiday activities and food co-ordinator. I am sure they will appreciate that there has been a lot of interest in the programme from organisations, but my team is happy to talk to bidders who want more detail and feedback on their bids so that we can keep pushing forward in this area.

I am also proud of my Department’s breakfast clubs programme. We are investing up to £26 million to set up or improve 1,700 breakfast clubs in schools in the most disadvantaged areas of the country, with the clear aim that those clubs stay sustainable over the longer term. The clubs ensure that children start the day with a nutritious breakfast. Such breakfasts not only bring a health benefit, but help children to concentrate and learn in school. I have visited one of these breakfast clubs, and one positive outcome from it was a rise in school attendance, with the fact that parents brought in healthy nutritious breakfast. Such breakfasts not only bring a health benefit, but help children to concentrate and learn in school. I have visited one of these breakfast clubs, and one positive outcome from it was a rise in school attendance, with the fact that parents brought in

Frank Field: The Minister has quickly gone on to the important topic of having free water in schools, but was he also shocked about how poorer children—we do not know how many—lose entitlement if they are not in school on a given day, as the credit on their card for a free school meal is cancelled? I hope the National Audit Office will be looking at this issue; will he and the Department also do so?

NADHIM ZAHAWI: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that point. I intend to address that matter later in my remarks.

Finally, my letter highlighted the range of resources and guidance that is available for schools, including on meeting the mandatory school food standards and supporting children on free school meals, and curriculum resources for schools to help children to lead healthier lives. The Government have recently taken significant action to ensure that all children can access healthy food at school and beyond.

NADHIM ZAHAWI: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that point. I intend to address that matter later in my remarks.
Thirdly, under our revised criteria for free school meals, which were introduced last April, we estimate that more children will benefit from free meals by 2022 compared with under the previous benefit system. In fact, numbers released today show that 1.3 million children are benefiting from free school meals.¹

On the point made earlier by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead, one recommendation in the inquiry’s report was that any unspent free meal allowance should be carried over for pupils to use on subsequent days. Schools absolutely have the freedom to do this if their local arrangements allow for it—indeed, Carmel Education Trust in the north-east has adopted the practice. The right hon. Gentleman has raised an important point, however, and we should look into the matter to see how we can get all schools to adopt a similar practice, if they can. I should highlight that free school meals are of course intended as a benefit in kind, rather than as a cash benefit, but I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman understands that better than I do. Our critical interest is that schools meet their legal requirements to provide free and healthy meals to eligible children every day.

My Department is responsible for setting the mandatory school food standards, which have been mentioned. They require schools to serve children healthy and nutritious food. The standards restrict foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar—both you and I, Mr Deputy Speaker, could benefit from fewer foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar. We are currently in the process of updating the standards, working with Public Health England to deliver a bold reduction in the sugar content of school meals. This is part of a wider Government plan to tackle childhood obesity. Sadly, as was mentioned in the Westminster Hall debate, the other side of the coin with regard to children going without food is obesity among the most disadvantaged families and their children.

Patricia Gibson: The Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland has described the Scottish child payment, which was announced yesterday, as a “game changer in the fight to end child poverty.” Will the Minister think about whether he could bring in something similar to help with child poverty throughout the UK?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am very much of the mindset that we should share best practice throughout the four nations, and I intend to visit to Scotland to look at what is being done there and to share what we are doing in England, too.

Many of the young people involved in the children’s future food report queried why unhealthy food is cheaper and more readily available than healthier choices. Through our childhood obesity plan, the Government are taking forward significant action on the advertising and promotion of unhealthy foods to children.

In the few minutes I have left, I shall address some of the direct questions I was asked. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead asked about the future of the holiday programme, which will of course be part of the spending review considerations. We have already learned a tremendous amount from this year’s and last year’s programmes on holiday activities. That evidence will help me in my discussions with the Treasury.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton mentioned the programme’s value for money. Our independent evaluation of the programme will report on that early next year. I am conscious of the time, however, so while I have detailed responses to her points and those made by other hon. Members, I will write to them rather than taking any more of the House’s time.

I am enormously grateful to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead for securing the debate and all colleagues who participated. The Government are already taking important and significant steps, and we will continue to do so, while working with all those involved in this important report.

Frank Field: Before I make a request of the Minister, I wish, like others, to thank those Members who participated in the debate: the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) and the Minister himself.

In this Chamber, in Westminster Hall and in Committee, we have been debating the evil of hunger among children in this country for seven whole years; we are still doing so. Under our system, we know that it is the Cabinet that has the power to do things. We conclude our debate today in the knowledge that all too many children will be hungry tonight and tomorrow morning. As we approach the school holidays, despite the efforts of many voluntary bodies and the Government, the number of hungry children will significantly increase. Will the Minister undertake to tell members of the Cabinet that the House of Commons knows that if we as a country wish to abolish hunger as we know it, the place where a decision will be made is the Cabinet, so will they act?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Children’s Future Food report.

¹ [Official Report, 2 July 2019, Vol. 662, c. 9MC.]
Serco and Asylum Seeker Lock-change Evictions

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

4.15 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. I rise to discuss the very important and serious matter of Serco and its announcement to press ahead with asylum seeker lock-change evictions. In giving a bit of background, I will be mentioning a number of organisations that have expressed their concerns, both publicly and to me. They include: the Scottish Refugee Council, Positive Action in Housing, the Govan Law Centre, the Govan Community Project, Glasgow City Council and the Scottish Government and, of course, the Tenants Union’s Living Rent campaign, whose badge I proudly wear today.

Earlier this month, Serco announced that it was going to restart its inhumane lock-changing programme, which could leave hundreds of asylum seekers homeless and destitute in the city of Glasgow. I and my colleagues in the Scottish National party want to prevent these evictions and future evictions from taking place. Serco currently has a contract with the Home Office for the provision of asylum accommodation in Scotland. The recent threat to evict 300 asylum seekers on to the streets of Glasgow without any consultation only strengthens the arguments that a public sector bid for those contracts would have been the best way forward.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) who serves on the Home Affairs Committee knows, in January 2017 the Committee published a highly critical asylum accommodation report. It made system-wide recommendations; uncovered unacceptable housing standards and insufficient recognition of needs, such as mental health, torture, sexual violence and trafficking; and raised serious questions about the rigour, consistency and lack of public transparency in the Home Office’s performance management regime of its three housing contractors across the United Kingdom.

I do not want to discuss the merits of live legal proceedings in this place—indeed that would not be right—but it is a concern that I have a constituent who is subject to live legal proceedings in Scotland’s supreme appellate court, the Inner House of the Court of Session, and I am surprised that both the Home Office and Serco have decided to press ahead with these lock-change evictions while the matter is still to be settled in the courts. Labelling asylum seekers as “failed” is not the sort of language that we should be using when discussing some of the most vulnerable in our society. The asylum system and process can be very lengthy and very complicated, and using labels such as “failed” is entirely unhelpful.

The Scottish Refugee Council has also expressed its concerns on the matter. Serco’s announcement on 12 June was made to Glasgow City Council and the Scottish Government, but not to Members of Parliament from Glasgow. We did not get that until we saw the press release. The public statement caused great concern. Of course, we were written to by the Immigration Minister on 17 June regarding the announcement and the lock-change eviction plan. It is clear that this is a co-ordinated action between the Home Office and Serco. Like the Scottish Refugee Council, I oppose these actions, and I want to focus on some of what Serco is up to.

No one should be rendered street homeless, and certainly never, ever without the protection of court due process. There is a wider strategic importance in Glasgow continuing to resist and overcome the clear housing and due process gaps in the current asylum system that will have relevance to other parts of the UK, especially other asylum dispersal areas such as the north of England, the Midlands, south Wales and Belfast. We are clear that what is happening in Glasgow—with multinationals such as Serco intending to evict vulnerable people and render them immediately street homeless through callous, traumatizing and possibly still unlawful lock changes—is an extreme symptom of a failed and broken Home Office approach to its responsibilities under the refugee convention and EU asylum legal instruments to prevent the destitution of those seeking refugee protection.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his powerful speech and for bringing this debate to the House. He has mentioned some of the local authorities that have stepped up to the plate to take the dispersal of asylum seekers in local authority areas. Does he agree that other local authorities that might have been interested in becoming dispersal authorities and stepping up to that plate will be completely put off doing so by the horrendous process they have witnessed in Glasgow?

Chris Stephens: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I will express later in my speech the real views of local government, but he is correct that there are local authorities that were considering becoming part of the asylum dispersal process that are now minded not to do so as a result of what they are seeing in Glasgow, with Serco’s announcement of lock-change evictions.

There should never be anything inevitable about destitution, from any system of support—be that social housing, social security or asylum accommodation. The decade-long devaluation, underfunding and outsourcing of public service delivery of housing to women, men and children seeking refugee protection has been part of the wider austerity project that has penetrated deepest in communities of entrenched multiple deprivation across the United Kingdom, including Glasgow. We should always remember that it is these areas, however, that have consistently welcomed people seeking asylum through the Home Office’s asylum dispersal programme.

As a consequence, those communities, council areas and third sector services have been stepping up to help, as we have seen in Glasgow. That is despite their unfairly having the responsibilities and costs of helping people shunted on to them by two of the most powerful institutions in the UK—namely, the Home Office and multinational companies such as Serco, which enjoys profits of £30 million, which basically exist only to win public service contracts, especially from UK Government Departments in immigration and asylum, defence, transport and other spheres.

The Scottish Refugee Council has had to increase its destitution service provision and influencing and advocacy activities, and accelerate its work with key partners such...
as Positive Action in Housing, Shelter Scotland and JustRight Scotland, co-ordinating the charity and legal sector collaboration against those proposed evictions. It has met regularly since August 2018 to share information and take actions via litigation, legal policy and campaigning. Other members include the Legal Services Agency, Latta Law, Govan Law Centre, the British Red Cross, the Asylum Seeker Housing Project, the Refugee Survival Trust and, of course, the great Govan Community Project.

The Scottish Refugee Council considered the Immigration Minister’s descriptions of the situation in the 17 June letter that was issued to Members of Parliament for Glasgow constituencies, and it is the council’s strong view that there were inaccuracies in that letter, which I come to now. The Scottish Refugee Council recognised that the Home Office, through its advice contractor Migrant Help, has made efforts by letter and telephone to contact those at greater risk of evictions by lock-change notice since November 2018. However, these efforts stemmed largely from advocacy by Glasgow City Council and the Scottish Refugee Council to the Home Office, in the Glasgow asylum taskforce. Furthermore, the Scottish Refugee Council and other members of the taskforce persuaded the Home Office to initiate a support referral process. This was a pilot that comprised Migrant Help in Glasgow offering each individual at risk of eviction a one-and-a-half-hour appointment. The pilot had two phases: first, from November 2018 to January 2019, involving Migrant Help only; and secondly, from February 2019 to April 2019, after Migrant Help sought assistance from the Scottish Refugee Council.

The Scottish Refugee Council received 41 referrals from Migrant Help in the second phase of that process. That compares with 419 individuals assisted by Scottish Refugee Council destitution advisers from April 2018 to March 2019, 263 of whom were in Serco asylum accommodation. Through sustained funding from a charitable organisation and short-term resources from the Scottish Government, the Scottish Refugee Council has managed to stretch limited funds to prepare and lodge 120 applications for section 4 support, with 59% of those being successful—thereby lifting 72 individuals out of destitution or preventing them from falling into it. That has been achieved outside any Home Office support. I think that we would all want to continue to urge the Home Office, as the state party to the refugee convention and EU asylum legal instruments, urgently to provide resources that are genuinely commensurate with need, including the funding of independent advocacy support to help individuals in grave need.

Stuart C. McDonald: Towards the end of last year, the Home Affairs Committee recommended direct funding to organisations and city councils in dispersal areas because of the undoubtedly cost implications for participating dispersal authorities. Does my hon. Friend share my frustration that the work that the Home Office undertook to carry out with local authorities to calculate the funds that would be needed seems to have been put on the back burner and kicked into the long grass, despite it being necessary as a matter of urgency?

Chris Stephens: I agree that it is urgent, as my hon. Friend suggests. I am sure that the Minister will address that, because there is a very real concern about it, not just from independent advocacy groups such as the Scottish Refugee Council but from local government and the Scottish Government. I will come to that later.

The priority remains to help all those facing asylum destitution, especially those due to receive the 14-day notice-to-quit letter followed by the seven-day lock-change notice. Destitution advisers provide a holistic assessment of need and ongoing support and co-ordination, including for individuals under threat of eviction through lock changes by Serco. All these individuals are known to the Home Office. The process of submitting new evidence for a refused asylum claim is lengthy and complicated for most, and they might not have an option to return because of fear of persecution. To simply say that they “refuse” to leave is not accurate. We must emphasise that the actions of Serco are, in this sphere, functions of a public nature and therefore come under the scope of the Human Rights Act 1998. This legal status was confirmed in a Court of Session decision.

It is important that we highlight just some of the individuals who are under threat of eviction by Serco and the Home Office. We have been advised by the Home Office, and by the Minister at a meeting I had with her earlier this week, that those with vulnerabilities will not receive such letters, but that is not the case. I am going to mention a number of cases that have been presented to me by asylum charities. Everyone here knows the safety and belonging that a home brings, but in Glasgow we are on the brink of a humanitarian crisis of hundreds of women and men who sought sanctuary in the UK. The Conservative Government have none the less retained their basic inhumanity in the asylum process. Since last week, they have been ruthlessly rolling out their privatised hostile environment in Scotland’s largest city.

Courageous women like Mariam, who has fled abuse in Eritrea but been refused refugee protection by the asylum system, should never have received a notice to quit. Why? Because Mariam has depression, is receiving medication and is being helped by a community psychiatric nurse. Serco has ordered her to get out of her house through a lock-change letter, which means no protection against street homelessness, with no rule of law or court oversight, callously causing her to lose her home, family and friends, her safety and her dignity. Mariam is a case in point. The outgoing Prime Minister said that tackling trafficking was a top priority? Does the Minister realise that those sorts of decisions feed exploitation and are a boon to organised crime, while destroying lives? Surely the decent thing is to ensure that Mariam’s lock change is cancelled.

Another concern that has been brought to my attention is that letters are being delivered by two men in uniform, sometimes to women who live on their own. I have a real concern about that, and I find it completely and utterly unacceptable. For a woman who has fled her country to seek shelter and asylum in the UK, two men in uniform visiting the house with letters will mean something completely different from what it would perhaps mean to us. It is unacceptable, and I hope the Minister will have something to say about that.

I have a number of other cases to mention. A 34-year-old woman from Eritrea was issued with an eviction letter dated 12 June 2019—not 20 June, as MPs have been advised—telling her to leave her accommodation by
25 June. The letter wrongly stated that she had received a positive decision. It also incorrectly advised her that she must leave and that she would have to apply to Glasgow City Council for rehousing. Her hopes were raised that she had got refugee status. A week later, she received another letter dated 19 June, again telling her to leave by 25 June. This time, the letter wrongly stated that her asylum claim was refused and that she must leave her accommodation. In fact, she has an ongoing asylum claim and is due to attend a further submissions appointment in Liverpool on 4 October 2019. This woman’s claim for asylum is based on her nationality and the fact that, as a Pentecostal Christian, she would be at risk of persecution should she return.

Another case presented to me is that of a 72-year-old gentleman who is an Iraqi national but has lived most of his life in Syria. He left Syria when the war started. He has lost contact with his wife and children in Europe and is in Glasgow alone. He speaks Arabic. Serco sent him a lock-change eviction letter dated 19 June, telling him to leave by 2 July 2019. He has a serious heart condition, for part of a leg amputated a heart operation. He also has a problem with his spine and breathing problems, which leaves him bedridden most of each day. He is particularly vulnerable due to his age, his ill health and English not being his first language, and he is traumatised by his experiences. It is a real concern that he will be unable to safeguard his own wellbeing and is at risk of neglect. Positive Action in Housing has asked Glasgow City Council’s social work department to carry out a community care assessment and is seeking legal support.

Another case is that of a 58-year-old woman who received a letter from Serco dated 21 June telling her that her entitlement to support ends on 23 June—less than two days’ notice. If she leaves her accommodation, she will be destitute. Her section 4 application is under way, and her legal case is ongoing. This woman left Gambia to ensure that her daughters cannot be subject to female genital mutilation practices.

Another case I have is that of a constituent who received a letter on 12 June, and who visited this Parliament as part of a delegation from the British Federation of Asylum Seekers. She is an African lady, who identifies herself as a member of the LGBT community, and she feels she cannot go back to her country. She was issued with a letter on 12 June, not 20 June.

It appears that Serco is treating individuals with complex cases as one mass of people, and this is likely to lead to unjust decisions and vulnerable people with a genuine reason to be here being ejected from their accommodation. As a landlord, Serco is ill-equipped to pass judgment on someone’s asylum status. Walking unannounced into someone’s accommodation and rummaging through their private belongings does not make that person an immigration officer. The people Serco is attempting to evict are not subject to deportation orders. The Home Office support has stopped for now, but that does not mean that their cases—to put it in inverted commas—“failed”. They can still engage with the legal process and apply for support to be reinstated. Appeals and judicial reviews do happen and are often successful.

I want to come on to the local government view. I have a letter, which I will place in the Library, from Susan Aitken, the leader of Glasgow City Council, and a note of the meeting of local authorities passing on their concerns about asylum accommodation contracts and processes. There are pressures in different areas, including the north-east, Yorkshire and the Humber, and Glasgow, as incoming contractors face the need to procure a large number of properties in a very short period of time. It is my concern that Serco is advertising the fact that the reason why it needs to remove asylum seekers from their accommodation is so that it can hand back the keys to the original landlords, which does not seem to me to be an acceptable reason.

There is very real concern from local government that the transition deadline will not be met in some areas and that contingency accommodation may have to be used. The distribution of asylum seekers across the country is very uneven, with some areas of high concentration, including Glasgow. Local authority leaders from other parts of the UK agree that we need to progress the funding issues, as local government is left to pick up the tab for the decisions made by both Serco and the Home Office. In their view, the Home Office is failing to address issues for which it has responsibility and seems unable to provide up-to-date data on the number and locations of asylum seekers. When data is produced, it is often incomplete and it contradicts information available from other sources.

In the view of local authorities, nothing is being done by the Home Office to convince other local authorities in the UK to participate in the dispersal programme. However, as we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East, the fact that asylum seeker lock-change evictions are going ahead has resulted in some local authorities suggesting that they would not want to participate in that sort of process. Local authorities participating in the dispersal programme are still waiting for the Home Office response to their request for funding, and they see no evidence that that has been taken to Her Majesty’s Treasury.

I think it would be fair to say that we have a number of questions about what is going on in relation both to the contracts, and to this inhumane move to subject asylum seekers to lock-change evictions and make them homeless. However, before I ask those questions, I have to say that I am very concerned at the behaviour of Serco. I want to reiterate again that two men should not approach women living on their own or with children, going in with threatening letters and handing them over in that way. That is something I want to hear the Minister condemn, and I want that practice put a stop to.

Can the Minister answer the following questions? I have a number of questions for her. Does she intend to come to Glasgow to witness a lock-change eviction? When is she next coming to Glasgow to discuss the asylum accommodation contract with asylum charities and the council? Does she realise what it would mean for someone to come home and find that their locks have been changed? May we have a guarantee that no one in Glasgow who has vulnerabilities as defined by the Home Office safeguarding policy has or will receive 14 days’ notice to quit, or a seven-day lock-change notice?

Will the Minister publish the Home Office safeguarding policy? To my mind, the four cases that I presented involve people who would qualify as having a vulnerability under that policy. Will the Minister say more about
what the Home Office defines as the over-staying group? Does it have a list of those in that group? Will she confirm whether refused case management and immigration enforcement teams are planning to start working through the over-staying list? Are they planning to detain people at their reporting events in Glasgow? Can she assure me that that will not happen, and that it has never been discussed since the first announcement about Serco evictions in July 2018? Can the Minister provide an assurance that no one in the over-staying group will be visited by immigration enforcement in their asylum accommodation, purely because they are classed as an over-stayer?

As a result of what has been put forward, the Home Office is required to make a decision. You will have heard the rumours, Mr Deputy Speaker, as I have, about the shredding machines in Departments being in overdrive and working overtime, prior to the new Prime Minister and new regime.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I have not heard that.

Chris Stephens: Well you have heard the rumour now. Given the facts presented today, the Home Office must now call a halt to these eviction notices. Everything we have been told by the Home Office in good faith about how this system will work in practice has been shown not to be the case. Letters were issued before 20 June, although we were told that they were not. We were told that those with vulnerabilities would not receive letters, but that was not the case. The style of how those letters are being delivered is completely unacceptable on any level, as I hope the Minister will agree. As a result of the facts I have put forward, which were given to us by asylum charities, will the Minister call a halt to these evictions?

The Home Office and Serco must know that they have picked the wrong city—the city of Mary Barbour and the rent strikes just over a century ago; the city of the great Glasgow girls who campaigned against child detention and ensured they got their school friend back. Thousands of volunteers have signed up to the living rent campaign, and they are on standby and ready to step in and prevent these evictions. The Government should be in no doubt that if Glaswegians are required to use their human rights, such as the right to peaceful assembly, to protect the basic human rights of others, that is what will be done, and I will join my fellow Glaswegians to prevent these evictions.

4.43 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate and providing me with the opportunity to clarify the current position in Glasgow regarding those who are no longer eligible for asylum support or accommodation.

The United Kingdom has a proud history of providing an asylum system that protects and respects the fundamental rights of those individuals who seek refuge from persecution. The Government are committed to working closely with communities and stakeholders to ensure that destitute asylum seekers are provided with safe, secure and suitable accommodation, and that they are treated with dignity while their asylum claim is considered. However, it is important to recognise that the majority of the affected cohort in Glasgow do not have status in the UK. They have sought asylum. Their claim has not been substantiated. They have exhausted the appeals process and they now need to take steps to return to their country of origin.

Stuart C. McDonald: Even if some of these individuals have not qualified and have not met the technical definition of what a refugee is, that does not mean they are not vulnerable people, it does not mean they do not have significant needs and it does not mean they should not be treated with dignity. Why do we have a cliff-edge process that means that, if an asylum claim is refused, no alternatives are looked at and there are no ways to try to work with that person to ensure they are looked after properly?

Caroline Nokes: At no point have I said that these people are not vulnerable. I have tried to set out that they have had an asylum claim that has not been found to be valid and that they have been through the appeals process. If the hon. Gentleman will give me some time, I will move on to discuss the various means of support that are available, particularly to those we heard about earlier: those who are vulnerable, those who have medical conditions and those who have children.

The system that operates in Glasgow is the same system that operates across the United Kingdom and has been operated by successive Governments since the introduction of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Asylum seekers and their dependants who would otherwise be destitute are provided with accommodation and a weekly cash allowance by the Home Office while their asylum claim and any subsequent appeals are considered. This form of support is usually known as section 95 support. If an asylum seeker is granted refugee status, they are free to take employment and become eligible to apply for mainstream benefits in the same way as British citizens and other permanent residents.

If their asylum claim is refused but they have children at the time their appeal rights are exhausted, they remain on section 95 support until their youngest child reaches 18 years of age or they leave the UK. Those without children who exhaust the appeals process lose access to section 95 support, but a very similar form of support, known as section 4 support, is provided so long as they take reasonable steps to leave the UK, or, importantly, show that there is a legal or practical obstacle that prevents their departure. Examples of such an obstacle include: those who are too sick to travel, those who need time to obtain a necessary travel document, and those who have made fresh submissions against the refusal of their asylum claim that have not been resolved.

Chris Stephens: I thank the Minister for giving way. This is an important point in terms of someone’s status and their appeal. My understanding from what she says is that someone who has been refused an upper tribunal level could be subjected to an eviction letter. Is the Minister saying that those individuals have effectively 14 days to submit fresh evidence—an article 8 application or the like? Someone who has been refused an upper tribunal level still has the right to submit a fresh claim.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter.
claim after claim when a first-tier tribunal and then an upper-tier tribunal found their claim to be unfounded. Circumstances may change. I absolutely accept that, but it is important that, while we treat individuals fairly, the system is upheld.

Decisions to refuse section 4 support attract a right of appeal to an independent tribunal. It is clearly reasonable to limit the offer of section 4 support to people who satisfy these conditions. Providing support indefinitely and without conditions to people who have no right to be in the UK is wrong in principle and risks undermining public confidence in the asylum system.

I have said that it is right that people who have no legal basis to remain in the United Kingdom are not supported indefinitely, but it is also right that they should be aware of their options, and the advice and support available to them. Advice on accessing further support or returning home with support is routinely provided to all whose claim has been refused. However, in the case of this particular cohort of people we have gone further. Since August 2018, we have been working with partners in Glasgow, including Glasgow City Council and the Scottish Refugee Council, to ensure that affected individuals are aware of the further support available to them.

Migrant Help, on behalf of the Home Office, has been reaching out to those affected to explain how they can continue to be supported and accommodated if they take the necessary steps to return to their country of origin. We have also provided information on our assisted voluntary returns scheme, which provides up to £2,000 in reintegration assistance.

Migrant Help has contacted 373 people to discuss these options and conducted 154 advice appointments. The Home Office has also held over 296 conversations about voluntary return. The scheme available is designed to assist those who require more help and includes supporting resettlement in the country of origin. We have also provided information on our assisted voluntary returns scheme, which provides up to £2,000 in reintegration assistance.

I should note that a minority of the affected individuals have received a grant of leave to remain, but have none the less refused to leave their accommodation at the end of their eligibility. We are working closely with Glasgow City Council and the Scottish Refugee Council, to ensure that affected individuals are aware of the further support available to them.

Some concern has been raised about the legal position in relation to issuing lock-change notices, which I would like to clarify. In July 2018, Serco commenced a process of reclaiming properties from those whose asylum applications had been decided and were no longer entitled to support. This was after a similar process had been successfully rolled out in the north-west of England.

The process of issuing a lock-change notice, if an individual refused to leave a property at the end of their entitlement, was paused pending a legal challenge in the Scottish courts. That pause did not affect people’s eligibility to receive asylum support, so those who became appeal rights exhausted or were granted leave to remain continued to receive the normal letter asking them to leave their accommodation. However, in that period, Serco did not follow this up by proceeding with lock changes if the individuals declined to leave.

In April this year, Lord Tyre dismissed two cases brought against Serco and the Home Office contesting this course of action. An appeal has been lodged and is currently sisted. As the cases were dismissed, Serco is now moving to resolve the circumstances of those staying in Serco properties. It is right that it does so.

Finally, I want to clarify the operational process, which I also set out in my recent letter to Glasgow MPs and MSPs.

Stuart C. McDonald: The Minister says that it is right for Serco to act in that way given Lord Tyre’s judgment, but surely it would be right for Serco to wait for the outcome of the further appeal. Will she also address the issue of funding for local authorities, with the Home Office having undertaken to work with local authorities to assess the impact of dispersal on their resources?

Caroline Nokes: The legal action that was started last year and the judgement concluded in April this year did not provide a barrier to Serco continuing with this activity. It chose to pause it. The further appeal does not provide a barrier and the judgment was very clear. It is right that Serco should seek to make sure that accommodation designated for asylum seekers is available to those who fall into that category.

Chris Stephens rose—

Caroline Nokes: As I was saying, a small number of people have been granted refugee status, but it is absolutely right that they then move on from accommodation that is designated for destitute asylum seekers, so that the next cohort of asylum seekers can move into that accommodation, and those refugees—who have the right to stay, live and work in this country—move into accommodation that is appropriate for their needs and is not designated part of this asylum support accommodation, which is specifically designed for a cohort of people who are still in the claims process.
Chris Stephens: The Minister can hold this line that the first letters were issued on 20 June, but I will place in the Library letters that were issued before that. Has she clarified with Serco when it issued the first letter, because the date of 20 June is simply factually inaccurate?

Caroline Nokes: I set out very clearly earlier—I cannot find the place in my notes right now—that Serco continued with the process because actually there was a cohort that came to everyone’s attention in the summer of last year, but between then and now there have been additional asylum seekers in Serco accommodation who have submitted new claims that have been found not to be substantiated. The process is not set in aspic; it continues the whole time. Different individuals will have come in and new claims will have been made by that cohort. The hon. Gentleman refers to other individuals who received notices to quit, but it is important to reflect that that might have been because their claims were found to be warranted and they were given refugee status and so needed to move into mainstream accommodation. There will also be those whose asylum claim was found not to be substantiated and were not in need of protection.

It remains the position that all of the cohort can apply for section 4 support at any time, and if they do, the process will be suspended until the application is considered and any appeal against its refusal is decided.

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Nokes: I think that Mr Deputy Speaker is concerned that we are about to use more time than I am permitted.

I am proud of the contribution that our country makes to providing accommodation and support to those seeking asylum. However, when the courts have decided that an asylum claim is not well founded, it is important that the support is available only if the individuals take reasonable steps to leave the UK, or if there is an obstacle to their departure. I am of course always willing to consider practical ideas about how we can further encourage those whose asylum claim has been refused to accept the offer of support on these terms.

Question put and agreed to.

4.57 pm

House adjourned.
be encouraging the people who live in their constituencies to go to the DWP to get the help that they need, confident that they will be respected and treated with genuine dignity?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his important question and for setting up the visit, which was so useful and purposeful. I do note that when I went to the jobcentre and met the work coaches, they were passionate about delivering the right outcomes for their constituents. When we asked them what they would change about universal credit, they said the publicity, because they are so committed to getting the right outcomes for the right people. These are people who are doing good work for good people.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm for the record that any EU national who has been granted settled status in the United Kingdom is regarded as being habitually resident for the purposes of applying for and receiving universal credit?

Amber Rudd: That is largely correct. The only issue here is about the evidence that people now have to supply which they did not have to supply before. I know that there are a number of places where people were able to claim benefits and they now no longer qualify for universal credit. We are looking at those individually to see whether it is an issue with their application for settled status or something else.

21. [911662] Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Universal credit was rolled out in my area last year. Staff at my local citizens advice bureau found that, last year, 1,882 people contacted them in relation to debt linked to universal credit. Surely that is an indication of how many people are finding difficulty in managing during that initial five-week wait. Will the Secretary of State tell me when the Government will act to end the misery of the five-week wait?

Amber Rudd: In answer to the first part of the hon. Gentleman’s question, which is about assistance in getting the applications through, we announced in April this year the help-to-claim arrangements so that applicants who are struggling to apply for universal credit can have the additional support they need from citizens advice bureaux. I hope that he will find that that is working well in his local bureau. On the second part about getting money to people earlier, as he will be aware, we have made advances available and we are extending the amount of time over which people have to repay it and the amount that is deducted from their core amounts so that they do not feel it as badly as they would have previously.


Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Research released last week from the Child Poverty Action Group and the Church of England shows that women are being forced to choose between poverty and an abortion because of this Government’s two-child cap—that is the reality facing families with three or more children. It appears unlikely that the Secretary of State will face another
Work and Pensions Question Time, so will she make it her legacy to scrap the two-child cap and avoid impoverishing half of all children in those families?

Amber Rudd: I will try not to be distracted by the hon. Gentleman's slightly personal remarks. He might know that I visited Scotland last week, and the Scottish Government have taken their own steps on what they feel is the way to address child poverty. Those of us on the Government side of the House feel that the best way to address child poverty is to help more people into work. I am proud of the fact that there are now 1 million more people in work and that over 600,000 children are no longer in houses where no people work.

Neil Gray: I note that the Secretary of State did not answer my question. I would like to compare and contrast, because CPAG has said of the two-child cap, “you could not design a policy better to increase child poverty”, but last week it described the new Scottish child benefit, to which the Secretary of State referred, as “an absolute game changer in the fight to end child poverty”. Therefore, on the 20th anniversary of the reconstituted Scottish Parliament, is this not yet another example of where Holyrood empowers, Westminster impoverishes?

Amber Rudd: Again, I point to the fact that there are different ways of addressing poverty, both child poverty and family poverty: one is to hand out money, which is what the Scottish Government have chosen to do; and another is to focus, with laser-like attention, on ensuring that we build the economy and create employment and that there are good jobs so that people can support their family.

Departmental Organisation

2. Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): Whether she has made an assessment of the potential merits of splitting her Department into two separate Departments. [911640]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): There has been no such assessment. As one Department, we have rolled out universal credit, providing a holistic benefits system to ensure that everyone is given the support they need. As one Department, we have seen record levels of employment and the lowest unemployment rate since the 1970s.

Stephen Lloyd: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. However, she will be aware that there is a significant difference between the benefits of universal credit, disability benefits and pensions. She will also be aware that certain newspapers are prone, when talking about the allegedly outrageous amounts of money that people on unemployment or disability benefits get, to look only at the Department’s overall spend. Of course, as she will be aware, 90% of that spend is on pensions. Would it not be simpler, easier and more straightforward simply to split DWP into two Departments, so that both can focus on what they should be focusing on?

Amber Rudd: Although I recognise the good work that the hon. Gentleman has done in many of these areas, I respectfully disagree. I think that it is right that those elements are held together in one Department. If we look at the results, we are seeing record levels of pensioner poverty—[Interruption.]

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Yes, we are.

Amber Rudd: I say quickly to the hon. Lady on the Opposition Front Bench that we are seeing the lowest levels of pensioner poverty, as well as the highest levels of employment.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I very much welcome the recent decision to move the Office for Disability Issues into the Cabinet Office, creating a super-hub of all equality work right across Government. Will the new hub be leading the reform to statutory sick pay so that it is better enforced, more flexible and covers the lowest-paid workers, and when will the consultation on this vital reform take place?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and may I take this opportunity to pay homage to the extraordinary work that she did to ensure that took place? The point of having an equalities hub in the Cabinet Office is to ensure that we have strong enforcement to deliver on the disabilities changes across Government. With her help, following the work she put in, we are able to do that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, the man in the summer suit—splendid. Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): And my tie has whales on it, Mr Speaker—Japan comes to mind. The fact of the matter is that the Secretary of State knows that she has some really good people working in her Department—certainly the people working in my patch are very good—but the trouble is that they are not well managed or well led. Splitting is not the answer; the answer is to get in some managers who can tackle things such as the awful situation for people on universal credit who do not have a bank account, because she has still not tackled that.

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are working with Lloyds, for instance, to ensure that basic bank accounts are more available. May I also take this opportunity to join him in praising the work of the staff at the jobcentre in Huddersfield to help people in his constituency?

Child Poverty

3. Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of trends in the level of child poverty. [911641]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): Tackling poverty will always be a priority for this Government, and I take these numbers extremely seriously. In the latest low income statistics, child poverty increased in three of the four measures. The evidence shows that work is the best route out of poverty, and there are 667,000 fewer children in workless households compared with 2010.
Emma Dent Coad: Summer holidays are fast approaching, and far too many families will be struggling to feed their children. The Childhood Trust states that two thirds of London children living in poverty—that will be 2,000 in Kensington—could go hungry without access to charitable donations. While the Mayor’s Fund for London supports hungry children across the capital, what is the Minister doing, long term, to tackle the causes of child poverty, including in-work poverty?

Will Quince: As I have said, the latest statistics show that full-time work substantially reduces the chance of poverty. The absolute poverty rate of a child where both parents work full-time is only 4% compared with 44% where one or more parents are in part-time work. We are supporting people into full-time work where possible—for example, by offering 30 hours of free childcare to parents of three and four-year-olds. Over three quarters of the growth in employment since 2010 has been in full-time work.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In our country in 2019, what proportion of children live in poverty?

Will Quince: Without knowing the exact figure, it is too many. My role within the Department, and the role of the Department itself, is to address that. My hon. Friend will know too well that the best route out of poverty is work. That is why our focus is on universal credit. Universal credit is working in terms of getting more people into work, and more people are staying in work.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The best way out of poverty is probably properly paid work. The real problem for many of my constituents and their children is the fact that they have very low levels of savings, so when somebody loses their job, perhaps because a company closes, the real danger is that when they go on to universal credit they have to wait for five weeks for a payment and have nothing to fall back on. I really do beg the Government to reconsider the issue of the five weeks. The worst possible thing of all is saying, “You can borrow some money”, because suddenly a family ends up in debt, and that is when the children end up not having food unless it comes from a food bank.

Will Quince: I recognise the passion with which the hon. Gentleman raises his point, but, in terms of the five-week wait, nobody has to wait for their first payment of universal credit, as 100% of their indicative advance is available on day one. It is interest-free, repayable over 12 months—and, as the Secretary of State has said, that will in future be moving to 16 months. That is available and about 60% of people are currently taking it up.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Given that the majority of families affected by the two-child limit are working, why did the Department for Work and Pensions make the following statement in response to the recent report by the Child Poverty Action Group and the Church of England:

“This policy helps to ensure fairness by asking parents receiving benefits to face the same financial choices as those in work”? Could the Minister clear up this confusion for the House?

People with Disabilities: Employment

4. Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help people with disabilities into work.

17. Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help people with disabilities into work.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work

Justin Tomlinson: We support disabled people into work through initiatives like the Work and Health programme, the Personal Support Package, and the new Intensive Personalised Employment Support programme launching at the end of 2019. Access to Work approved support for nearly 34,000 disabled workers last year, and we engage with employers through the Disability Confident campaign.

Mary Robinson: The 19% disability employment gap in Cheadle highlights our untapped talent and the challenge facing the Government in getting a further 1 million disabled people into work over the next eight years. Greater flexibility in working hours, managing time and accommodating medical appointments are just some of the ways to close the gap, but there is clearly more to be done. Does my hon. Friend agree that employers should be encouraged to think creatively about how to make work more accommodating to disabled people?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend is spot on. I was at Employability Day on Friday, celebrating, meeting disabled people who had got into work and, crucially, meeting employers who had often made very small changes. The key message was that it is a win-win. The 950,000 more disabled people who we have got into work are making a real difference to businesses that have taken those steps.

Gillian Keegan: I recently met the charity Root Experience at Chichester library, where it was launching a book called “Hidden Stories”. The book puts a spotlight on hidden disabilities such as epilepsy or autism and how they impact people on a day-to-day basis. Would my hon. Friend be happy to receive a copy of the book? What steps is the DWP taking to promote education and awareness of hidden disabilities in the workplace?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting that fantastic book. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland) and I recently went to Swindon Council library and were handed a copy of this excellent book. It is currently sitting on the back seat of my car. It is a brilliant edition, and I hope that as many MPs as possible can see this proactive and constructive way to champion opportunities that people with hidden disabilities can offer.
Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I am sure the Minister will agree that we want all our pupils to stay in full-time education until they are 18, including those with special needs and disabilities. However, at 16 these pupils face the change of moving from disability living allowance to personal independence payment. That is out of step with changes faced by other children. For example, other children aged 16 in full-time education are able to continue to claim free prescriptions, free eye tests and free dental checks, but children with special needs and disabilities have to face this change in benefits at 16. This is extremely stressful—it is stressful enough for these children to be going on to college, let alone having to change benefits. Will the Minister look at changing that, so that children in full-time education at 16 do not change benefits until they finish?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important point. I recognise the points that she made, but it is a balance. The decision to do this has been in place for a long time, to allow for everything in be in place for when they get to 18, but I am happy to meet her to discuss this further.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Can the Minister explain the very long delays in the limited work capability assessment to qualify for the working element of universal credit, and why disabled people who are trying to work are being penalised because of the apparent inefficiency of the contractor, Maximus?

Justin Tomlinson: Under universal credit, from the initial conversation with a work coach, individual claimants—including those with disabilities—can get support. We continue to make improvements to the work capability assessment, following the five independent reviews. Over 100 different recommendations have been taken on board. I work very closely with stakeholders, as do all the ministerial team. We look to continue to improve the process.

Marsha De Cordova (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Support for disabled people in work should be a top priority for this Government, but on several occasions I have raised with Ministers a fundamental flaw under universal credit for disabled people in work, which is that to qualify for in-work support, such as the work allowance, one must be found unfit for work under the work capability assessment. That contrasts with legacy social security, where someone qualifies for in-work support by being in receipt of DLA or PIP. Does the Minister agree that this is absurd, and will he commit today to rectifying this illogical and damaging policy?

Justin Tomlinson: I will commit to continuing to do everything we can to ensure that all people with disabilities and long-term health conditions have the maximum chance to get into work. I am very proud of the fact that over the last five years alone, 950,000 more disabled people are in work, and we continue to make good progress towards our target of a further 1 million disabled people in work by 2027.

**Universal Credit: Food Banks**

5. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What assessment her Department has made of the effect of the roll-out of universal credit on the level of referrals to food banks.

Diana Johnson: Even before universal credit was rolled out in Hull, the use of the food bank network was very high because we have widespread in-work poverty, and a third of the children in Hull are living in poverty. The Trussell Trust has said that nearly half of all food bank referrals are due to a delay in benefits being paid when universal credit is rolled out, which happened in Hull before Christmas. Does the Minister now accept that, and what is he going to do about it?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We continue to provide a strong safety net through the welfare system for those who need extra support and, as I have said, people use food banks for many and varied reasons. We review research carried out by organisations, including the Trussell Trust, to add to our understanding of food bank use. I intend to work far more closely with the Trussell Trust and other food bank providers, including other stakeholders in this area. I want food bank providers and jobcentres to work far more closely together so that we can better understand the issues and then put in place the interventions to make the situation better.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): A few weeks ago, I and a colleague of mine visited a major food bank in Coventry. One of the lessons we learned from the food bank in Coventry—it has nine outlets throughout Coventry and Warwickshire—is that universal credit is forcing people to use food banks. What is the Minister going to do to sort out the problem that people have who are forced to use food banks? Surely we should have another look at universal credit and abolish it, because it is not working.

Will Quince: I am sorry to hear the hon. Gentleman’s example. If I get a chance to visit his local food bank, I will certainly do so, but I have to stress that no claimant needs to wait more than five weeks to receive their first regular universal credit payment. We have listened to feedback on how we can support our claimants and made improvements, such as extending advances, removing waiting days and introducing housing benefit run-on. I will continue to work with the Trussell Trust and others to improve our system in any way we can.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Ind): I am afraid to say to the Minister that the advance payment is missing the point. The biggest driver of people going to food banks is the five-week wait. Because of the benefit freeze, the basic amount people have to live on, particularly the very vulnerable, is not enough. We cannot then expect them to live on less by taking away their advance payment, which is a debt. There is a simple way to deal with this. Some 60% of claimants are already taking advance payment, which tells us they cannot wait. The money is already going out of the DWP’s door. Make it a grant. It should not be repayable for the most vulnerable people in society.
Will Quince: I respect the hon. Lady’s knowledge in this area on the Select Committee, but I would say that advances are not loans from a separate fund; they are the claimant’s benefit paid early, which is then recovered over an agreed period. So they are in place to ensure that those in genuine need are able to receive financial support and are not reliant on illegal or high-cost lenders. But if a claimant considers they are facing financial hardship because of the amount that is being deducted from their universal credit award, they can ask the Department to consider reducing their deductions. As of October this year, the maximum deduction goes down from 40% to 30%.

**Universal Credit: Working People’s Incomes**

6. Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase working people’s incomes through universal credit.

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): One of the key transformations that universal credit provides is to support people who are in work, ensuring they can increase their earnings and develop in their career. It removes the 16-hour cliff edge, which held so many back on legacy benefits, and gives improved, tailored support through jobcentre work coaches.

Mr Seely: Will the Minister join me in thanking the excellent DWP staff on the Isle of Wight, some of whom I met in Newport a few weeks ago? I am sure he and the team will seek to make further improvements to universal credit, but it was clear to me, talking to those staff, that universal credit enables them to do more good for more people than the inflexible system that preceded it.

Alok Sharma: I thank my hon. Friend for being a huge champion for the Isle of Wight and working so well with his local jobcentre. I am very pleased about that and he is absolutely right. As a result of universal credit, people are able to get the support—that one-to-one support—that is so vital. Since 2016, an extra £10 billion has gone into the system.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My constituent, Amanda, who is a single mum with significant mental health problems, had her UC claim closed—unknown to her—at the beginning of May. She was told by the DWP that this was a sanction because she failed to complete an online review. I should also mention that she was in the last few weeks of her pregnancy. Given that Amanda is clearly a vulnerable person, will the Secretary of State commit to ensure that all work coaches are aware of their obligations following last year’s High Court judgment, which demands that they should treat vulnerable claimants appropriately?

Alok Sharma: Of course. The Secretary of State, I and all colleagues want to ensure that absolutely every single person claiming universal credit gets the appropriate support and the right level of support. I would be very happy to look at that individual case with the hon. Lady. I would just say on sanctions that these are not just handed out; there is a clear process. I can tell her that, in February 2019, only 2.45% of those who were under conditionality requirements actually had a sanction and the average sanction’s length was 30 days. But I will look at that case for her.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent, Craig Ferguson, has Asperger’s, but works in retail. He broke his leg, was not entitled to statutory sick pay and was advised to switch to UC. He then lost his severe disability premium. His UC has automatic deductions for an employment support allowance overpayment and, at times, he receives no UC award at all, which means that he has to depend on savings. How is that fair? Can his case be reviewed?

Alok Sharma: Of course, I am happy to look at that individual case. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will get in touch with my office after this session.

**Local Housing Allowance**

7. Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of the adequacy of levels of local housing allowance.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): Welfare reforms were designed to ensure a fair balance between public spending and supporting vulnerable people to meet their housing costs. LHA rates are not intended to meet all rents in all areas. However, the Secretary of State and I have committed to end the freeze to LHA in March 2020.

Vicky Foxcroft: Local housing allowance is supposed to cover the lowest 30% of market rents, but research by Shelter found that that is not possible in 97% of England. For example, in south-east London, local housing allowance will cover only the bottom 10% of rents. We have a housing crisis across the country and local housing allowance is not fit for purpose. Does the Minister agree that it must be raised to reflect the true cost of renting?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. As I said, LHA rates are not intended to meet all rents in all areas. Housing benefit claimants have to make the same decisions about where to live as people who do not receive benefit. In 2019-20, targeted affordability funding has been used to increase over 80% of rates in London. Nevertheless, we recognise that this is an issue. The Secretary of State and I are alive to it and we are looking at several options ahead of a spending review bid.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Does the Minister recognise that recent changes to the tax treatment of the private rented sector, particularly the buy-to-let sector, will mean an increase in rents across the board? That will have a very real read-across to the local housing allowance. Will he give some assessment of what allowance he will make for that increase?

Will Quince: That is, of course, a question for the Treasury. Any rise or potential rise in LHA rates has to go hand in hand with addressing supply. I urge my hon. Friend to address that issue with my counterparts in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and, indeed, the Chancellor and Chief Secretary to the Treasury.
Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome what the Minister said the other day about reviewing how local housing allowance areas need to be redefined. Does he accept that, because Stroud is in the same area as Gloucester, we are now losing a significant number of people from the private sector because they cannot afford to top up? Will he therefore look at this as a matter of urgency?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He is right that the broad market rental areas have some anomalies. I have officials looking into this. It is a huge and complex piece of work, given that there are approximately 900 of those areas. It is therefore not something that can be done quickly, but I recognise the issue and I am working on it.

Pensioner Poverty

8. Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the level of pensioner poverty in the UK. [911647]

9. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the level of pensioner poverty in the UK. [911659]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The overall trend in the percentage of pensioners living in poverty has fallen dramatically over recent decades. Relative pensioner poverty rates before housing costs have halved since 1990 and rates of material deprivation for pensioners are also at record lows. We want to maintain this achievement.

Joanna Cherry: On Friday, I met constituents and campaigners from Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign Scotland. Those women told me that they are suffering poverty, distress and significant inequality as a result of a pension decision taken in the name of equality. At a time when the Tory leadership candidates are promising billions of pounds of public spending, those women would like to know why the Government cannot find the cash to right the wrong done to the WASPI women.

Guy Opperman: It is not the Government’s intention to change the Pensions Act 1995, the Pensions Act 2007 or the Pensions Act 2011. There was a £1.1 billion concession in 2011. The policy was conceived in 1993, continued under the Labour Government for 13 years, continued under the coalition and will continue under this Government. I should also point out that a judicial review is pending. I cannot comment any further than this.

Martyn Day: Does the Minister think it right that the UK has the lowest state pension in the developed world?

Guy Opperman: The reality of the state pension in this country is that it has risen by £1,600 in real terms through the triple lock. It also needs to be looked at in the context of the significant high private pensions that, thanks to automatic enrolment and other reforms, show that this is comparable to many other European countries.¹

¹[Official Report, 7 July 2019, Vol. 663, c. 2MC.]
Government’s commitment to the triple lock has meant that the full basic state pension is now worth about £1,600 a year more in cash terms than it was in 2010.

Eddie Hughes: I thank the Minister for that answer, but 3,440 households in my constituency will lose their free TV licence as a result of the BBC’s recent decision. Can he assure my constituents that pensioners with increased costs will be at the forefront of the Department’s decision making during the comprehensive spending review?

Guy Opperman: Clearly, I cannot comment on the specifics of the comprehensive spending review—I suspect that will be for the new Prime Minister—but the reality of the situation is that the triple lock and the various reforms we have introduced have meant that pensioners have done considerably better. We spend £120 billion on pensioners, of which £99 billion is on the state pension. That is a record sum.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Pensioners who apply for disability living allowance after the age of 65 are not eligible for the higher mobility component and are therefore not able to access the Motability scheme. The regulations are not new—they date to 1991—but our understanding of what it is to live a good life in retirement has changed in the intervening three decades. Will Ministers reconsider the regulations, so that pensioners continue to have the opportunity for full social participation?

Guy Opperman: I will take the hon. Lady’s point on board and write to her.

State Pension

10. Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): How many people receive a state pension of less than £168.80 a week.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Department does not publish statistics on the number of people who receive a state pension below the full new state pension amount. As of November 2018, the average amount of the new state pension that people received, including any protected payments, was £154.91 per week.

Gareth Snell: I thank the Minister for that answer. While he may not have that figure, I can tell him that two of the people who do not receive that amount are Bob and Hilary Heyes from my Stoke-on-Trent constituency. Had they started to claim their state pension under the new state pension, they would have received the full amount because they had 35 qualifying years, but because they were born before 1951 and 1953 respectively, they receive considerably less. What would the Minister have me tell Mr and Mrs Heyes when they come to constituency surgery next?

Guy Opperman: It is hard for me to comment on the specifics of the particular case. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me in advance of the forthcoming constituency surgery, I will write back to him and he can hand over the letter.

Mr Speaker: Very helpful.

Disability Confident

11. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Whether she has discussed with Cabinet colleagues the potential merits of making all public bodies join the Disability Confident scheme.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): Disability Confident is a very effective voluntary scheme, so compulsory options have not been discussed with Cabinet colleagues. Public bodies are already subject to the public sector equality duty. All main Government Departments are level 3 Disability Confident leaders, and 80% of local authorities are Disability Confident.

Mr Speaker: I hope I can be forgiven for saying—because I am going to say it anyway—that the House of Commons is a Disability Confident employer. It is absolutely right that we should be, but in case there are Members here who were not aware of that fact, they are now.

Robert Halfon: Thank you, Mr Speaker. My Harlow constituent, Lacey-Rose Saamanthy—a deaf lady—had a catering assistant job offer retracted by the Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust on the basis that it could not mitigate against the so-called risks of her employment. This is despicable, so what steps is the Department taking to ensure that all employers, including the NHS, are signed up to the Disability Confident scheme and are aware of the funding available through the Access to Work scheme, as advocated by the National Deaf Children’s Society and others?

Justin Tomlinson: I know my right hon. Friend has championed the case of Miss Saamanthy and I understand that the trust has contacted her to discuss alternative roles in the organisation, including roles that staff with hearing disabilities have successfully been recruited into. I also encourage that particular NHS trust to sign up to the Disability Confident campaign.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Speaker’s parliamentary placement scheme, which offers paid internships with training. The graduates graduated just last week. The one that I had the joy of hosting did very well out of that, and that was on the disability strand, hence my question. Will the Minister add his support to the disability strand of the scheme and also look at strengthening the learning from that scheme, so that we can help more employers in the public sector be better employers under Disability Confident?

Justin Tomlinson: Absolutely, and I am really encouraged to hear about that. Through the Disability Confident scheme and the Access to Work scheme, we want to do everything that we can to support these new opportunities being created, because ultimately, the employers benefit when disabled people’s talents are unlocked.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, young Docherty-Hughes.
Martin Docherty-Hughes: Thanks for the “young”, Mr Speaker.

The Minister seeks, in the Government’s proposal, to promote Disability Confident employers, but does he not recognise that, in April 2019, 85% of all mandatory reconsiderations for personal independence payment modified the original decision? Does he not agree that there seems to be rank hypocrisy in promoting Disability Confident employers while the Government are impoverishing my constituents in West Dunbartonshire and those across the United Kingdom?

Justin Tomlinson: We have over 2 million claimants on PIP, and only 5% of the applications have been taken to appeal. I recognise that those who go through the independent appeal process will, more often than not, have a decision overturned, which is why we have been working extremely hard, through a series of pilots within PIP, on the mandatory reconsideration stage and the independent appeals stage, so that we can get hold of the additional oral and written evidence earlier, which is what is often used to get the decision changed. This is an absolute priority for the Secretary of State and we are making sure that we are doing everything we can, as quickly as we can.

Universal Credit: Vulnerable Claimants

12. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase financial support for vulnerable universal credit claimants, compared with the legacy system. [911652]

15. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase financial support for vulnerable universal credit claimants, compared with the legacy system. [911655]

20. Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support vulnerable people who apply for universal credit. [911661]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): Universal credit ensures that support goes to those who need it most by simplifying the previously complicated legacy system, allowing 700,000 more people to receive approximately £2.4 billion in unclaimed benefits. Since 1 April this year, the Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland Help to Claim service has been in place, providing free, confidential and impartial support to help people, including those who are vulnerable, to make a universal credit claim.

Peter Aldous: I acknowledge the work that the Minister and the Secretary of State have done to improve universal credit, though concern remains that the five-week wait for the first payment is presenting a serious challenge to many people. To address this, will he accept the recommendation of the Bright Blue think-tank for one-off, up-front helping hand payments?

Will Quince: Those moving to universal credit will get more than 25% of their award through two weeks of additional housing benefit and, as of next year, jobseeker’s allowance, employment and support allowance and income support. Advances are available to cover the interim period, but we recognise the concerns about the payments in arrears and would welcome further ideas.

Nigel Huddleston: Vulnerable universal credit claimants often need to travel, sometimes long distances, to regular hospital appointments. What can the Minister do to help give these people the financial security they need to attend those regular and important appointments?

Will Quince: Universal credit claimants may be able to claim a refund for the cost of travelling to a hospital for treatment through the NHS healthcare travel costs scheme. To claim travel costs, claimants should take travel receipts, as well as their appointment letter or card and proof they are receiving a qualifying benefit, to a nominated cashiers office, which will be located in the hospital or clinic that treats the claimant. I should advise my hon. Friend that costs can be claimed back up to three months after an appointment.

Nic Dakin: The requirement for explicit consent built into universal credit makes it difficult for organisations such as Macmillan to support claimants as they did those on legacy benefits. When will the Government meet their commitment to review this requirement with the Social Security Advisory Committee, how will they engage stakeholders and when do they expect to report their findings?

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman raises a very good point—it concerns me too. We have agreed to work collaboratively with the Social Security Advisory Committee to consider how current practices could be enhanced, and to publish a report on our joint conclusions.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): A constituent of mine, Claudette, lives with her son, who is disabled, in private rented accommodation. She is in receipt of universal credit, but she did not receive her April rent payment, and the Department is refusing to investigate. Prior to that and ever since, universal credit has covered her rent. Will the Minister meet me to review this case, as my constituent fears eviction?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that individual issue. I would like her to raise Claudette’s case with me. My door is always open, as I know are those of other Ministers in the Department, and of course I would be delighted to meet her.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): At the last oral questions, I raised the case of single parent Alicia in my constituency, who had seen fraudsters claim universal credit for her. The Minister promised to investigate but still has not. In the meantime, we have seen hundreds more cases across Greater Manchester, including that of my constituent Sarah, who has now, in spite of reporting the fraud, been asked to attend an interview under caution and been further victimised by the Department. Will the Secretary of State please make sure that victims of fraud and crime are not further victimised by her Department?

Will Quince: We take fraud incredibly seriously, and I believe that the matter in question is being investigated. If the hon. Lady has further cases, she can refer them to me or the Minister for Employment, and we will look at them very carefully.
Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The pilot of the Government’s ill-conceived managed migration of universal credit is meant to start this month, but the Government have been very slow in coming forward with details. Is this because the level of payment to severely disabled people who lost out when they transferred to universal credit was found to be unlawful by the High Court?

Will Quince: The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work has been very clear on this. We are still considering it and will come back to the House in due course.

Margaret Greenwood: The Government have repeatedly responded to criticisms of social security cuts—and have done so today—by claiming that they are targeting those who need support the most. How does that accord with spending nearly £200,000 on legal battles with severely disabled people and single mothers who have lost out under universal credit?

Will Quince: Let me gently point out to the hon. Lady that we are spending more than £6 billion a year on the main disability benefits.

**Personal Independence Payment**

13. Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to support claimants whose mobility awards were (a) reduced and (b) stopped when they moved from disability living allowance to personal independence payment.

Justin Tomlinson: Among those who have made the transition from DLA to PIP, an extra 144,000 who did not qualify for the enhanced mobility rate under DLA now do so under PIP. We have continued to work with Motability in respect of the additional transitional support that it has announced, and we will continue to keep a close eye on this important area.

Mr Speaker: Given the time constraints, it would be helpful to the House if the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) were to shoehorn her inquiry in the next question into this one.

14. Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): My constituent Siobhan Fennell spends a great deal of time training local businesses in Belper in how best to accommodate customers with disabilities such as autism and dementia and conditions that cause limited mobility, and she has made a huge difference to the local community. Will my hon. Friend commend her work, especially given that she is in a wheelchair herself? She is passionate about her mission.

Justin Tomlinson: I absolutely commend my hon. Friend’s constituent for the work that she does in her community. I also congratulate Ms Fennell on receiving the British Empire Medal in the Queen’s birthday honours, as well as a national citizenship award in recognition of her work: a true tribute.

**Universal Credit: Access to Legal Aid**

15. Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Justice on universal credit claims and access to legal aid.

16. Shabana Mahmood: Solicitors in my constituency have told me that the DWP is refusing to supply written confirmation in the precise legal format that is required for legal aid applications made by people on universal credit. It is a case of one Government body refusing to comply with the rules of another. Is the Secretary of State aware of how deep these problems go, and will she ensure that no universal credit claimant misses out on legal aid because the DWP cannot follow the rules of the Ministry of Justice?

Amber Rudd: I am surprised to hear that question from the hon. Lady. According to my experience and the evidence that I have received during my conversations with the Ministry of Justice, there is no problem and it has been possible to passport in the same way. I hope that that will continue, but, as the hon. Lady knows, the Ministry of Justice is conducting a review. If she will write to me about that particular case, I will look at it myself.
Mr Speaker: Finally, on the matter of plumbing and pensions, Mr John Mann.

Pension Liabilities: Plumbing Industry

18. John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with representatives from the plumbing industry on section 75 pension liabilities. [911658]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I met plumbing representatives from Lancashire recently, and those in Angus and Perth last year. We also debated this matter in the House last year. There are nearly 1,000 last man standing multi-employer schemes. Most respondents to the Green Paper on defined-benefit pensions felt that the current buy-out basis was a clear and fair way in which to calculate an employer debt.

John Mann: My constituent Margaret Briggs, having paid £21,000 over 11 years with four employees into a pension scheme, has in the past four weeks received a demand for £331,000. How is she expected to pay this, and how can that possibly be rational and fair?

Guy Opperman: I cannot speak on the specifics of the individual scheme, but the majority of the employers in these schemes are incorporated and are not personally liable for any debt. The flexible apportionment arrangement can be used to help unincorporated employers who wish to incorporate, and the plumbing pension trustee has a streamlined flexible apportionment arrangement process that employers can use. Alternatively, where the employer debt arises in multi-employer schemes as a result of an employer cessation event, there are a number of mechanisms in the occupational pension schemes employer debt regulations that can be of assistance.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Rubbish.

Mr Speaker: I think that is the technical term.

Topical Questions

T1. [911664] Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): Now that we have moved from the design to the implementation of universal credit we continue to seek ways to ensure that it is a fair, compassionate benefit that takes account of people’s circumstances. I know that there have been concerns across the House about overpayments of benefits that result from fraud or error are recovered from claimants, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) for alerting me to this issue.

I am able to announce today that in cases where a claimant has been convicted of defrauding the Department and their only considerable asset is their home, we will take account of this prior to instigating Crown court proceedings to recover assets under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. This ensures a proportional response that should not result in the claimant having to subsequently apply to the Department for housing benefit. We believe this provides the right balance between pursuing what is owed to the Department and acknowledging the deprivation debt recovery can cause some claimants.

Robert Halfon: I had intended to ask another question, but I want to refer to the answer given to me by the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work; he is a very serious Minister but gave a very disappointing answer worthy of Sir Humphrey. The fact is that my constituent Lacey-Rose Samanthy, who is deaf, was offered a job by the NHS in mid-Essex; I saw the letter. That job offer was then rescinded because it said it was too difficult. She then got another very similar job in another organisation and it was able to adapt to her needs. This sort of thing should not be happening; it is incredibly unjust, and I want to know what the Department is going to do about it by being humane and showing compassion to my constituent.

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for being such a great champion of people with disabilities and tackling the challenges they have in the workplace, and I must say that the example he has given is very disappointing, because we would always hope and expect employers to show compassion and support where they have applications and the opportunity to employ disabled people. The work that this Government are doing will always try to address that, and with my right hon. Friend’s help we will make sure we get it right.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The two men competing to be the next Prime Minister have both said they would be willing to push through a catastrophic no deal. That is despite long-running warnings that disabled people will be hit hard by a no deal, with risks to vital medical supplies and the recruitment of care workers and the loss of the European social fund. However, last week Ministers revealed that the Government have not carried out any assessment of the impact of no deal on disabled people, so will the Minister commit to carrying out such an assessment, and could he in good conscience be part of a Government who pushed through such a reckless act?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady may be aware that I have some concerns about no deal; I would much prefer that this country chooses to leave the European Union on the basis of a deal, and I am hopeful that when we have a new leader in place we will be able to arrive at that position, possibly even with the support of the hon. Lady, to try to ensure that we get an exit that supports disabled people as well as everyone else.

T6. [911669] Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I established a universal credit action group in my constituency to track local progress and add performance indicators to see how the roll-out is going in Clackmannanshire. What measures are in place to track local success and progress? Are Ministers willing to meet me to discuss the progress of my action group?

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): I thank my hon. Friend for the energy with which he is supporting his constituents on universal credit. One of the key performance indicators is, of course, payment timeliness, which has improved significantly over the past couple of years, and that progress is matched in Alloa jobcentre. His local jobcentre staff will be happy to interact with him and, of course, I am also happy to meet him.
T2. [911665] **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I have the honour of chairing the all-party parliamentary group for terminal illness, and we have been taking evidence over recent months on the challenges that dying people face in accessing social security due to the six-month rule. Incidentally, the Scottish Government are already committed to allowing clinicians to make judgments for PIP, with their limited powers. We will be launching the report on Wednesday at 4 o’clock in the Members’ Dining Room, so will the Minister attend and agree to meet me and Marie Curie to discuss the report’s findings?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work in this area, and I reassure him that there have been several meetings with Marie Curie on this subject. I will take an interest in the report that is coming out on Wednesday, and I can tell him that we are once more looking at this matter again.

T8. [911671] **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): Will the Minister provide an update on the Department’s work to help people who are out of employment back into work, particularly in the Black Country and, more specifically, in my constituency of Walsall North?

Alok Sharma: As my hon. Friend knows, more people are in work now than ever before. Indeed, the employment rate is higher in every region of the country than in 2010, including in the Black Country. Specifically, he may already be aware that Willenhall jobcentre is working closely with major employers on employment opportunities and, of course, that our mentoring circles programme is being rolled out for 18 to 24-year-olds to help them increase their employability skills.

T3. [911666] **Frank Field** (Birkenhead) (Ind): I want to ask the Secretary of State about my constituent who hanged himself shortly after losing his personal independence payment. I wrote to her asking whether she would establish an inquiry, whether that inquiry would be independent, whether it would be headed by somebody who knows something about this area, whether it would report in three months, and whether the report will be made public.

Amber Rudd: I am taking this case very seriously, and I have had the right hon. Gentleman’s letter. At the moment, we are doing an internal inquiry, and if the right hon. Gentleman will leave that with me, I will come and talk to him if anything additional is required.

T10. [911673] **Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): Earlier this year, I visited the Friendly Autism Moray Experience in Lossiemouth. FAME is paid for by the lossie Entertainment Academy and works in collaboration with the DWP and Moray’s autism services. Local DWP manager Jane Munro has seen people on the project and believes that their contribution increases both their capabilities and their confidence. Does the Minister agree that we should support this valuable project? Will he also wish everyone involved with FAME all the best for the future?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting such a fantastic proactive example that is making a real difference, and I support anything further that we can do. The number of applicants to the Access to Work programme with a learning disability increased by 22% in the last year alone. That is an encouraging trend, and we must do much more in this important area.

T4. [911667] **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): With £7 billion of unclaimed pension credit since 2017—equivalent to two out of five pensioner households entitled to that credit not getting it—how will Government respond to Independent Age’s “Credit Where It’s Due” campaign to ensure that everyone who is entitled to pension credit gets it?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I saw the report, which was published last week, and noted the findings on page 15 and the four recommendations, many of which we are already doing. Whether through jobcentres, third parties, local authorities or our various other communications, we want more people to be claiming pension credit, and we are trying to do everything possible to make that happen.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Last week I had a meeting with a Parkinson’s support group in my constituency and was told about the many struggles that sufferers face. Will the Minister review the 20-metre rule, so that more people with Parkinson’s who have mobility problems can qualify for essential support, such as the blue badge scheme?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend, and I would be happy to meet her to discuss this further. It is a rule of thumb, but we have to look at whether somebody can repeatedly, regularly and safely travel 20 metres. I welcome the fact that, under PIP, 55% of those with Parkinson’s qualify for the highest rate of support.

T5. [911668] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): I spoke to a constituent at the weekend who has a lifetime disability living allowance award, but she is now being told that she has to apply for personal independence payment. She is obviously very worried about the situation, not least because there are so many cases online of people with indefinite awards being turned down for PIP. Why can we not transfer the data over so that somebody who has been assessed as having a lifetime need can automatically qualify for lifetime PIP?

Justin Tomlinson: I understand why the hon. Lady raises that question but, under DLA, only 15% of claimants actually got the highest rate of support, whereas the rate under PIP is now 31%. One of the key things is that 70% of DLA claimants were on lifetime awards, yet one in three claimants’ condition had significantly changed within 12 months and they would have been entitled to a different rate—predominantly a higher rate, rather than a lower rate—and we do not want people to miss out. That is why, under PIP, we are now spending an additional £6 billion a year to support some of the most vulnerable people in society.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): There has recently been a noticeable increase in the number of my constituents in receipt of personal independence payment who, on reassessment, have had it stopped or reduced. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me to discuss this worrying trend and to see what we can do to sort it out?
Justin Tomlinson: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend. We work closely with stakeholders to look at how we can continue improving the system, but I repeat that we are now spending an additional £6 billion and that a significantly higher rate of claimants are now on the highest level of support, and rightly so.

T7. [91670] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): With the childcare element of universal credit being paid in arrears, many people, particularly women, face a real barrier to entering work. Will the Secretary of State look at either paying that element in advance or paying for the first month of childcare for free so that all parents can access the employment market?

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this question, and I am mindful of the Select Committee report that addressed some of it. We have now made changes so that women going into work for the first time from benefits—either universal credit or a legacy benefit—will be able to access advance payments for that first month so that they do not have to find the money themselves. I am making sure that work coaches have more independence to support people back into work; that is one of the changes I have made.

Justin Tomlinson: Without having the full facts of a case it is difficult to comment, but I am happy to look into that specific one. When we compare DLA with PIP, we are talking about an additional £15.04 of benefit support a week per claimant.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Okay, I will take the point of order now. The hon. Gentleman has been jumping up and down like a veritable Zebedee, and so I shall accommodate him on this occasion, but I advise him that in the ordinary course of events points of order tend to be taken after statements. [Interruption] It is not obligatory, and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care can wait for his statement. I know he has all sorts of other activities in which he wishes to be busily engaged, but I am afraid he will have to wait.

Jon Trickett: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Thank you very much for finding the time for this. I am standing next to the Leader of the Opposition, whose fitness is legendary. I wonder whether you have received an application by a Minister to make a statement to the House on the principle of civil service neutrality. I ask following the undemocratic and unconstitutional public intervention attributed to senior civil servants and based on a falsehood printed in Saturday’s The Times. No doubt you will agree that since the 1854 Northcote-Trevlyn reforms the professionalism and objectivity of our public servants has been admired throughout the world, and it is a cornerstone of our democracy. But there must be no hesitation at all in condemning the kind of behaviour reported, and I would hope that the Government will root out any miscreants who have behaved in this way. Finally, I wonder whether you can do anything to encourage Ministers, if they have not already approached you, to make a statement in the House or arrange time for a debate about this very important principle.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I have not received any indication that a Minister is planning to make an oral statement in the House on this matter, although it is perfectly open for a Minister to offer to do so. The Northcote-Trevlyn principles are of the utmost importance, and I hope they will be upheld by Governments indefinitely. They have existed for a long time because the principles involved—permanence, anonymity and neutrality—are absolutely sacred. I simply suggest that the hon. Gentleman pursues the matter with his characteristic persistence and vigour, and I feel sure that, using the Order Paper and the resources provided by the Table Office, he will be happy to do so.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I just want to reassure the House that we have complete confidence in the fairness and independence of the civil service. It has said that it will respond and I frankly question the good judgment of the shadow Minister for bringing this up in the House at this stage, before it has had the chance to do so.

Jon Trickett rose—

Mr Speaker: I do not want to dwell on this matter. Suffice it to say that the Leader of the Opposition looks perfectly healthy to me; I have known him a long time and he is a very healthy-living fellow in my experience. On a serious note, I do think that the convention is
sacred and it really should not brook of any dispute across the House. It might be best to leave it there. I gently suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he has made his point with considerable lucidity and let us leave it there.

We come now to the statement from the Health and Social Care Secretary, which he has been eagerly awaiting. I know that he will want to deliver his own words with every ounce of aplomb at his disposal. I call Secretary Matt Hancock.
NHS Long-Term Plan: Implementation

3.43 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the implementation of the NHS long-term plan and the delivery of improvements to the health service. Today marks the 100th anniversary of the Ministry of Health, founded under the Liberal and Conservative coalition of Lloyd George, and the Department has been staffed by brilliant, impartial civil servants ever since, and is today.

I can tell the House that on Thursday last the boards of NHS England and NHS Improvement agreed the long-term plan implementation framework. Alongside the clinical review of standards, and the interim workforce plan, published last month, this framework is a critical step in delivering on our 10-year vision for the NHS, and in transforming our health service with the record funding that this Government are putting in. The document sets out the framework within which each of the 300 commitments in the long-term plan will be delivered, and it also sets out the 20 headline commitments and how we will monitor the delivery of the plan. In the past, there have been criticisms that NHS plans have not led to full delivery. We are determined to ensure that the long-term plan fulfils its potential to transform the health service for the better, and I am placing a copy of the implementation framework in the Libraries of both Houses.

I wish to draw attention to three particular areas, the first of which is cancer care. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) for his efforts to ensure that we focus on the vital indicator of one-year survival rate is how we ensure that the NHS remains at the forefront of cancer diagnosis and treatment and continues to deliver world-class care.

The second area is mental health. The Prime Minister and her predecessor rightly prioritised the treatment of mental health so that we can ensure that mental health finally gets parity with physical health. The £33.9 billion cash-terms settlement, which is the longest and largest cash settlement in the history of the NHS, includes a record £2.3 billion extra in real terms for the expansion of mental health services. The framework sets out how 380,000 more adults and 345,000 more children and young people will get access to mental health support. I pay tribute to the mental health Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who has done so much work to put the issue on the agenda.

We are introducing four-week waiting-time targets for children and young people and testing four-week community mental health targets for adults. The implementation framework refers specifically to the vital improvements to community mental health services that we all know are needed. Those improvements include services for adults living with serious mental disorders, including eating disorders, and for those coping with substance misuse. The framework also sets out how we will create a new workforce of mental health support teams to work with schools and colleges to help to identify young people who need help and reach them faster. In all, it is a fundamental shift in how we treat mental illness and how the NHS will prioritise mental health services.

The third area that I wish to touch on is people. Three quarters of the NHS budget goes on staff, because people are the most valuable resource that we have in the NHS. We need not only the right numbers but to ensure that staff have the right support. The long-term plan sets out our ambition to recruit, train and retrain the right numbers of staff over the next decade. Last month, Baroness Dido Harding set out the interim people plan, which sets out how we will build the workforce we need and create the right culture, so that doctors, nurses and other NHS staff have the time to care for patients and for themselves.

Last week, the British Medical Association accepted in a referendum the new agreement with junior doctors that will improve both pay and working conditions. Thanks to the hard work of my predecessor, we are already taking steps to increase the number of clinical training places by opening five new medical schools and increasing the number of routes into nursing through apprenticeships and nursing associates. Last year, more than 5,000 nursing associates started training through apprenticeships. This year, it will be up to 7,500.

Those are just three of the most vital areas from the 10-year vision for the NHS set out in the long-term plan. The British Medical Association accepted in a referendum the new agreement with junior doctors that will improve both pay and working conditions. Thanks to the hard work of my predecessor, we are already taking steps to increase the number of clinical training places by opening five new medical schools and increasing the number of routes into nursing through apprenticeships and nursing associates. Last year, more than 5,000 nursing associates started training through apprenticeships. This year, it will be up to 7,500.

From this year, we will start the roll-out of rapid diagnostic centres throughout the country, building on the success of a pilot with Cancer Research UK, so that we can catch cancer much earlier. NHS England is further extending lung health checks, targeting areas with the lowest survival rates, and Health Education England is increasing the cancer workforce, which will lead to 400 more clinical endoscopists and 300 more reporting radiographers by 2021. With these steps, our ambition is that 55,000 more people will survive cancer for five years, each year from 2028. Improving the one-year survival rate is how we ensure that the NHS remains at the forefront of cancer diagnosis and treatment and continues to deliver world-class care.

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Those are just three of the most vital areas from the 10-year vision for the NHS set out in the long-term plan. Across England, based on the implementation framework, local strategic plans are now being developed and will be brought together as part of a national implementation plan by the end of the year, and all of this will be underpinned by technology. Today sees the official opening of NHSX, the new part of the NHS, which will drive digital transformation to give citizens and clinicians the technology they need and save and improve lives. I am delighted that NHSX has received
such a warm welcome across the NHS because it has so much potential to transform every part of health and social care for patients and staff.

The forthcoming spending review will settle budgets for health education, public health and NHS capital investment, and the settlements will feed into the final implementation of this plan. As part of the spending review, we will also review the current functioning and structure of the better care fund, which is rising in line with NHS revenue growth.

On this the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the Ministry of Health, this framework sets out how we will go about securing the foundations of the national health service into the next century and the creation of an NHS that delivers world-class care for generations to come. I commend this statement to the House.

3.51 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for an advance copy of his statement. I had hoped for a greater sense of urgency from him. He talks about the 100-year anniversary of the Ministry of Health, but this year is the first time in 100 years that the advances in life expectancy have begun to stall, and even go backwards in the poorest areas. Just the other week, we saw that infant mortality rates have risen now for the third year in a row. As this is the first time that they have risen since the second world war, I would have hoped for a greater focus on health inequalities in his statement today, not least because public health services—the services that, in many ways, lead the charge against health inequalities—are being cut by £700 million. Now he says that we should wait for the spending review for the future of public health services, but we do not know when the spending review is. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury has said that it will be delayed, so it could be next year.

In the past, the Secretary of State has talked about a prevention Green Paper. Will that prevention Green Paper be before the spending review or after the spending review? Will he also tell us whether it is still the intention of the Department to insist that local authorities fund their public health obligations through the business rates?

At the time of the publication of the long-term plan last year, the then Secretary of State for Health said that we cannot have one plan for the NHS without a plan for social care, yet we still have no plan for social care. We have been promised a social care Green Paper umpteen times. We are more likely to see the Secretary of State riding Shergar at Newmarket than see the social care Green Paper. Where is it?

The Secretary of State talks about the better care fund revenue increase. May I press him further on that? Is he saying that the clinical commissioning group allocations to the better care fund, which tend to be the bulk of the better care fund, will increase in line with the NHS revenue increase, or is he saying that there will be new money available for the better care fund? Adult social care has been cut by £7 billion since 2010 under this Tory Government, which is why hundreds of thousands of elderly and vulnerable people are going without the social care support that they need. Presumably, we will have to wait for the spending review for proposals on social care.

The Secretary of State talks about the workforce. We have 100,000 vacancies across the NHS. We have heard about the interim people plan, but of course we have seen the bursary cut, the pay restraint, and the continuing professional development cut. That plan is all good and fine, but when will it be backed up by actual cash?

The Secretary of State talks about IT systems and apps—we know that he is very fond of that—but again he gives us no certainty on capital investment. Hospitals are facing a £6 billion repair bill—ceilings are falling in and pipes are bursting. The repair bill designated as serious risk has doubled to £3 billion. When will we have clarity on NHS capital?

We broadly welcome what the Secretary of State said about mental health, but 100,000 children are currently denied mental health treatment each year because their problems are not designated as serious enough, and over 500 children and young people wait more than a year for specialist mental health treatment. He talks of a fundamental shift, so can he guarantee that clinical commissioning groups will no longer be allowed to raid their child and adolescent mental health services budgets in order to fill wider gaps in health expenditure? On mental health resilience and prevention, only 1.6% of public health budgets is currently spent on mental health, so will he mandate local authorities, when setting their public health budgets, to increase the money they spend on mental health?

On cancer, we broadly welcome what the Secretary of State has said, but patients are waiting longer for treatment because of vacancies and out-of-date equipment. Today we learned that consultant oncologists with shares in private hospitals are referring growing numbers of patients to those hospitals. Is that not a conflict of interest? When will we see tougher regulation of the private healthcare sector?

The Secretary of State talked about the clinical review of standards that is being piloted in 14 hospitals, yet those hospitals are not publishing the data. If he wants to abandon the four-hour A&E target, will he insist that those pilot hospitals publish all the data? He did not mention waiting lists. We have seen CCGs rationing treatment because of the finances. We have seen 3,000 elderly people refused cataract removals. We have seen CCGs refusing applications for hip and knee replacements. We have even seen a hospital that until last week was inviting patients to pay up to £18,000 for a hip or knee replacement—procedures that used to be available on the NHS. When is he going to intervene to stop that rationing of treatment, which we are seeing expand across the country because of the finances?

Finally, there are many laudable things in the long-term plan that we welcome. Alcohol care teams were a Labour idea. Perinatal mental health services were a Labour idea. Gambling addiction clinics, which the Secretary of State announced last year, were a Labour idea. Today he is talking about bringing catering back in-house, which is also a Labour idea. Why does he not just let me be Heath Secretary, and then he could carry on being the press secretary for the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)?

Matt Hancock: Well, it is great that by the end of his questions the hon. Gentleman finally got to the future of the NHS, which is what we are here to discuss. However, what I did not hear—unless I missed it—was a welcome for the extra £33.9 billion that we are putting
into the NHS. I did not hear him welcome the fact that life expectancies are rising, or our plan to drive up healthy life expectancy still further. I did not hear him say whether the Labour party supports our efforts to ensure that the NHS is properly funded and supported not only now but into the future, because that is what this Government are delivering.

I will go through some of the questions that the hon. Gentleman did raise. He asked about the prevention Green Paper. Indeed, he will know that preventing people getting ill in the first place is a central objective of mine, and it will be forthcoming shortly. He mentioned the better care fund. I was very precise in what I said about the better care fund, because its funding is rising in line with NHS revenue growth. In fact, the overall funding available to deliver social care in this country has risen by 11% over the past three years. Of course there is more to do to ensure that we have a social care system that is properly funded and structured to ensure that everybody can have the dignity of the care they need in older age, and that people of working age get the social care they need, but the Labour party ought to welcome the increase in funding, as well as the aim of ensuring that we get the best possible value for every pound.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the clinical review of standards, which he welcomed when it was announced recently. The pilots that he mentioned started just four weeks ago, and of course we will be assessing the results and ensuring that we get the right structures in place in future. I am glad that he welcomed it, but in relation to publishing data, after just four weeks it is unsurprising that we are still in the early stages.

The hon. Gentleman asked me to ensure that the increase in funding for mental health will happen and that CCGs will be required to see that increase flowing through to make sure that patients get better service. I can confirm that NHS England is already intervening. The £2.3 billion increase that we have set out in the long-term plan will be required to flow through to the frontline. This implementation framework is part of the system that we are putting in place to make sure that that happens.

**Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I very much welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement on putting the one-year cancer metric at the very heart of cancer services as a means of encouraging earlier diagnosis. You will be well aware, Mr Speaker, that the all-party parliamentary group on cancer has long championed the need to put this metric at the very heart of our services in order to encourage earlier diagnosis. The inconvenient truth is that despite the best will of those on both sides of this debate on the need to focus on process targets, we have failed to close the gap on international averages in our cancer survival rates. I chaired the APPG for 10 years, and I know that the current chair, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), is waiting to speak as well. Will the Secretary of State ensure that sufficient funds are allocated to the one-year metric, because history would suggest that this metric has been there, or thereabouts, in the mix before, but because the money has been attached to the process targets, local NHS systems have ignored it?

**Matt Hancock**: I pay tribute to the work that the APPG, so ably led, has done in putting the measurement of improvements of cancer services at the forefront of the debate. I particularly acknowledge the point about early diagnosis. Here in the UK, we are one of the best countries in the world at treating cancer once it is diagnosed, but we are behind the curve on early diagnosis. Putting a one-year cancer diagnosis metric at the heart of the implementation of the long-term plan is a critical step in making that happen. What is going to happen now is that each of the local systems will feed into the framework in terms of how they will be putting this into action. The full implementation plan, which will be published shortly after the spending review, will take that into account, as well as all the budgets that need to be settled in the spending review. I would recommend to my right hon. Friend—my hon. Friend—[Interruption.] Just for now. I recommend that he keep up this campaign, because we have made significant progress in the implementation framework but there is still more to do.

**Mr Speaker**: The hon. Gentleman was temporarily elevated to the Privy Council by his right hon. Friend on the Treasury Bench. He might—who knows?—regard that as an earnest of what is to come.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): There is no reference to GPs in the statement—I have just been looking through it. This comes at a time when my constituents are telling me that they are having to wait three weeks to get a GP appointment. Faith House GP surgery on Beverley Road, which I have raised with the Secretary of State directly, is now due to close. It is all very well training doctors for the future, but what is he going to do about the crisis in primary care now?

**Matt Hancock**: I picked out three of the 20 areas that we are particularly focused on in this implementation framework, one of which is the number of GPs and the broader primary care workforce, because it is not just about GPs but about all those who also support primary care across the board. We have a clear target of 5,000 more GPs, based on the 2015 baseline. We have a record number of GPs in training. Last month, the Minister for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond), announced the consultation on changes to the pension to remove some of the unintended consequences of pension tax changes for GPs to ensure that we retain our highly trained, highly qualified GPs. There is a whole load of work in the people plan being led by Baroness Dido Harding to make sure that we have the number of GPs that we need and the wider primary care health workforce that is necessary.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): As my right hon. Friend said, the first Minister of Health was Christopher Addison, then a Liberal, who abolished his position as President of the Local Government Board to succeed himself as the first Minister of Health in 1919, but the first Secretary of State to hold up a White Paper saying “national health service” was the Conservative Sir Henry Willink in 1944. We must give credit to the Labour party for bringing in the health service, agreed by the coalition Government, in 1948, although we have to recognise that Aneurin Bevan decided to nationalise the hospitals and not the GPs, when most people expected it to be the other way round.
In the experience of my wife, who did five years as Minister for Health and Secretary of State for Health, we should be praising all those who support the clinical, the support workers, the administrators, just the others who help doctors, nurses and other professionals—to look after us at all stages of our lives. We must have the extra money. I am glad that we have gone beyond the Labour party’s ambitious targets to meet our own ambitious targets, and that we can look forward to doing more, because we have to recognise that health will require a greater proportion of our wealth as we live longer and want better services.

**Matt Hancock:** I wholeheartedly agree with the entirety of what my hon. Friend said. It is true that for the majority of its 71-year history—71 this week—the NHS has been run by Conservative Secretaries of State, and the largest cash injections have come from this party. It is a truly national institution that we should all support, and we have to support not only the doctors, who lead many parts of the NHS, and the nurses, but all the health service staff, because it is a true team effort.

**Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): The Secretary of State may remember that I brought a group of mental health reformers to see him, to make the case for culture change in mental health services to address clear human rights abuses such as locking people up when they do not need to be locked up, often for a long period, shifting people around the country in ways that would never happen with physical health and the endemic use of force in mental health services. We argued that ending inappropriate institutional care would free up money for better prevention and early intervention. He said he loved that approach. Is he doing anything to actually implement it?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes. First, in terms of the review led by Simon Wessely of the legal powers set by the Mental Health Act 1983, there will be a Government response and then legislation in due course. We want to get that legislation right and bring it forward on an open basis, to ensure that we get a consensus behind it before introducing it formally to the House. On the administrative side, a programme of work is under way to deliver exactly what the right hon. Gentleman mentioned. In my statement, I specifically referenced the expansion in community mental health services that must happen, which will be good value for money and, of course, much better for many patients.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Mr Speaker:** Ah, a veritable galaxy of parliamentary celebrities from whom to choose.

**Damian Green** (Ashford) (Con): I felt that my right hon. Friend’s announcement deserved a more enthusiastic response than the uncharacteristically churlish one it received from the shadow Health Secretary. In terms of mental health, I particularly welcome the introduction of four-week waiting time targets for children and young people, because I know how much distress has been caused to many of my constituents by undue delays in the assessment and treatment of young people with mental health problems. Can he tell the House when he plans to implement those new waiting time targets and how he will keep pressure on CCGs, so that the benefits are seen on the ground as soon as possible?

**Matt Hancock:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. The shadow Secretary of State is so nice behind the scenes that he sometimes has to get a bit spiky in public, just to prove to his masters in the Leader of the Opposition’s office that he is on their side.

Over the rest of this year, we will deliver the plan to ensure that these targets are put in place. The truth is that we can only manage what we measure, and having a target for access to mental health services and pilots on how we do that for children’s health services is an incredibly important part of ensuring that the system lines up behind the rapid availability of mental health services, which, as I imagine every Member knows from constituency casework, is critical.

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I very much welcome the ambition of this plan, the recognition that it will need appropriate resources—it very much needs appropriate staffing, because the human resource is most important—and the emphasis on cancer and early diagnosis. May I ask the Secretary of State how he will ensure that improvements in early diagnosis for less survivable cancers are central to the target to diagnose 75% of cancers at stage 1 and stage 2? There is a concern that the less survivable cancers will get neglected, given the nature of the plan at the moment.

**Matt Hancock:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the tone that he takes, and he is absolutely right in his analysis. I know he met the cancer Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy), last week on this point. We absolutely will address it, and we will not miss the less survivable cancers. Indeed, the focus on early diagnosis will of course help survivability, but it is also a focus across all cancers equally, rather than just on those where survivability has improved so much.

**Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): This long-term plan for the NHS has been developed by the NHS, not imposed by Government. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this sets the plan apart and means it is much more likely to work for staff and patients alike?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. The plan is of the NHS by the NHS for the NHS. We in Government will absolutely facilitate it and support it, and of course we are putting in the money, but the NHS as a whole should be very proud of what this plan proposes and the way the implementation is being done in such a rigorous fashion.

**Mr Chris Leslie** (Nottingham East) (Change UK): This long-term plan for the NHS has been developed by the NHS, not imposed by Government. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this sets the plan apart and means it is much more likely to work for staff and patients alike?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. The plan is of the NHS by the NHS for the NHS. We in Government will absolutely facilitate it and support it, and of course we are putting in the money, but the NHS as a whole should be very proud of what this plan proposes and the way the implementation is being done in such a rigorous fashion.

**Mr Chris Leslie** (Nottingham East) (Change UK): May I press the Secretary of State a little further on the section of the plan that relates to prevention and early intervention? We are all waiting still for the prevention Green Paper. In particular, there are some diseases and illnesses, such as stroke, where apparently four out of five cases could be prevented by such early action, whether it is diagnosis of atrial fibrillation, or blood pressure and cholesterol testing devices. What more can be done for this Government to show they are serious about preventing ill health, such as stroke?

**Matt Hancock:** I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The whole plan—the whole NHS long-term plan—is about prevention as well as cure. The focus of
the NHS needs to switch more towards prevention as well as, of course, helping people get better when they get ill. Taking the example of stroke, there is a lot on the prevention of stroke in the draft prevention Green Paper—just to give him a bit of a teaser for that. At the core of improving prevention of stroke is both behaviour change but also better use of data, because being able to spot people who have symptoms that are likely to lead to stroke can then help much more targeted interventions. I find it striking that with the big stroke charities, as with the big heart charities, their big ask is for better and more access to data.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and his commitment to this implementation plan, alongside the commitment to increase clinical standards? That is not a criticism of the medical professions; it is just a determination to make sure that the NHS is an infinite learning organisation and can learn from its mistakes. In that respect, will he recommit to HSIB—the healthcare safety investigation branch of his Department—which is devoted to doing clinical investigations without finding blame, so that these problems can be surfaced and the learning can be implemented across the NHS? In particular, will he recommit to the legislation, which has been through prelegislative scrutiny and is still waiting to be introduced?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I am looking forward to that legislation being introduced. The work that my hon. Friend’s Select Committee—the Joint Committee on the Draft Health Service Safety Investigations Bill—did in the prelegislative scrutiny was incredibly important. The HSIB Bill promises to improve patient safety, which is an important part of the agenda, and I look forward to its being brought forward to the House.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I have recently become the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on sickle cell and thalassaemia. Sickle cell is very much a hidden disability which is lifelong. Some people take up to five medications a day, which is very costly. If they have a relapse, they can be hospitalised, but it is more cost-effective and preventive to have free prescriptions than to end up in hospital. Will the Secretary of State review the matter and do what is both best for those patients and in the public interest?

Matt Hancock: I will certainly look at the matter. When I was on a night shift with a London ambulance crew, we attended a patient who suffered from sickle cell, and it was horrific to see the degree of pain that they were in. I have therefore seen at first hand exactly how horrific the condition can be and I will look into the hon. Lady’s suggestion.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I was delighted to be able to show the Secretary of State the health and wellbeing hub in Budleigh Salterton and the opportunities at Ottery St Mary community hospital, and that he confirmed that both places had a role to play in the future of health provision in East Devon. However, last week, the National Audit Office found that community hospitals and GP surgeries were struggling to pay the rents charged by NHS Property Services and that, nationally, outstanding debt has almost tripled since 2014 to £576 million. If my right hon. Friend is interested in securing a legacy before he moves on to even higher political office, will he please look at that, particularly in advance of the review planned for 2021?

Matt Hancock: I certainly will. I also draw my right hon. Friend’s attention to an announcement, which we made last month, to allow local hospital trusts to request property from NHS Property Services so that it can be transferred to the trusts if it can be used better and more flexibly locally, in the way that the hub I saw at Budleigh Salterton absolutely delivers. I can also see such an opportunity for the potential hub at Ottery St Mary, which was a community hospital and has enormous promise for delivering services closer to the community.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for the statement and the substantial moneys that the Government have committed to the NHS long-term plan, particularly given the need for the cancer strategy to be fully implemented. On rare diseases, will he confirm that drugs such as Orkambi, Spinraza and medicinal cannabis will be simple to apply for and accessible for those who desperately need them now, when time is not on their side?

Matt Hancock: I understand the importance of those drugs. Each one is in a slightly different part of the process. We have opened up availability of medicinal cannabis. Indeed, I was talking this morning to the head of NHS England to ensure that our plans to normalise access to medicinal cannabis for those with a clinical need for it can be brought forward. The hon. Gentleman should expect to hear more news soon on the progress that NHS England and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence have made. On Orkambi, we are still engaged with the company, Vertex, to try to bring that to patients in a cost-effective way. I greatly hope that Vertex will make some progress.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It has been great to hear my right hon. Friend mentioning the new medical schools. The one in Chelmsford is fantastic. It is 12 times oversubscribed for next year—we would love an increase in places. It was lovely to meet three of the medical students last week, when they raced across the high street to have selfies taken with my right hon. Friend’s predecessor.

We are also doing well on nurse apprenticeships, but there is an issue, especially with mature students coming in to study adult nursing. Will my right hon. Friend look again at how to give them financial assistance?

Matt Hancock: I thoroughly enjoyed visiting my hon. Friend’s local medical school and seeing the expansion that has taken place. The two of us walked into a room occupied almost entirely by dead bodies, which was quite an experience. [Interruption.] It was nothing like this place. On the specific and substantive questions she asks, we are looking at both the funding for the expansion of medical schools and how we ensure that we get the nurses we need into the profession. That will be part of the spending review process with the settlement of the budget for Health Education England.
Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Having been diagnosed earlier this year with a stage 3B melanoma, I always get a bit sweaty when people start talking about how important it is to have early diagnosis to ensure survival rates, but of course they are absolutely right. The number of people, in particular, men, with melanoma is rising and people are still dying. I have heard horrific tales of people going to GPs five, six or seven times before a GP was able to send them on to see a dermatologist. I have heard about dermatologists saying, “I’ll look at this mole here, but I’m not going to look at that one because you haven’t been referred for that one. That will have to be a separate referral.” I have heard of people waiting six or seven weeks for histopathology to come back. All those things delay the process. Do we not need to have a wholesale approach to melanoma to ensure that we save more people’s lives?

Matt Hancock: Yes, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I agree with what he says. There is a need for the whole medical profession to be constantly up to date with the latest treatment and diagnostic science. I am determined that part of the drive for early diagnosis is about not just diagnosis once referred, but better referral. We all have a part to play in that—wider society, as well as primary care.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Many people in my constituency find it difficult to obtain NHS dentistry. While that is part of the short-term plan, on the ambitions outlined in the plan for long-term improvements to oral health, what assurance can the Secretary of State give that NHS dentists will be in place to deliver them?

Matt Hancock: NHS dentistry is incredibly important. Ultimately, dentistry is part of prevention; it prevents oral ill health. We are doing a lot of work on what further we can do to support oral health. In fact, I had a meeting with the Minister with responsibility for public health on that subject this morning. I would love to meet my hon. Friend to discuss it further.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Secretary of State clearly identified three critical areas for improvement to cancer survival rates. He is absolutely right about early diagnosis. I do not want to make my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) any more sweaty than he already is, but it cannot be repeated enough times that spotting these issues early on is critical to improving survival rates. The Secretary of State is also right about the importance of mental health. The third point he touched on was that the workforce is key to underpinning all this. In that regard, does he know how many specialist mental health and specialist cancer nurses we will have at the end of the 10-year period?

Matt Hancock: The answer to that question is being worked on as part of the people plan, which Baroness Dido Harding is putting together. We published the interim plan last month. The full people plan will be available after we have settled, in the spending review, the budget of Health Education England. The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly important point.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I very much welcome the plan, with £33.9 billion being committed by 2022-23. My slight concern is where the money is going to come from. I wonder whether my right hon. Friend has had assurances from the Treasury that that will indeed be the case. With all the other pressures on spending and revenues in the coming years, that might be a little difficult. We have to find ways to ensure that the revenue is there because this money must be spent.

Matt Hancock: Yes, it will in all circumstances. This is a firm commitment, supported right across this House and right across our party, and it will be delivered. There is absolutely no question about that.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): We know that areas of greater deprivation have greater health needs than other areas. Will the Secretary of State tell us what more there is in the long-term plan specifically about increasing the resources for GP practices that serve areas of greater deprivation? They have longer waiting times and greater vacancy lists and we need specific action to support those practices.

Matt Hancock: Making sure that we have the right allocations for CCGs across the country that reflect the needs of the local population is a very important responsibility for NHS England—as the commissioner of those services—to make sure that the money follows need. After all, the principle of the NHS is that it is available to everybody according to need, not ability to pay.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): We all know that the Secretary of State is a great fan of technology and of improving the mental health of young people, and all people across the country. In my constituency, a man called Richard Lucas has set up a new online system called govox, which is a revolutionary, technologically enabled way of improving mental health among young people. Will the Secretary of State advise the House how innovative new technological solutions at a local level can best get into CCGs and the local NHS, so that we can improve mental health for everybody?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend has raised with me before the new technology developed by Mr Lucas. A new technology such as this can be picked up by all sorts of different parts of the NHS—by different CCGs or mental health trusts—which can then use it. One of the reasons that we have brought in NHSX, which opens today, is to make sure that there is a central place to which people with a good idea for how to improve the health of the nation by using technology can go to find a way into the NHS, so that great practice and good technology can be promoted across the NHS as quickly as possible.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Speaking of revenue, what is the Secretary of State’s attitude to NHS trusts that set up subsidiary companies, if one of the main motives is clearly seen to be VAT avoidance, as in the case of Bradford trusts where nearly half the extra revenue of setting up a company in the first five years would be VAT-related?

Matt Hancock: If the hon. Gentleman writes to me with the specifics of the case, I will be very happy to look into it. The use of subsidiaries in the way that he described in principle has been available to NHS organisations for some time, and I am very happy to take up the case that he asked about.
Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome the 10-year plan and particularly what the Secretary of State said about apprenticeships, and I urge him to push more degree apprenticeships in the NHS. If it is right to have a 10-year long-term plan for the NHS in England, does he agree that we also need a long-term NHS plan for my constituency of Harlow? The only way that we can achieve that is by having a new hospital health campus. He has visited our hospital and realises that it is not fit for purpose.

Matt Hancock: Few people make the case for their constituencies better than my right hon. Friend, and nobody makes the case for Harlow better than him. He invited me around Harlow hospital. I went into the basement to see some of the work that is needed, and the basement of Harlow hospital is in a worse state of disrepair than the basement of this building. That means that it needs work, so I am considering his proposal. The future NHS capital budget will be settled in the spending review, so I suggest that he has a conversation with Treasury Ministers as well. I look forward to seeing the case progress.

My right hon. Friend is also right about how important degree apprenticeships are. Both of us are former Skills Ministers and have heralded the arrival of degree apprenticeships as a route for people into high-paid, high-quality jobs without them having to go to university.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Delayed discharge has a knock-on effect on the whole NHS. The fact that the Secretary of State has said today that all he will do is review the better care fund and that he will not publish a White Paper on social care shows what a low priority this is. When will we see the White Paper on social care for which we have been waiting not just months, but years?

Matt Hancock: The statement was about the implementation of the NHS long-term plan, to which of course the future of social care is vital, which is one reason why the spending power available within social care has risen by more than 10% over the past three years. We continue to work on the long-term future of social care. We will have to wait for a new Prime Minister before publishing the Green Paper—I think that is fairly obvious—but it would also be good to get a bit of cross-party collaboration. When my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) made some proposals that were in line with the cross-party work of two Select Committees of this House, within half an hour the shadow Secretary of State’s friend, the shadow Chancellor, had rubbed this idea—I do not think he took the time even to read it. We could do with a bit of cross-party work on the future of social care in this country.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Thanks to the record funding boost for the NHS, Cheltenham General Hospital can plan for the future with confidence, but local trust managers consistently cite difficulties with recruiting emergency medicine doctors as a reason for not being able to expand A&E provision. Does the Secretary of State agree that some of the additional resources must go into training additional A&E doctors so that we can give Cheltenham General Hospital the resources it requires?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I agree very strongly with that. When I said that my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) was one of the best constituency advocates, I forgot my right hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who is also one of the best, and certainly the best advocate for Cheltenham, that the House has ever seen. He is absolutely right in the substance of his question, which is that we must have the support for the workforce we need, including in emergency medicine, to ensure high-quality emergency facilities near to people—where they are needed—and he makes that case with respect to the expansion of services at Cheltenham Hospital, which he supports incredibly strongly.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Is the privatisation of the urgent care centre in the Runcorn-Halton part of my constituency part of the Secretary of State’s NHS plan?

Matt Hancock: I am not sure what specific case the hon. Gentleman is referring to, but I will tell him this about privatisation: I support the NHS being free at the point of delivery, but it is a fact, and the most important principle at stake is how to deliver the best possible services for our constituents. That is what I will keep doing.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The success of the NHS long-term plan in Northamptonshire will depend on urgent short-term reform of the combined health and social care system in the county. There are 1,400 hospital beds in the two hospitals in Northamptonshire; 900 are occupied today by stranded and super-stranded patients as a result of delayed transfers of care. This is the worst situation in the country. The number of patients staying more than seven days in a hospital bed is twice the national average. Northamptonshire’s over-65 population is the fastest growing in the county. We need to take advantage of local government reform to establish an integrated health and social care pilot, but this requires the personal attention of the Secretary of State. Without that, we will not make any progress. Will he meet Members of Parliament from the county this month to get this under way?

Matt Hancock: Yes, and I suggest we meet also with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. I have met the Northants MPs to progress this, and I have also meet the Communities Secretary about it. My hon. Friend is dead right. There is a serious problem, but there is also an opportunity for much more integrated health and social care. If Northants MPs, the Communities Secretary and I can find an opportunity to meet, perhaps we will be able to crack through this one.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his announcement. I have two questions. First, do he and his Department accept that there are additional costs in providing healthcare on an Island that is of an equal standard to that provided elsewhere? Secondly, will he and his officials agree to meet Island officials to discuss plans for a pilot scheme to help integrate healthcare, adult social care and other local government services to ensure maximum efficiency
in the delivery of services, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) just talked about, and to ensure that as much money as possible goes to frontline services?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I shall be happy to ensure that that meeting happens. As for Island healthcare costs, my hon. Friend is right to say that the Isle of Wight is unique in its health geography, and that there are places in this country—almost certainly including the Isle of Wight—where healthcare costs are higher because of the geography. There is a programme for smaller hospitals that are necessarily smaller because of the local geography, as they need special attention.

As I have said, I shall be happy to ensure that the meeting goes ahead, and I shall continue to talk to my hon. Friend, who makes the case for the Isle of Wight better than any other.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Tomorrow I shall attend the funeral of my Auntie Bib, who has just died of cancer. It was discovered at quite a late stage. May I press my right hon. Friend to ensure that rapid access diagnosis centres are rolled out as quickly as humanly possible, and to give the House more details? May I also—as is my job—remind him that he is, of course, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care for this entire United Kingdom, and ask him how he intends to engage with devolved authorities when targets are being missed to ensure that standards are maintained across the island? Our constituents are all British citizens, and they all require and deserve the same level of support.

Matt Hancock: I am sure that the whole House will want to pass our condolences to my hon. Friend, to his family, and to friends of his aunt. In a way, it is fitting to end this session with a very personal example of why early diagnosis matters.

As for my hon. Friend’s second point, ensuring that we have high-quality health services throughout the UK is, of course, vital. It is true that there has been a smaller increase in funding for the NHS in Scotland, and a consequent smaller increase in the number of healthcare professionals there. We need an improvement right across this country. We are delivering that in England, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will continue to make the case for better health services in Scotland from the Scottish National party Government, who receive the money from the UK Treasury but do not put all of it towards the NHS.

Diana Johnson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. I will come to points of order in a minute. I will come to points of order in a minute.

Mr Speaker: That is a very useful public information notice as well as a request by the hon. Gentleman. I shall always profit by his counsels; I am always grateful to him for his advice, and he speaks on this subject with a passion, knowledge and authenticity that are respected across the House. All levity aside, he makes a very serious point, and I am particularly preoccupied with

**Points of Order**

4.37 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Long-suffering rail travellers in the north of England were promised for many years that Pacer trains, described by the Transport Secretary himself as “knackered”, would be replaced by new trains by December 2018. Before the end of 2018, the deadline became December 2019. In the weekend press, news emerged that Pacer trains would not now be replaced by then, and would be in use well into 2020.

Given the billions of pounds spent on rail investment in London and the south-east and the £1 billion-worth of new Crossrail trains sitting idle in London, this latest broken promise is extremely galling to Members of Parliament and passengers throughout the north. Have you received any indication from the Department for Transport, Mr Speaker, that it intends to make a statement on why there is to be this further delay—or does it simply not believe that people in the north deserve such an explanation?

Mr Speaker: I am bound to say to the hon. Lady that I am not aware of any intention on the part of a Minister to make a statement on the matter in the Chamber. Certainly I have received no approach, to the best of my knowledge. I think that if I had been written to about it, I would know, and I don’t, so I haven’t. Let me say to the hon. Lady, however, that if she wishes to give voice further to her concern about this matter—as the indefatigable representative of Kingston upon Hull North constitutes that the House knows her to be—there will be plenty of opportunities for her to do so. I have a feeling that she will be troubling the scorers on the matter for some time to come, irked and agitated by the decision as she palpably is.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you will have noticed, the sun has actually been out over the last few days, and you will know that one of the major causes of skin cancer is exposure to the sun. You might have noticed that Glastonbury has been giving out free high-factor sunscreen to everybody at the festival. Those in the armed forces get free sunscreen because it is a chargeable offence to suffer from sunburn, yet our police officers and the security staff who stand outside this building, often for many long hours in the blazing sun, get no free sunscreen from the Palace authorities. Can you, Mr Speaker, make sure that that is now available in your capacity as Chairman of the House of Commons Commission? If you were thinking of going to Wimbledon at any point in the next fortnight, I wonder whether you might have a word with the authorities there to make sure that people there too do not end up with burnt faces and burnt ears and that there is free high-factor, high-quality sunscreen available to all.

Mr Speaker: That is a very useful public information notice as well as a request by the hon. Gentleman. I shall always profit by his counsels; I am always grateful to him for his advice, and he speaks on this subject with a passion, knowledge and authenticity that are respected across the House. All levity aside, he makes a very serious point, and I am particularly preoccupied with
the situation of the staff here. I may or may not make my way to SW19 over the next fortnight, and if I do I will bear in mind his advice, although I am not sure mine will be especially welcome. But as far as the House is concerned the hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and I would like to reflect on that. Of course people should take proper precautions to protect themselves from exposure; it is possible to enjoy the sun, but to do so safely, and that does require appropriate factor cream regularly applied, as the hon. Gentleman knows. I will come back to the hon. Gentleman on the point relating to the staff, but it will have been heard by officials, with whom I will discuss the matter.

Estimates Day

[6TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Department for International Development

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2020, for expenditure by the Department for International Development:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £3,631,122,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 2154 of Session 2017–19,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £1,923,101,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £5,760,680,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—[Rebecca Harris.]

4.41 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for approving this debate today. I would also like to put on record my thanks to my right hon. Friends the Members for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and for Witham (Priti Patel) and the Chairman of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), for helping me to prepare for this debate; the experience they have and the work they have done is admirable.

I have long had an interest in international development, and I think probably it comes from the fact that I certainly feel very lucky to have been born in this country. I did nothing to deserve to be born in this country. We have food, we have clean water, we have medical services, and we have education, which very many people across the world do not have; in other words, we have the building blocks to be able to progress in our lives and to normally live beyond childhood, while many in the world do not have that opportunity.

I would go as far as to say that my interest in international development and in trying to help the world’s poorest people was one of my main motivations for wanting to enter the House of Commons in the first place, and I have had the privilege of being able to witness the effects of the aid that the United Kingdom has provided. I am aware it goes across the world, but my particular interest has been in Africa and I have the honour of being chairman of the all-party group on Ethiopia and Djibouti. I have been to some very rural areas in Ethiopia as well as the cities and have seen the benefits our aid brings to so very many people.

We should look at the achievements we have made in this country through our official development assistance fund, which is now, I am very proud to say, 0.7% of our gross national income. We have donated more than £77 billion since 2013, when we set that target.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am glad that my hon. Friend has introduced the debate in this way. He has mentioned the 0.7%, and if anyone says that we cannot afford 70p out of every £100 of our wealth, they are wrong. We should be able to look after our own people and make this contribution to meet the United Nations target, which we have started to meet rather late but before most other countries.
Mr Robertson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. For a prosperous country—we are supposed to be the fifth largest economy in the world—that is a small amount to be asked to pay, but it has an enormous impact across the world.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I wholeheartedly agree with what has just been said. Our aid has made a huge impact. Under both Labour and Conservative Governments, there has been cross-party consensus on this. It is one of the few issues on which we have consensus in this House, and it is a good job we do, because it has made a huge difference. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on HIV/AIDS, and our aid through institutions such as the Global Fund has made a huge difference. I want to commend the Government for their fantastic announcement of £1.4 billion for the Global Fund in recent days. In 2000, when I was starting to work on these issues, there were only 2 million people globally receiving antiretroviral treatment for HIV; today, that figure is 22 million. This is literally life-saving treatment that we have been able to provide through our aid.

Mr Robertson: The hon. Gentleman is right to talk about the cross-party support for this issue in the House. The 0.7% target goes back a very long time, and I am pleased that it was a Conservative-led Government who actually reached it, but it would be churlish not to recognise the work that Tony Blair did, for example, in highlighting the issue, and I am pleased to do so. Many other leading politicians have also done work on this. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point, and I will come back to it in just a minute.

I mentioned the fact that we had given that £77 billion in aid since 2013, but what does that actually mean? It means that we have helped more than 1 billion children across the world to get an education, as well as helping more than 37 million children to be immunised and more than 40 million people to have access to clean water. These are things that we in this country take for granted, but our aid has helped people in those ways across the world and I am very proud of that.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman also agree that a particularly important facet of our investment in children’s education has been the investment in the education of girls? If we invest in girls’ futures, we invest in the future of the whole community and the whole country. Does he agree that the efforts we have made in that regard have been admirable and must be sustained and indeed increased?

Mr Robertson: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady on that point; I am glad that she has raised it. In rural areas in Ethiopia, I have witnessed situations in which girls have had to walk a number of miles every day to collect water to bring back to their families. That is neither sustainable nor efficient. It keeps the girls away from school, and there are distractions to keep boys and girls from attending school in such countries, but we really have to address that and get over it; otherwise, we will not make the kind of progress that we want to make.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech, particularly his focus on education. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on disability. Does he agree that in many developing countries, children with disabilities still find it too challenging to get to school and that we must focus on those extremely vulnerable children, who are often kept behind closed doors and never seen? We must ensure that they get every opportunity in life and that, in line with the sustainable development goals, we leave no one behind.

Mr Robertson: Absolutely. The hon. Lady makes an extremely good and useful intervention. As many hon. Members have done, I have seen the disabilities that some children have that prevent them from attending school or from doing very much in life, really. For example, we see children who cannot stand up because their limbs are damaged, and children with cataracts who are blind because they cannot get a simple operation. That situation really is unacceptable. So, if our aid can help reduce such incidents, it really is worth doing. We have to increase aid, and we have to improve so much.

It is a sad fact that we are one of only eight countries that actually meet the aid target. Other countries do give a lot of money, but few actually meet the target, and we need to work with and encourage others to do so. The situation is a bit like reducing emissions in this country, because we produce only 2% of the world’s emissions, but if other countries are not going to play their part, we are not going to get the progress that we need. The situation is exactly the same with aid.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is appropriate to follow up on the contribution from the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), because our international aid and development programmes are largely centred in East Kilbride. That is yet more evidence of the strength and vitality of this Union that we enjoy and the blessing that it is across the face of the earth.

Mr Robertson: Absolutely. I am sure that Madam Deputy Speaker would not want me to go too far down that road, but it is a good point.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is also in our national interests to keep up our investment in international aid? By making poorer countries more stable, we improve the world’s stability. By tackling diseases, we stop them spreading to our own country. If we are to fight climate change, we need to fight it globally. Aid is not just the right thing to do morally, but it is in our interests to continue it.

Mr Robertson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We could take things even further because, in the commercial sense, if countries across the world are richer, that affords us new markets as well, which is in addition to the humanitarian reasons for aid that she rightly outlines.

DFID’s budget is around the £14 billion mark. While it is certainly a small part of our overall income, as was raised earlier, it is still a considerable amount of money. The aid budget has its critics and criticisms, of course, and I will come on to one or two of them, because some may be valid. Perhaps we can improve matters, and we
should certainly never be satisfied with where we are, because we can always do better. We all have constituents who point out that some of our schools and our police are short of money, so if we are going to spend money abroad, helping people who are not from this country, then we must ensure that we spend it wisely and effectively, and this estimates day debate is about addressing the budget in the wider sense.

It is worth touching on exactly how aid works. This may come as a surprise to some, but DFID itself spends around 75% of the aid budget, with the other 25% being spent by other Departments, such as the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for Health and Social Care and the Home Office, and other outside organisations. Some of the aid that we provide is bilateral and some is multilateral, and I will come on to the difference in a minute.

The National Audit Office report, which came out just a few days ago, says that most of our aid is going to the right places and having a great effect, but it did point out that there is room for improvement. As I go through one or two areas in which we can improve, the observations that I will make are not in any way a criticism of our approach of our aid policy because, as the House has heard, I am supportive of it.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for being so generous in giving way. He is making a good point, but does he not agree that part of the reason why DFID is so good at focusing its share of the aid is that it is a discrete Department and not just part of another bigger Department? Does he share my concern that some right hon. and hon. Members have talked about amalgamating DFID into the FCO? Will he perhaps commit on the House’s behalf to talk to the candidates for the leader of the Conservative party to assure the House that DFID will continue no matter who wins the upcoming contest?

Mr Robertson: The hon. Lady raises a good point. I think it was Tony Blair who set up the separate Department, which provided it with focus. Thinking back before that, however, most right hon. and hon. Members would acknowledge the excellent work carried out by Baroness Chalker, even though the Department was then within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

I suppose there are two ways of looking at it. When I travel and meet DFID officials abroad, I often meet officials from the FCO, and maybe also from other Departments linked to it. Overall, I agree with the hon. Lady that this is such an important subject, and it obviously should have close ties to the Foreign Office, and probably to other Departments, too. As I say, 25% of the overseas aid budget is spent by other Departments, so there has to be a close link. I am probably persuaded that that should be the case. I will talk to the successful leadership candidate, whoever they are, about this issue in due course.

I mentioned that other Departments spend about 25% of the aid budget, and that proportion has increased significantly—it was 11.4% in 2013. That spending can be a good thing, because it draws on the expertise of those other Departments. In certain cases, money is provided that might not have been so quickly forthcoming if those Departments had to queue outside the Treasury for it.

However, the spending raises the question of whether these other Departments quite have DFID’s experience and expertise in delivering aid. The Department of Health and Social Care, for example, might be expert in handling health-related issues—I am sure it is—but DFID has that experience of delivering projects abroad. There is a question mark over whether we have got to the right level. Hopefully the Minister will give us some guidance.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman is generous in giving way again. Does he agree that that underlines the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) on the importance of having DFID leading on this? DFID has that expertise and experience as a separate Department and, actually, some of the criticisms levelled by the National Audit Office and others—I am not an aid purist, and some important aid spending needs to be done in conjunction with other Departments, such as through the Stabilisation Unit, International Climate Finance and other institutions—have been levelled at spending when it has been done well but without the remit of DFID. We need to see DFID in a leading role, using its expertise to ensure our money is spent effectively.

Mr Robertson: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and I look forward to hearing whether the Minister thinks that 25% of the budget being spent by other Departments is about right, too high or too low. I have not necessarily come with answers. I am asking as many questions as I am giving answers, but that is the nature of this debate.

This spending also raises the question of transparency, because the other Departments do not have the same legislative requirements. For example, the International Development (Reporting and Transparency) Act 2006 requires DFID to report to Parliament on where the money is spent, but other Departments are not covered by the Act.

The targeting of aid is something else that concerns some people. In 2017, the last year for which figures are available, DFID spent 66% of its bilateral aid budget on the world’s poorest countries, but the other Departments spent only 25% of their bilateral budgets on the least developed countries. There are always explanations and more details behind these figures but, on the face of it, we need to look at it and ask questions.

Through bilateral aid, we have complete control of the projects we fund; and through multilateral aid, we work with other agencies and do not have the same control, and the priorities of those other agencies might be slightly different from ours. There are different nuances within each of those headings, too. This is never a simple subject.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Before the hon. Gentleman launches into multilateral aid, may I take him back to the point raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) and for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty)? In my experience, since 2010 it is the Treasury that has been the principal driver of other Departments increasingly
being allowed to count some of their spending as international development spend. To what extent has the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) already had conversations with Treasury Ministers about the comprehensive spending review they are preparing for the next Conservative Prime Minister? I suspect the Treasury has already done work to try to identify ways to get that 25% figure even higher.

**Mr Robertson:** The hon. Gentleman raises a good point. I have not had those discussions with the Treasury, but they are certainly discussions we will need to have. I raise this with the Minister to find out her view, because this is increasing quite a lot—it has more than doubled in the past few years, so the hon. Gentleman is right to raise the point. This is why I make the point about spending in the countries that most need it and targeting it at the poorest people in the world. That is what most people would want us to do. There can be knock-on effects that come to this country, but the primary concern must be about helping the world’s poorest people.

**Mr Andrew Mitchell** (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): On the comment just made by the former International Development Minister from the Opposition, surely the issue is not just the 0.7% but the rules. Any expenditure undertaken by other Departments must of course be within the rules; otherwise, the Treasury would have a fit, as it would have to find the additional money if spending were undertaken outside those rules. The important thing is that this expenditure should be well spent—a point I hope to make if I catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker. It does not matter which Department is spending any expenditure that falls within the rules that Britain has accepted so long as it is spent well.

**Mr Robertson:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that intervention. He has expert knowledge of this issue. We had a meeting before this debate and it could have gone on a lot longer because we discussed so very many things. Where this spending goes does matter, and it does matter that there is accountability and transparency. That is the important point.

**Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): What concerns me is the issue of which partners we use to deliver our aid. DFID has great relationships with large trusted partners, but I am always concerned that smaller, more effective organisations operating in the most dangerous places, such as the Hands Up Foundation, do not get the funding and support from DFID that they need. Does my hon. Friend agree on that?

**Mr Robertson:** My hon. Friend raises a good point. It is very important to consider the partners we use. Accusations are made that some of the partners—the intermediaries—might take too big a chunk of the money before that money gets to ground level, and there are concerns about that. With multilateral aid, who we deal with is certainly one of the issues. Sometimes these bodies do not have the same priorities as we have.

**Victoria Prentis** rose—

**Mr Robertson:** If my hon. Friend will allow me, I will deal with this immediately. The bilateral aid of DFID was 62.6%, as against multilateral aid of 37.4%, and this has remained steady over the past few years. However, that is still a lot of money going on aid that we do not fully control. There are some good projects out there. The World Food Programme is an excellent example of multilateral aid that saves lives. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) mentioned the money going to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and today we had the announcement of this being £467 million a year. As I understand it, that is multilateral aid, so there are some excellent projects we are involved in, but there are delays in reporting by the multilateral agencies, which impedes our ability to analyse the work they do.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman, an old friend, knows of my passion for cutting road deaths worldwide; this is the biggest killer, especially of children and young people, and mainly of poorer ones. He knows of my role as chair of the World Health Organisation’s Global Network for Road Safety Legislators. Does he agree that bilateral and multilateral approaches are both good in the right contexts and with the right partners? We are doing work in the real target countries, and in some countries this can be bilateral but often we are looking for a number of partners.

**Mr Robertson:** I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, to whom I pay tribute for all his work in that respect. I shall come back to that issue in a moment.

Let me turn to the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, which was set up by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). It has identified some spending by, for example—this is only an example, and it is not the only one—the Newton Fund, which the commission said “is not promoting the best use of ODA and some projects appear not to be within the ODA definition.” That is of some concern. The commission lists some of the projects about which it is concerned. Sometimes when one looks into the projects and gets into the details, one finds they actually do help people who need help, but the headlines that they receive do not necessarily suggest that. Nevertheless, we have to be careful, because we all have constituents who want to see that their hard-earned money they pay in taxes goes to the right target.

**Alec Shelbrooke** (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My hon. Friend has just made an important point. It is absolutely right that we fund multilateral projects, and some of the organisations involved, such as the UN, are huge. In respect of the big multilateral projects it is easy to pick on the tiniest point about where some aid might go and blow that up into a huge headline, and that is what our constituents hear. We are not going to change that in the press—the newspapers will not print a headline that says, “All the planes took off on time yesterday”—but it is the House’s responsibility to emphasise exactly what my hon. Friend is talking about.

**Mr Robertson:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, which enables me to move to another point. Contrary to what is sometimes said, we do not actually finance corrupt dictators in other countries. Another point raised—I have taken so many interventions that I cannot remember who made it—was that it can be difficult to get aid to the people who need it most.
For example, people who live in war-torn countries are going to be desperate and will need help of one form or another. The people who live in countries with very poor Governments that have dictatorships need help. It is not the dictator who needs it, but the people who live in those countries certainly do need help. The trick is to get under the radar to help those people, but that should not be confused with the financing of wicked dictators. The two situations are different.

Gareth Thomas: Is not another benefit of multilateral aid that it enables a country such as Britain to help by combining with other countries to get significant sums of money to the poorest people, with a minimum impact on that country? I think of a country such as Ghana, which has lots of poor people and a civil service with nothing like the capacity that our great civil service has. Imagine if all 27 EU countries that give money through the European development fund suddenly decided that they wanted not to give money to Ghana through Europe but to do it themselves. The Ghanaian civil service would suddenly have to deal with all those 27-plus reporting lines. Is not one of the benefits of multilateral aid that it minimises the administrative burden of getting aid to the very poorest in the country in question?

Mr Robertson: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Of course, countries working together has to be the way forward, but the system really does have to be accountable, transparent and delivered efficiently and effectively. When it is those things, it is obvious that countries working together is a good thing.

All that takes me to another point: we all want humanitarian assistance to be provided—I certainly do, and we certainly do provide it—and it is easy to justify that, but we also want to see countries being given the building blocks and facilities to develop. The hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) gave the example of the civil servants in Ghana. Tax-raising and collecting authorities in such countries are important. The problem is that it is sometimes difficult to explain to our constituents the difference between development aid and humanitarian aid. It is not always easily understood. It is important that we help countries to build the capacity to move forward. The old adage about giving a man or woman a fish and feeding them for a day or teaching them how to fish so that they can feed themselves for a lifetime is absolutely right. We have to find ways to do that, or we will never make the progress in the world that we all want to see.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): On that important aim, let me say that, like me, the hon. Gentleman probably attended the Fairtrade Fortnight event, which looked at the impact that DFID has when it works with developing countries to ensure that producers receive fair prices for cocoa through the She Deserves campaign. Does he agree that that kind of intervention is vital not just at a governmental level but at an individual level, ensuring that families, and women in particular, are able to support and sustain their families?

Mr Robertson: I totally agree with the hon. Lady. We have had campaigns in this country to get fair milk prices for our farmers, so it is certainly right that we should ensure that farmers and traders in other countries get fair trade as well as fair prices. It is very, very important indeed.

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman is being very kind in giving way. He will know the sterling work that my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) has done in this area. She, like all of us here, absolutely believes not only in tackling world poverty but in the absolute scrutiny and accountability that go with it. For all of us in this field, they are our watchwords, our doctrine. When the newspapers accuse us of being do-gooders who do not care, it is just not true. My hon. Friend is a champion of that sort of scrutiny.

Mr Robertson: It is right that we do scrutinise things and that we do demand transparency, but it is also right that we put things in perspective as well. I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman.

I want to try to draw my remarks to a close, because, presumably, lots of hon. and right hon. Members wish to speak. In summary, I want to see an increase in the amounts going to the least developed countries and an increase in transparency, certainly in non-DFID and multilateral spending. I also want us to have a bit more control over, and understanding of, where the multilateral aid actually goes. We need to be aware that when we leave the European Union—and I will say “when”—we will get something like 10% of our budget back. We then have to decide where that goes. I am sure that there is no shortage of places or projects for which we want to provide.

In conclusion, I am very proud of our aid budget and of the fact that we have saved and transformed so many lives. The suggestions that I have made and the queries that I have raised today in no way challenge my commitment to our aid budget, but I want to make sure that we help even more people even more effectively than we already are. Most people want to see the United Kingdom, one of the richest countries in the world, helping the poorest people in the world, but they do have a right to make sure that their hard-earned money—it is not our money, it is theirs—actually goes to the people who need it the most. Much of it already does, but I think that all of it needs to do so. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in this debate.

5.13 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson). I congratulate him on securing this opportunity to scrutinise in the main Chamber DFID and its work. I agreed with every single word that he said. His speech demonstrated that there is strong cross-party support for this commitment.

It is opportune that we debate the Department’s estimates this year because we are in the 50th anniversary year of the Pearson commission, which was undertaken by the World Bank and which first suggested a commitment of 0.7% of gross national income for countries to follow. The United Kingdom met that target in 2013. As the hon. Gentleman rightly reminded us, we are alone among the major economies in the world in achieving that target and one of just eight countries to have done so.
The cross-party commitment is incredibly important. I agree with what the hon. Gentleman said about the importance of the 0.7% commitment and the importance of DFID as a stand-alone Department—a voice for development in the British Cabinet, but also a strong British voice in international institutions. DFID has earned, rightly, enormous praise in international institutions as a strong leader on development. I also agree with him that those of us who support the 0.7% target and DFID have an added responsibility to demonstrate value for money, to call to task when there is not value for money, and to ensure that every penny of taxpayers’ money that goes to international development is spent wisely and efficiently.

Another point that we should make, although it is not a focus for today, is that if we are to achieve the sustainable development goals—the ambitious Agenda 2030 programme to which the world is committed—aid alone will not get us there. Aid will be a fraction of the resources required to achieve those goals around the world, but especially in the poorest countries. Mobilising other forms of capital, including private sector investment, will be vital. I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is vital that we assist those countries to develop strong tax collection systems so that they can collect taxes from domestic taxpayers and international companies operating there.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point. Does he agree—that this has been brought up by the International Development Committee, which he so ably chairs—that what the UK needs in addition to DFID, or perhaps inside or alongside DFID, is a development bank, which so many other major economies have but we do not?

Stephen Twigg: I am delighted to take that intervention from my friend the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), whom we miss on the Committee. He is an extremely eloquent and powerful voice for international development in this House and beyond, not least through his role in the World Bank parliamentary network. I am very sympathetic to his point about having our own development bank. I have just come from an event with the Commonwealth Development Corporation, which performs some of those functions, but I know that he argues for a distinctive UK development bank, and I hope that he will have an opportunity to elaborate on that later in the debate.

I will comment briefly on five areas, all of which were covered by the hon. Member for Tewkesbury: humanitarian versus development; multilateral versus bilateral; localisation and small organisations; scrutiny; and addressing some of the issues with non-DFID official development assistance.

We know that the world is facing some huge crises. Some of them are global, such as climate change, and some are a consequence of natural disasters, but many of them are man-made—person-made—and often a consequence of conflict. We look at Syria, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and the crisis affecting the Rohingya people of Burma, most of whom now live in neighbouring Bangladesh. In that context, the distinction between what is a response to a humanitarian situation and what is development is increasingly irrelevant. People are escaping conflict and living as refugees or internally displaced people for large parts of their lives. Children are spending their entire childhoods displaced. They need humanitarian assistance, but they and their communities also need development support.

That is why the International Development Committee has focused so much on the importance of investing in global education. As the Minister well knows, we have consistently called on the Government to devote a larger part of the UK’s development assistance to education. I welcome the commitment that she made recently—at the last but one DFID Question Time—to the UK increasing our commitment to Education Cannot Wait, the multilateral fund aimed at supporting children and young people in emergency situations. I encourage her to put today, or quite soon, a figure on that commitment—and for it to be a high figure—because the earlier we make a pledge on Education Cannot Wait, the more likely other donors are to follow so that we can ensure that that excellent fund can play its part to support education in emergencies.

That brings me on to the broader issues around multilaterals and bilaterals that the hon. Member for Tewkesbury set out fully. First, let me strongly echo my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty): we hugely welcome the commitment that was made on the Global Fund over the weekend. It is really excellent news that the Government have made that commitment to replenishment, and have made it early, which has lessons for replenishments in other areas and again demonstrates strong leadership in this field. The last-but-one Secretary of State—I think we are on the fourth Secretary of State since I took over the Chair of the Committee four years ago—oversaw the multilateral development review. That was a very thorough piece of work by the Department looking at the relative strengths of different multilateral institutions and showing that some of those working in the health field, notably the Global Fund, came out very strongly.

Interestingly, other institutions that came out very strongly—the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) oversaw the review—were the European ones, including the European Commission. I have been encouraged by the responses that we have had from Ministers about the issues that we will face in the event of Brexit and about ensuring that the excellent programmes that are provided through European institutions, like the European development fund, do not suffer as a result of Brexit. What we should have uppermost in our minds is the needs of those who are benefiting from those programmes. I urge the Minister, and the Government more generally, in deciding whether to continue to work closely with and fund European development programmes after Brexit, to follow the best evidence as to what is good for the beneficiaries. I hope that whoever the Prime Minister is, the Government will not be guided by an ideology that says, “We can’t work with European institutions.”

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point. Would he also urge those on the EU side of the debate to leave their ideology aside and, where there are fantastic non-governmental organisations from the UK that could deliver some of these programmes, to ensure that they can continue to do so?
Stephen Twigg: I absolutely agree with the Minister on that. It is very important that, if we are no longer in the European Union, British NGOs are still able to deliver them, it is absolutely right that they should have that opportunity.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Further to the point that the Minister made, are we not in a very strong position, when we leave the European Union, to decide for ourselves—in the same way that the multilateral aid review takes place—which of the programmes that the European Union is delivering are worthy of our support, and support them? Then, where there are programmes that we perhaps do not choose to support, we can use our money in a different way, giving us the flexibility always to go where the money is best spent.

Stephen Twigg: I agree. I am keen to emphasise that the Government’s own reviews suggest that most of these European-run programmes are good, so there is a strong likelihood that we would, if given the opportunity, volunteer to remain part of them, but the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we would have more flexibility in terms of any programme that we might not want to support, and that would free up some money.

Stephen Doughty: I very much hope that, whatever happens on Brexit, we will be contributing to those European programmes that have been so well regarded.

Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the crucial things about having DFID as a separate Department with a Cabinet-rank Secretary of State has been our ability to influence and shape global institutions? Having a Secretary of State going to World Bank board meetings, attending sessions of the Global Fund and attending crucial UN meetings has given us greater influence, not just through our money but through political investment. That is why we need to ensure that we have a strong, separate Department with a Cabinet-rank Secretary of State.

Stephen Twigg: I absolutely agree. When DFID was created in 1997, the UK governorship of the World Bank shifted from the Chancellor of the Exchequer to the Secretary of State for International Development. That was absolutely the right thing to do. It has given us a strong voice in these multilateral organisations, including the World Bank.

Let me comment briefly on the three other areas that I identified—first, localisation. The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) made this point earlier, and it is very important. We frequently take evidence from organisations that say that it can be hard for a smaller company or smaller non-governmental organisation to get access to some of DFID’s contracts and programmes. That applies whether those companies and NGOs are in this country or in other countries. Greater opportunity for those smaller organisations to access programmes is important.

Alongside that, it is important that we see more autonomy for DFID’s country offices. I was interested to listen to the Secretary of State when he came to the Committee last week, because he was proposing something quite radical in terms of greater autonomy for the country offices. He made an important point—it is something we said in one of our reports—about the concern that, in recent years, DFID has lost some of its in-house expertise in certain areas and made itself much more reliant on contracting for that expertise. Indeed, many of the people now getting the contracts used to be the in-house experts. The Secretary of State contrasted how much DFID spends on specialist country advisers on education or climate change with some of the other donors who spend a lot more. I welcomed him saying to us that he would look at that again, and all power to his elbow.

Mr Sheerman: My hon. Friend knows that I have boundless admiration for him as Chair of the Select Committee. He mentioned localism and smaller groups. There are a lot of fashions. Something less fashionable but none the less effective is cutting road deaths. In the developing world, the loss of a breadwinner or the breadwinner becoming injured or an invalid for life is a sure path to poverty. I have lobbied him to look at road deaths and casualties. Rather than the bigger, more glamorous issues, will he look again at something like that, which is very effective?

Stephen Twigg: I thank my hon. Friend. He is tireless. He has lobbied me privately to do that and I do not blame him for lobbying me publicly. There are other members of the Committee here who can bear witness, so we will consider that. We have been looking at the global goals, which make reference to cutting road deaths, and we have the voluntary national review later this month. I can give an undertaking that my good friend, the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) and my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) and I will raise that when we are in New York later this month—Whips permitting—to attend the voluntary national review.

As the hon. Member for Tewkesbury said, aid spending is quite widely and deeply scrutinised, and rightly so. It is scrutinised in the media and by the public. Like all other areas of Government spending, it is scrutinised by the National Audit Office. We also have the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, established when the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) was Secretary of State, which is a very powerful lever for improvement in our system.

Alongside that scrutiny—this is something we are focusing on more as a Committee—we need to get better at hearing the voices of those who are beneficiaries of aid and those who are working in the field. That was brought into sharp focus by the issues around sexual exploitation and abuse that arose last year. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire, who has been raising that issue for years, well before The Times coverage began last February. It brought to light the failure of the aid sector, including those of us who scrutinise it, to hear and to create opportunities for those who live in some of the poorest countries in the world to have their voices heard about the impact of aid—hopefully when it is positive, but also, in this extreme case, when it is negative.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; this is the second speech I have heard by him today, having been at his CDC speech. On that issue, and particularly sexual...
exploitation, we are clearly out of touch—having served twice on the Committee, I include myself in this—with what is going on on the frontline. I understand that Voluntary Service Overseas, which I associate more with students and what are now called gap years, offers opportunities for more mature people. Instead of going on a typical Committee visit where everyone goes to one place, would it be possible to starburst out and use an organisation such as VSO to be in the ditches, in the huts and at the delivery units and warehouses, keeping our ear to the ground—not with any fixed purpose, but genuinely to listen and engage? As we all know from our constituency visits, that is sometimes when we get the most powerful evidence.

Stephen Twigg: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who served with distinction on the Committee until relatively recently. This is always a challenge when we undertake visits, because we are there to scrutinise how the money is being spent, so we are often somewhat in the hands of DFID about where we go, but there is a case to separate ourselves from that sometimes to get to hear those voices and to work with organisations such as VSO, so I thank him for that suggestion.

The final thing I want to address is what the hon. Member for Tewkesbury focused on, which is the fact that roughly 25% of official development assistance now goes not through DFID, but through other Government Departments. He made the case well. He asked whether it is too high or too low. I think the test is not so much whether it is too high or too low. For me, the test is whether it is as effective as the money spent through DFID. The current DFID permanent secretary, Matthew Rycroft, when he was before us a few months ago, said he felt that the DFID share should not go below 75%. That sounds about right to me and I think that is about where it is at the moment.

DFID has an important role to play as a driver of all the spending, and we have said as a Select Committee that DFID should sign off all ODA spending, including what goes through other Government Departments. We were supported in that in a recent report by the TaxPayers Alliance, which recognises that DFID has a stronger record than the other Government Departments. For me, it comes down to this. When we look at the Newton Fund, which the hon. Gentleman referred to; the prosperity fund; the conflict, stabilisation and security fund; or individual programmes by other Government Departments, are they absolutely focused on poverty reduction and, in particular, on creating jobs and livelihoods in the poorest parts of the world? Those programmes are perfectly capable of delivering that, and some of them do, but I do not think that is yet in the DNA of those other Government Departments in the way that it is in the DNA of DFID. By putting DFID in the driving seat, we can ensure that that is the case.

I am really pleased to have had the opportunity to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman again. I finish by mentioning again the sustainable development goals and the voluntary national review that we will undertake this month. There is an opportunity here for us to ensure that we take these important issues out there and engage and re-engage with the Great British public. I think there is a huge generosity in the British public—that is seen in the charitable donations when there are appeals during emergencies—but there is a scepticism about whether we are really getting value for money in aid spending. I believe, based on the evidence, that in most cases we are, but we have an opportunity as parliamentarians, on a cross-party basis, to get out there and persuade our constituents and the wider public that some fantastic things really are being done in their name.

5.32 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I am most grateful to have an opportunity to contribute to this debate, and indeed to follow the Chairman of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who does the job so very well and in such an open and transparent way. I draw the House’s attention to my interests, which are documented in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

In discussing these estimates, I want to make the point that DFID is one of the most transparent Departments of State. Almost all its expenditure, from a very low level, is in the public domain. When it comes to transparency and the ability really to scrutinise where money is going, DFID is not surpassed by many, if any, Departments in Whitehall. I am particularly pleased about the level of agreement, although we must be wary when the House of Commons appears to agree in almost every corner—we must remember the words of the late Harold Macmillan, who said that when the House of Commons is in complete agreement, there is probably something wrong—so we must maintain self-criticism in spite of such agreement. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) on launching this debate, and doing it with his customary efficiency, good sense and judgment.

I am very pleased that the issue of development has not been caught up in the leadership election that my party is going through, and that what I would call the David Cameron development consensus continues to motivate and define British policy in this very important area. With all the Brexit distractions, global Britain is something that, across the House, we are very keen to see driven forward in the post-Brexit era. In many ways, the progress being made at the moment in respect of global Britain is almost entirely in this area, as I will come on, I hope, to demonstrate.

The Department for International Development contains many leading international experts who are respected around the world. It is important to underline just how respected this relatively new Department is. Hon. Members of all parties have emphasised this afternoon the importance of its remaining a separate Department. I do not think that anyone is suggesting that it should not be a separate Department, but let us be clear that it does not need to be part of another Department, because of the National Security Council. That is the link between diplomacy, development and defence. The policy is beaten out and agreed there, and that provides the right level of co-ordination and underlines the importance of keeping DFID as its own area of expertise, which makes such a large contribution internationally.

United Kingdom leadership is about not just DFID, good though the Department is, but many of the academic institutions throughout the UK, which, through their academic work and thought leadership, lead on development policies around the world. Development
Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): For many years, the right hon. Gentleman has made a major contribution to DFID debates and at one stage he had responsibility for the Department. Last week, it was heartening when we had a number of young people down here, talking about not only climate change but concerns about the medical welfare of people in some developing countries. They wanted to maintain the level of financing for tackling, for example, HIV. DFID also plays a major part in developing British markets for the future. That means jobs for British people. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that people tend to forget that when they look at the amount of money we spend overseas?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman makes his point.

Most of the problems that the Chair of the International Development Committee mentioned require more work and more international development. I will briefly comment on five of them. The first is migration. British development policy is designed to build safer and more prosperous communities so that people do not feel the need to migrate. The problems of migration, which are well understood and disfigure our world, need a lot more work.

The second problem is pandemics. I think that Ebola has been mentioned, as well as the tremendous announcement that the Prime Minister made in Japan about the replenishment of the Global Fund. As the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has clearly demonstrated, pandemics threaten within the next few years.

The third aspect is protectionism. There has been a coming together across the House about the dangers of protectionism and the importance of free trade in lifting the economic wealth of rich and poor societies alike.

Fourthly, let us consider terror. DFID’s work in Somalia and northern Nigeria directly contributes not only to the safety of people who live in jeopardy in those countries, but to safety on our streets in Britain.

Fifthly, on climate change, DFID leadership has made a huge direct contribution to tackling something that affects the poorest people in the world first and hardest. The British taxpayer has made a huge contribution through the international climate change mitigation funds. Britain is leading work on international development around the world, and that has a huge benefit.

Alec Shelbrooke: Does my right hon. Friend agree that we come back to the problem of public perception of international aid? When we tackle climate change, disease and terrorism, that has a direct benefit to this country. Although it may be thought that diseases are thousands of miles away, they are only one plane journey away. Does my right hon. Friend share my frustration that we do not do enough to explain how taking world-leading responsibility directly benefits the UK?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. I would argue that all taxpayers’ money spent by DFID—all the overseas development aid budget—is in Britain’s national interest. It helps to make other countries safer and more prosperous, which has a direct effect on making us safer and more prosperous.

What should our priorities be now? I want briefly to mention four. First, we should recognise the importance of tackling conflict. It is conflict above all that mires people in poverty. Britain has been a leading provider of humanitarian relief in Syria—it has provided more humanitarian relief to the poor suffering people of Syria, within its borders and without, than the whole of the rest of the European Union put together, as we try to absorb the humanitarian shock of the massive failure of policy that is the Syria conflict. I am a tremendous critic of the Government’s shameful policy on Yemen. Nevertheless, humanitarian aid to Yemen is helping many tens of thousands of people who, without it, would starve. If we look across sub-Saharan Africa, stretching from northern Nigeria through the Central African Republic to Sudan, where the number of displaced people is so immense, and through to the horn of Africa and up into Yemen, we see a belt of misery that is destabilising for the world. This is where international development and Britain’s commitment can make a real difference.

If the first key task is tackling conflict, the second is building prosperity. That is about building good governance and having a free media. I am very pleased that the Foreign Secretary is holding an international conference to expound the importance of a free media. We keep our politicians and powerful people on the straight and narrow through having a free media and the rule of law. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, the Chairman of the International Development Committee, made the point that the CDC has a huge impact on building prosperity. Its annual report, published today, makes clear two extraordinary statistics. First, in 2018 alone, CDC investments—CDC is the 100% British taxpayer-owned investor of pioneer and patient capital—led directly to the employment of 852,130 people. That is an enormous number of families who have a breadwinner and who are being fed. The investments made by CDC in the poor world have led to tax of $3.2 billion being paid into the Exchequers of those countries over the past year. That is an extraordinary impact. That money may not always be well spent once it arrives in the Exchequers of those countries, but it shows that investment in enterprises in poor countries is not only employing people but yielding tax revenue.

The third priority is the absolutely prime importance of demonstrating to our hard-pressed taxpayers that their money is really well used. We should always strive to get more out of each taxpayer pound that is spent. We owe it to our constituents, who are stumping up the money, to show them that they really are getting in 100 pence of value for every pound we spend. We cannot do too much as politicians and Ministers—the Minister, I know, will agree—to make the case and explain why the money is so well spent.

Dr Cameron: The right hon. Gentleman is making a fantastic speech, and he has great knowledge and experience in the field of international development. Does he agree that in terms of value for money, one extremely good
project is the Small Charities Challenge Fund? Local churches and organisations in our constituencies can raise money and apply for match funding to make a difference across the world both through aid and by connecting our local people with people in developing countries—schoolchildren, churchgoers and so on—which facilitates positivity around the international development budget.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady makes an extremely good point. When I had responsibility for these matters, I set up the impact fund, which was effectively designed to match-fund the donations and support that individual organisations could secure. It was a way for the taxpayer to get two for one as a result. The fund probably starts at too high a level to impact on some of the projects that she talks about, but she is right that this is a very important area of development, and we should do more about it.

I was making the point about demonstrating the effectiveness of spending. I have always thought that one of the most effective ways of doing this—I said it in the last Parliament, and I think it is true in this Parliament—is to look at the way in which Britain supports vaccinations, particularly of those under five years old around the world. The critical importance of that will be clear to all Members. We were able to say in the last Parliament that the British taxpayer was vaccinating a child in the poor world every two seconds and saving the life of a child in the poor world every two minutes. Those children were suffering from diseases that, thank goodness, none of our children in Britain and Europe die from today. That is a very visual, good example of just how important and effective this taxpayer spending is.

Let me turn to my final point. There was a report about money being spent by other Departments, there was the National Audit Office report, and we have the report from the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, which I set up in 2010 and which is the taxpayer’s friend. It is there to act in the interests of the taxpayer to ensure that this money is really well spent. When we set up I was the Finance Secretary in the Department for International Development and the UK was the first country in the world to say, “You are handing over the assessment of development spending, it said, “It’s no good talking to us. It is DFID money; go and speak to DFID.” That is completely unacceptable. Other Departments that spend hard-pressed taxpayers’ hard-earned development money must expose themselves to the same level of scrutiny that DFID does and stand up for the money that they are spending. All Departments must take that extremely seriously.

I will draw my remarks to a close, because others want to speak. Our generation has the opportunity to make such a difference to the extraordinary discrepancies in opportunity and wealth that I described earlier, and we are doing it. It is happening under British leadership, and it is currently one of the few examples of global Britain. I think that everyone, whatever their political view and whatever their standing, should take great pride in what Britain is doing. We are driving this agenda forward, admired and respected around the world for Britain’s commitment. It is cross-party; it is a British policy—not Labour, Liberal or Conservative—and we should take pride in doing that and supporting it.

5.49 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), a former Secretary of State, as he always makes a worthwhile contribution to our deliberations on DFID matters, although the David Cameron development consensus is a relatively new concept that I am not sure will catch on—but good luck! I also congratulate the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) on securing the debate.

We wait ages for DFID Ministers to come to the Dispatch Box for debates and then suddenly three debates come along at once. In the whole time I was the SNP’s DFID spokesperson, between 2015 and 2017, it would just be DFID questions every six weeks; we would be lucky to get the odd statement or debate in the Chamber—I know they are kept busy in Westminster Hall. After the SDGs debate two or three weeks ago, we are back again, which is very welcome, not least as Ministers are currently looking to secure legacies for themselves. Perhaps in discussing the Department’s expenditure as part of the estimates process, we can consider how Ministers might achieve that.

There is a clearly demonstrated passion on both sides of the House for the work of DFID and the value it brings around the world. Like other Members, I have had the huge privilege of visiting projects both before my election and since: peace villages in Rwanda, food security and nutrition projects in Uganda, climate change projects in Malawi—all transforming people’s lives on a daily basis thanks to the support of DFID.

That is because aid works. Despite the doubts in some people’s minds and the political expediency of saying otherwise, the reality is, as we have heard from speeches so far and will no doubt continue to hear, aid makes a difference around the world, which is why the 0.7% target came into existence in the first place. It was calculated in the 1970s that if all the wealthy countries contributed that proportion of their national income it would be enough to end poverty and inequality elsewhere.

In the decades since, OECD countries have not reached the target. It is commendable therefore that the UK has achieved a cross-party consensus and that the target was finally legislated for under the coalition, with massive
public support and after years of campaigning. I do not have the exact statistic, but we worked out how many billions of pounds had not been spent in all the decades the UK was not meeting the 0.7% target, but it has been since 2013 and that ought to continue.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am enjoying the hon. Gentleman’s speech, but I would like to pick him up on something he said, because it is very important. He said the target was brought in with massive public support, and it was, but only in certain areas. The House has a responsibility always to espouse the virtues of international aid because there are many people—they contact us on email and so on—who want to get rid of it. We have to address those concerns directly and say that it is important. I always say: let’s get people selling it as if it was to be abolished tomorrow. That would soon raise people up again. There is a large body of people who do not support it because they do not understand what it does.

Patrick Grady: That is fair enough, although the campaigning had gone on for years. I think back to the jubilee debt campaign, the trade justice movement and the Make Poverty History campaign, which mobilised tens of thousands of people on to the streets of towns and cities across the United Kingdom. In many ways, the climate change protest—there was one here last Wednesday—is the successor to those movements. Now is the time to tackle climate change. If we do not, the progress towards the SDGs and MDGs is likely to go backwards, which is not in anybody’s interest. Those movements mobilised churches, trade unions and different parts of civil society. That sentiment still exists, and although it is quiet now, the hon. Gentleman is right that if there was a serious threat, that noise would make itself heard, just as it did in the days of the Gleneagles summit and the years after.

We have discussed how the DFID estimate is not the entirety of the 0.7% target and how we need greater scrutiny of other Departments that spend money that is counted towards it. Incidentally, the UK Government conveniently count towards it the money that the Scottish Government spend on international development, even though it is additional. Taxpayers in Scotland pay for DFID through their taxes and the Scottish Government, with cross-party support dating back to the time of Jack McConnell, choose to use a very small amount of their own budget to provide additional and often very innovative support, particularly through the grassroots links with Malawi, which I will say a bit more about shortly.

Ministers are aware of concerns that I and other Members have about the occasional double counting of money towards two separate targets: the 0.7% target for aid and the 2% for military spending. Some money is counted towards both targets. Ministers stand up and say, “Well, we don’t mark our own homework. It just so happens that the money is counted by the ODA and NATO and there’s not much we can do about it”, but if the money is being used to hit both targets, one of the budgets must be losing out. If they are committed to the targets, the Government should make an effort to meet them both independently. If they happen to spend a bit more, that’s fine, since both targets are minimums, not maximums.

I hope the Minister will take this opportunity to reiterate her and her Department’s support for the aid budget, under the current definition and amount, and for the Department remaining a stand-alone facility, because, despite what some Government Members have said about how they do not know where the talk is coming from, the talk is real. The outriders for the Tory leadership campaigns, particularly that of the former Foreign Secretary, have made it clear they think there is political capital to be made from undermining or changing the role of DFID and its budget.

Aid is not a tool of soft power to be used as some political lever. It should be dispensed on the basis of need and in pursuit of internationally agreed objectives, such as the SDGs and the Global Fund—and I join others in welcoming the announcement about the replenishment of that fund. When Government talk of aid working in the national interest, the question I always put back to them is: how is meeting the sustainable development goals not in the national interest? How is the national interest different from tackling global poverty and climate change? Even from a self-interested point of view, if we want to stop the migration of people, we need to give them reasons to stay in their home countries, and access to a good education and nutrition and not having to run away from major climate disasters are very good reasons—if that is the perspective we want to take.

I want to touch briefly on the importance of the Government learning from and engaging with civil society actors. I mentioned the Scotland Malawi Partnership. I declare an interest because it provides secretariat support for the all-party group on Malawi, which I chair, and which has issued an outstanding invitation to the Secretary of State, lasting as long as is left to him, to meet the group and member organisations of the Scotland Malawi Partnership.

The hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), who is not here, at the last DFID questions raised the idea of DFID undertaking an exercise of mapping links between local civil society organisations and counterparts in developing countries to see the added value that civil society groups in the UK bring to development. That would be worth the Department pursuing in the near future. In Scotland, the Scotland-Malawi people-to-people model suggests that more than 208,000 Malawians and 109,000 Scots are actively involved in the links between the two countries, while a 2018 paper from the University of Glasgow reckoned that 45% of people in Scotland could name a friend or family member with a connection to Malawi.

Here is an opportunity for a ministerial legacy. What more could the Government do to connect formal Government efforts with those of civil society—not just the large NGOs we are familiar with, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) suggested, the thousands of churches, schools, hospitals, universities and community and diaspora groups involved in two-way partnerships—and not just engage with them, but fund them and encourage them to think innovatively?

The last piece of DFID legislation was the Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 2017. We recognise the important role that the CDC plays in leveraging private capital into development. I wonder what a civil society equivalent might look like.
I know that Mr Speaker has not selected the amendments, but I think that the fact that amendments were tabled to the motions is an interesting indication of the way in which the estimates process is beginning to evolve. We welcome that, because when the “English votes for English laws” system was introduced, SNP Members were told that it would be through estimates that we could continue to scrutinise Government expenditure, particularly when Barnett consequentials were involved. I do not believe that they are involved in DFID funding—as I have said, Scottish Government international development funding is separate—but, nevertheless, this is our opportunity to engage in such scrutiny. Gone are the days when SNP Members were told to sit down because they were talking about estimates during an estimates debate.

The amendment tabled to this motion was intended to put pressure on the Government by asking them to clarify their position in relation to a no-deal Brexit, and to prevent that from happening without the full approval of the House. We know that Departments, including DFID, are being touched by Brexit preparations; we know that dozens of DFID staff are being sent to other Departments to help prepare for no deal. The destabilising effect that we are seeing across Government must be a matter of concern, and it is right for us to use debates such as this to raise it and to keep the Government on their toes.

Today’s debate has enabled us to highlight the importance of DFID, but it has also drawn our attention to the risk that the Department will be downgraded, the risk that Brexit preparations will weaken its capacity, and the risk that policy progress will be stalled because Brexit continues to dominate everything. I welcome our recent opportunities for scrutiny in the Chamber, but I wonder whether those opportunities are likely to continue beyond 24 July.

6.1 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): It is a genuine pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). I was glad that, towards the end of his speech, he referred to the amendment. I must say that when I saw it I was very disappointed that we would be playing with the question of whether this Department, in particular, was to have the budget that would enable it to proceed. I listened carefully to what the hon. Gentleman said, and I think I understand a bit more clearly why the signatories include a member of his party, the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law). However, I am disappointed that such an amendment should have been tabled, on any of the estimates budgets but especially on this one, because—as many Members have pointed out today—the international aid budget is attacked on a regular basis, especially in the press and especially by those wanting to cause mischief by saying that we could be spending the money elsewhere.

It is dangerous to use the aid budget as a political football in relation to our own needs. The hon. Gentleman was right to say that it must be led by objectives laid down internationally to ensure that we are all pulling in the same direction, but it is also true that this country’s contribution is a real lever of the soft power we have in the world. That is at the heart of international development.

As the international chairman of the Conservative party, I go around the world—for instance, to southern Africa and South America—and see the difference that has been made by work of various kinds, whether it has been done through the Westminster Foundation for Democracy or through direct international development projects. The impact of that work becomes clear when one talks to Governments in other countries, as I know the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) will have done. I have an enormous amount of respect and praise for the hon. Gentleman, who has done fantastic work as Chairman of the International Development Committee, but ours is clearly a strong power, and I was disappointed by the amendment because it seemed to suggest that if we ended up leaving with no deal on 31 October, we would not have an international aid budget. If amended, the motion would effectively say, “If you leave, we will cut that budget and you will not be able to spend it.” I do not want to get into a Brexit argument now—that is not what this debate is about—but I did think it odd that those who are worried about the influence that we may lose during Brexit should also want to end the funding for one of biggest contributors of soft power.

At the heart of international development is the fact that it is morally right. I class myself as a Christian, and the second commandment is “Love thy neighbour as thyself”, and that is how we are in this country. Whether they are Christian, Muslim, Jewish or part of any other religion, most people want to “love thy neighbour as thyself”, and to look after one another. Ours is one of the richest economies in the world, and it is nonsense to suggest that 7p out of every tenner is too much and we cannot afford to spend it. However, we must ensure that it is spent in the right way. This is almost a nationalisation of people’s charity, and we must therefore make certain that every penny is used as efficiently as possible.

I have no problem with the scrutiny that is levelled at the Department, but I do have a problem with how it is abused to try and get cheap headlines and cheap stories. I do not blame constituents who write to me saying that they think we should get rid of international aid, because they are picking that up from certain quarters, but I write back to them and explain the impact that aid has. As I said earlier, it is all very well for a headline to say, “Your international development taxes did this in, for example, the Gaza Strip: we were funding terrorist organisations”. However, that was not a bilateral project. When it comes to multilateral projects, it is right for us to be part of world-governing bodies, because if we were not, what would happen to our soft power? What will happen to our influence in the world if we say, “I was not happy about one particular project, so I am cutting the funding for everything?”

Let me touch on some matters that have been touched on before. In 2016-17, humanitarian aid made up about 15% of the bilateral budget. I believe that an area the size of the United Kingdom was flooded in Pakistan, and millions of people were displaced—some of the poorest people on earth. We should stand up and be proud of the fact that this country was there, along with other countries, giving aid when it mattered. Let us be honest about what will happen if we stop giving that aid. That is how to breed the hatred and discontent that will end up back on our own shores if we walk away from these parts of the world, saying, “Not interested, your problem, don’t care.”

That leads me to the refugee crisis that has resulted directly from the Syrian conflict. I am immensely proud of the amount of money provided by this Government—
well, let us say “this country”, because this is not a party political issue, but something of which we in the House should be proud. As was pointed out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), this country—from this House—has given more money than the rest of Europe put together. There are 6 million people in refugee camps; imagine what would happen in those countries if we were not able to provide that money.

Back in 2016, I went to Lebanon and saw the real hardship with which it was struggling in trying to absorb people. We are well aware of the millions taken in by Turkey, which is trying to help people on its borders. The Jordanians are doing incredible work, doubling school shifts and class sizes to ensure that a generation of children who have been displaced through a brutal war do not lose their childhoods and therefore their futures. Our aid money is supporting countries which would not be able to do that work without it. I challenge anyone to come up to me and say, “No, I would rather fix the potholes in my road.” There is really no question about it.

One of the most important aspects, which has already been touched on briefly, is the work that we do in connection with government and civic society. We take for granted the way in which our country operates, and the way in which the countries around us operate. We take it for granted that we can go and do business in another country that will have the rule of law and will understand about the civil service, about who can collect the taxes and about how they will be spent, but that does not apply to many of the countries that have emerged from dictatorships and are, in relative terms, young democracies. We lead much of the world in being able to provide the necessary expertise and training.

As a result, countries such as India have developed to an extent that we have massively reduced our aid. In fact, I think we are in the low millions now as we finish off a few international development projects. However, many people say to me “We give all that money to them but they have a space programme.” That is great; however, guess where they are buying the components—guess where the trade areas have developed. We should be proud that we have put a nation of over 1 billion people in a position where it can pursue these programmes. There is still a lot of work to do, and there is a lot of poverty in India, but, again, we have moved these things forward.

Health is a very important issue, but for too many people, especially when we talk about the African continent, it is an issue that seems to be thousands of miles away and is therefore not important. But as I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield earlier, these diseases are but one flight away. Our Scottish colleagues will know of the brave nurse who caught Ebola and is still suffering the consequences to this day. These diseases are but one plane journey away and see whether a balance can be struck to get more renewables into those projects and move away from fossil fuels, because ultimately that will give far more sustainability to the ongoing energy needs of those countries than just bringing in what is rapidly becoming a very old technology.

The one message I would like to send tonight is that this is not just about giving away our money to poor countries; this is an investment in our own country and
in the world, and therefore in the futures of our children and ongoing generations, and that it all adds to our bigger security picture, our bigger climate change picture and our bigger moral duty, which allows us to lead this world in a way that not many countries can.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) and to have heard the many excellent speeches and interventions of right hon. and hon. Members. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this issue in the Chamber because it is an issue of immense importance to me and my constituents.

I believe it is incumbent on us as global leaders in this country, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, to be seen to be helping other nations where possible, especially those nations with which we have historical colonial links. The hon. Gentleman referred to our duty to set the scene for those who come after, not just in this country but elsewhere in the world where we have influence. It is my belief that there is a duty on us to lead the way, but I am also aware that there is so much need on my own doorstep and subsequently the aid we give to other countries must be limited. We must also therefore be effective with the 0.7% that we give. We must make sure that that money goes where it is needed most.

Probably everyone in this House will be aware of the phrase, “Cut your cloth to suit your clothes.” That is what international aid must be—we must do it, but in a sensible way to make the most of the cloth that we have. We must make sure that the money set aside goes to where it needs to go and is as effective as it can be.

The UK spends 0.7% of its gross national income on aid and, in the 2017 general election, the major parties in this House committed themselves to maintaining spending at that target in their manifestos. I support that. However, it is clear that we need to be cautious about how it is distributed and make sure it is done right.

The Library briefing for today’s debate, supplied by the excellent Library staff, states that the Department for International Development spends a majority of the aid budget, which is provisionally estimated at £14.5 billion for 2018. Some parliamentary Committees and other organisations have raised concerns about how effectively Departments other than DFID can deliver aid. Aid spending can be broken down into a number of functional sectors and, in 2017, the two largest sectors by spending were social services infrastructure, at 42%, and humanitarian aid, at 17%.

Hon. Members have referred to the stories we have heard over the last year and a half of senior staff members of some charities—not all, thank goodness—having been involved in terrible activities that involved sexual abuse and taking advantage of young people, including parents and single women. We need an assurance—which I think we have had from the Minister—that that can never happen again. We want to make sure that that is the case.

On charitable giving, I know very well that my constituents are heartily generous. The 2016 individual giving survey undertaken by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action found that a large proportion of respondents donated money to charity—89% over the last 12 months. This figure is consistently higher than UK-wide levels, which stand at 62% on average. So my constituents, per head of the population, are 27% more generous when it comes to giving. It is always good to know that people are generous and it is good to know that the people of Strangford are especially generous.

We are generous people in this House—all of us—but we are also thrifty and careful in what we do and we like to ensure that money spent is well spent. That is where I question the Department—not on what we give, but on how we give it and making sure that it goes to the right place. DFID money and assistance go to countries that have an appalling record of human rights abuses, and I ask the Minister what has been done to ensure that the money that is given to those countries can focus its way through to ethnic groups and small religious minority groups to ensure that those people actually benefit from it. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, this is something that is close to my heart, and to the hearts of all those who have spoken and who will speak after me.

Some Members have referred to climate change. Last Wednesday, we had the opportunity to attend a mass rally out on the green, in which Christian Aid was very much involved. It was a pleasure to be there and to meet some of my constituents and other people from Northern Ireland who were there to encourage us as politicians to ensure that action is taken. There is an onus on us to ensure that we do our bit here, so that we can help others elsewhere. The hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell mentioned ideas on renewables for countries where sunshine is plentiful, and that might be an appropriate method in those places. This is now a regular topic of conversation in my office and my advice centre, and I think it is probably the same in everybody else’s as well, because people are genuinely interested in this subject. They want to see the rest of the world address climate issues, including the problems elsewhere that we in the west have perhaps contributed to over the years.

It is my sincerely and deeply held opinion that more money should and must be given to relief projects that enable people to self-sustain. One of the missionary bodies in my constituency that I support is the Elim Mission Church. It not only gives men, women and children a meal but teaches them the skills to enable them to earn money themselves. We were looking at projects that can be of real benefit—those are the projects we should encourage. We need to look at the funding to see whether we are facilitating people’s lives in refugee camps instead of providing them with the things they need to get into a community where they can live, work, raise a family and earn a living, and thereby be self-sustainable. That is all any of us really want to do.

I particularly want to give credit to the important work being done by WaterAid. In Northern Ireland and probably some parts of Scotland, we have some of the highest levels of rainfall in the whole United Kingdom, and we have the luxury of water on tap whenever we want it. In other parts of the world where water is a scarce commodity, WaterAid—and other charities, to be fair—are working hard to ensure that clean water, hygiene and sewage disposal are available. These things that we take for granted are all important issues. They also include job sustainability.
We all have churches and missions in our constituencies, and we are all pleased to have them. People are compassionate and understanding; they have a conscience and want to help others. The Churches in Ards include the Presbyterian Church, the Church of Ireland, the Methodist Church, the Baptist Church and the Roman Catholic Church, and they are all helping with projects across the whole of Africa and the far east. They include projects in Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. Those Churches are actively involved with marvellous projects to deliver education, health and water.

Last September, I had an opportunity to be in Pakistan with a delegation from the all-party group to meet some of the leaders in Pakistan and to discuss human rights issues with them. We also discussed some of the projects that we do. We also met representatives from DFID. There is a wonderful opportunity to be involved in education programmes through the different systems that DFID has in place. There are opportunities to work alongside the Churches, the non-governmental organisations and the missionary groups to deliver education. We should use those organisations as a conduit to make that happen, because that has not been done in the way that I would like to see it being done. For instance, the universities and schools in Pakistan want to have projects in which they can work with DFID and with groups in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to look at ways whereby they can develop those projects. That would create an opportunity for those of a minority religion or members of small ethnic groups to be educated so that they, too, can apply for jobs. It is not fair that some of the Christians in the small ethnic groups are given the menial jobs such as sweeping the streets. We need to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity and that is a way of doing that.

When we are funding infrastructure projects, we need to ascertain how much goes to worthwhile projects and how much is taken up in administration. I understand that this is a difficult job, but I believe that our ambassadors are best placed to ensure that our funding is being appropriately used. Again, I must say that I support international aid and support the Government’s commitment to it—I would perhaps like to say a bit more on that—totally and fully, but I believe we must make better use of those on the ground, including the local missionaries. How can DFID work better with some of the missionaries, Church groups and people who are well placed in countries across the world to try to ensure that aid gets through to those who do not normally get it? I refer to the embassies, to the NGOs and to those who are at the frontline of need and able to help. Every penny we can give must make a difference; otherwise, it is pointless to continue to give. I look forward to hearing how DFID and the Minister intend to ensure that we are as thrifty as we are generous.

6.26 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mrs Leadsom) on securing the debate. As many people have said, this is not a party political subject, and I think that is a very important part of it. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who chairs the International Development Committee, on which I sit. It is a very interesting Committee, and many people today have made excellent speeches about the value of international development from this country’s point of view.

I would also like to compliment my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who was a distinguished Secretary of State when we first came into power in 2010. He also championed Project Umubano in Rwanda for many years, and he saw at first hand—as many of us on this side of the House did—exactly what we needed to do and how we were able to contribute to development in Rwanda. That was a valuable lesson for me before I came here, and for many of the Members of Parliament who have supported the project, which has now been completed in Rwanda. It changed the lives of a lot of people following the terrible genocide, and it was an important lesson for us all to learn.

There have been some really good speeches today, and I do not want to cover the same ground again, so I am going to keep my remarks fairly short. I want to compliment the Minister for Africa, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), and the Department for starting the conference last year following the Oxfam scandal and the problems with Save the Children and sexual exploitation and abuse. I think it was well received by the aid industry, which needed shaking up, and the then Secretary of State had some good ideas as to what should happen in future. Sadly, however, the abuse continues, and we have to act firmly to produce an ombudsman that people can go to if they have problems. We also have to support the whistleblowers who feel that nobody will listen to them. They often lose their jobs following their whistleblowing, yet they are the victims.

I have spoken to the Secretary of State about this, and I think we need to have a survey to see exactly how widespread the abuse is, because we do not have a baseline. We know that what we hear is probably just the tip of the iceberg, and we need to find out the actual impact this is having on the aid industry. We do not know how it is affecting the industry, and the perpetrators need to be brought to account. The victims also need to be supported, because there are so many victims out there, and, of course, the vast majority of them are women. We need not only to help those women come to terms with what has happened to them, but to stop people going from one NGO to another without anybody sanctioning them, because they can just leave—often with a reference. I think that the situation is getting better, but it was a big problem.

We should be proud to be a global leader in international development. We were at the forefront of negotiating the sustainable development goals because, of course, David Cameron was on the high-level panel that came up with them, and they followed on from the millennium development goals. Of course, there are far more goals this time, but every single one of them will have an impact on people in the world’s poorest countries, and we need to be aware of how to help them. If we do not tackle climate change soon and at scale, people in developing countries will be forced to migrate, which will be in nobody’s interest if they have to keep moving from country to country. We need to address that problem, and we need to address it now.
Mention has been made of the voluntary national review, which we will be submitting to the United Nations later this month. I am disappointed that ours is one of the more of an impact both in this country and around the world. We need equality both in this country and around the world, so we need to take more evidence from civil society groups that concentrate on women-only issues.

The UN has set five focus goals for us to report on, and I know that we will be covering them in more depth. They include goals on education, work and economic growth, and reducing inequality. Education is vital for every single person in the world and, as we heard earlier, people will not get out of poverty without work. As for reducing inequality, we still see that women experience more of an impact both in this country and around the world. We need to reduce the gender pay gap. We need to help women be more successful in their careers—if they choose to do that. I have already mentioned climate action, and we need to work really hard on that. Peace and justice is another of the UN’s goals. All those issues have an impact on women, and there needs to be a focus on women when we report to the United Nations. As I said, I am disappointed that we have waited so long, but it is better late than never.

I would like to see much more emphasis on what we are doing in this country. It appears that DFID has been given the lead on this, which is great because it is a fantastic Department, but what about all the other Departments? I do not think that they have taken this as seriously as they should have done from early on. The report seems a little cobbled together, yet DFID will have to lead on it now, because it is too late to do anything else. However, I want to see more emphasis on what we are doing to improve the lives of women in this country, in addition to all the fantastic work that we do in other countries.

I do not believe that this country should allow girls as young as 16 to get married with parental consent, and I am passionate about trying to change the law. Girls under 18 can only get married with parental consent, so they are not adults; they are just girls. I am told that not many people are affected by the issue, but of course there is an impact on people from other ethnic groups who will often take girls out of this country for forced marriages, which are illegal here. However, if they come back when they are 16 and the parents say, “Oh, we agree to it,” there is nothing we can do. Girls Not Brides is keen to raise the age to 18, which is something that we ask other countries to do to stop child marriage, but we allow something different here, so we should be working hard to change that anomaly in the law. I am passionate about giving girls the opportunity to carry on studying and not lose out on joining the workforce and therefore end up in much poorer situations. I want the Government to do something about that as soon as possible. It is not an international development issue, because we tell other countries not to allow children to get married, but they can come back and say, “But why should we make girls not get married until they’re 18 when you allow it at 16?”

My three main things to act on are climate change—that is absolutely critical—sexual exploitation and abuse, and the minimum age for marriage. We need to be doing far more to ensure that abuse cannot exist in the aid sector any more, and we need a study to find a baseline of where we are, so that we can make things better for girls. As for marriage, if someone has to be in education or training until they are 18, how on earth can they be married? That seems a nonsense to me, so I shall continue to campaign on that until the law has been changed.

I thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

6.36 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure and a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham), who made an impassioned speech. The three points that she mentioned are well received by all of us who understand the importance and gravity that is attached to each of them.

This has been an incredibly interesting debate for me. I stand to speak not because I claim any particular insight, experience or technical knowledge around the subject, but because what we are doing as a country in relation to expenditure on international development—this is an estimates debate after all—is the right thing for us to be doing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) spoke extremely well in introducing the debate. I was educated by the wonderful speech of the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), so I am grateful to him for his contribution. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) once again shared his long-term expertise and experience with the Chamber. I also enjoyed the speech from the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), and I recognise and respect his experience in this area from long before he came to this place. He reminded us of the Pearson commission, which was quoted by the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby. The House of Commons Library briefing states—remember that this was in 1975—that the Pearson commission “argued that if this target”—

0.7% of gross national income—

“was met by all rich countries and accompanied by appropriate policies, aid would be unnecessary by the end of the 20th Century.”

Oh, if that were only the case. Imagine if we were now celebrating the ending of aid. However, it is needed now as much as it has ever been.

I am grateful to be able to take a few minutes to celebrate the fact that we have had a cross-party debate and that there is uniform support across the House for our commitment, as a United Kingdom, to the
0.7% target. That this target is enshrined in law, and that we have kept the commitment since 2013, is an expression of our national and collective commitment to playing a full part in helping the poorest people on the planet to get out of the extreme poverty that too many of them still experience and on to a path that leads towards a more prosperous future. Ultimately, I believe that will be a path of enterprise and trade.

**Stephen Kerr** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Like me, the hon. Gentleman took part in the net zero debate last week, and we need to bring that element to international development. If we utilise our spending on renewables to bring forward new technologies, not the old carbon technologies, surely that will result in a much better outcome for these countries, including in enterprise.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Like me, the hon. Gentleman took part in the net zero debate last week, and we need to bring that element to international development. If we utilise our spending on renewables to bring forward new technologies, not the old carbon technologies, surely that will result in a much better outcome for these countries, including in enterprise.

**Stephen Kerr**: Indeed, and I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s contribution. We have been discussing many aspects of the various goals that, as a Parliament, we are united in supporting, and climate change is part of that mix.

We have been reminded that the delivery of aid is not an end in itself; it is the means by which we commit to working in partnership with global and local organisations to eradicate the conditions that trap millions of people in extreme poverty. Aid should provide a ladder, and it should be the means by which we give our brothers and sisters in less fortunate circumstances a hand up, not just a handout.

Our objective should lead to actions that ultimately lead to a day when there is no requirement for international aid on the scale that is now needed. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), who reminded us that the case for international aid needs to be made over and again. It is an easy headline in certain newspapers to be critical of international development, but to assume that everyone agrees with that would be a grave political mistake. We should be deeply proud that the 0.7% budget speaks loudly to the kind of country we are.

We make and keep our commitments in this country, and we are a dependable partner. If our reputation and influence in the world is based on one thing, it is based on trust. That is why the UK is recognised as a global superpower in soft power. The UK has played a principal role in the post-war era in laying the foundations of the rules-based international order. Whatever disparity there may be between the words and actions of other nations, we in the United Kingdom must be true to our word and stand by the poorest people on the planet.

I do not have the expertise and experience of others who have spoken in this debate, but I am keen to add my voice, and I think the voice of the vast majority of my constituents in Stirling, to those in this place who advocate positively for our international aid budget. It is right that the United Kingdom takes deep pride in its contribution in these areas. UK aid has a momentous global impact, but it is also right that we continue to apply all the necessary scrutiny to how our aid budget is spent and what it is being spent on, because it should be evaluated in the context of the essential work it is charged to deliver. We must measure the aid budget in terms of value for money in reaching its strategic objectives.

In other words, although we may talk about how money is spent, it is vital that we measure outcomes.

These activities, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield alluded to, cannot be viewed in isolation. It is a fundamental problem of all Governments that Departments tend to work in silos, and the work of the Department for International Development needs to be seen in conjunction with the work of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The Ministry of Defence has been mentioned, but the Department for International Trade has not. There is a vital interplay between aid and our diplomatic influence, between aid and trade, and between aid and global security issues.

I, for one, welcome the Secretary of State’s introduction to the voluntary national review of the progress we are making towards the global goals, which was mentioned a few minutes ago. In that introduction, he pointed out that the UK played a key role in the creation of the global goals, which are aimed at making the world a fairer, healthier, safer and more prosperous place for everyone, everywhere by 2030, and that the Government are responsible for achieving the goals here in the UK, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire, and for contributing to the goals in developing countries.

In his introduction, the Secretary of State described the goals as neatly fitting into five Ps: people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership. He said those five Ps cover the most pressing issues of our time.

I am privileged to have seen some of the impact of the work being done with the money devoted to international development by this House. During a trip to Kenya last summer with Malaria No More, the hon. Members for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd), my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) and I stood on the frontline in the global fight against malaria. We visited outlying hospitals that lack even what we might consider the most basic essentials, but what they did not lack was love and compassion.

We saw mothers nursing their very poorly small children, including babies. It was a moving scene that will stay with me for the rest of my life. It did not half give us a real-world perspective of the challenges that we face, and that we obsess about in this place. It is not possible to experience what we experienced in Kenya in that one trip without leaving with two overwhelming resolves: first, never to lose sight of our need always to count our blessings; and secondly, strongly linked to that, a firm determination to do everything in our power to make sure the fight against malaria, AIDS and tuberculosis is consistently brought back to the forefront of our collective consciousness whenever and however possible.

A child dies every two minutes from malaria, and the global fight against malaria has stalled. That was part of the case for the sixth replenishment of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, and the case for investment has never been more compelling. It was with no small sense of emotion that I heard the Government’s announcement at the weekend that we have committed £1.4 billion to the Global Fund over the next three years to provide life-saving therapies and treatments to more than 3.3 million people with HIV, to provide TB treatment and care for 2.3 million people, to provide 120,000 people with treatment for multi-drug-resistant TB, to distribute 92 million mosquito nets to protect children
and families from malaria, and to strengthen health systems and promote global health security.

I feel grateful and proud to say that the UK has answered the call to action, by uplifting our commitment to the Global Fund by the 15% that was asked for. The richest nations on Earth should make the same commitment, and they should keep that commitment. Two million lives will be saved because of the UK Government’s announcement.

Behind these statements and commitments, I can still clearly see the dedicated community health volunteers, doctors, nurses and families we met in Kenya—the real people we need to help. Seeing the impact that the UK has made on this challenge gives me a sense of pride. Not only are the teams of specialist medics, logisticians, geographers, academics and many more mostly comprised of British subjects, but the money committed by the UK is a major contributor to the accomplishment of this work. It is also a field in which innovation is happening because of the work of UK aid and its partners. Since 2002, the Global Fund has helped save more than 27 million lives and reduced deaths from the killer infectious diseases of AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria by more than a third in the countries in which it invests.

We must not be in any doubt about what other countries are doing in international development. China has its belt and road initiative—BRI—which is about much more than just building roads; it is about building all kinds of infrastructure around the world. China is doing this to gain essential access and influence in some of the countries that most need help. The Chinese model for international aid, the BRI, uses Chinese labour and Chinese finance for these projects, many of which are done on the basis of commercial or sub-commercial loans. UK aid works alongside local communities to develop aid projects and pursues proper development. I would hope that the Minister might add something in her wind-up on what we will do in response to the BRI and explain our strategy for meeting its challenge, particularly in Africa.

Jim Shannon: I share the hon. Gentleman’s concerns about China’s reasons for doing this. Many of us feel that China has an insatiable demand upon the resources of every country it is involved with and that its real reason for doing this is to get its hands on the assets of those countries, particularly the mineral assets, whereas we are not doing that—we are here to help.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that, as he makes the point I was coming to.

I would like to talk briefly about one value we share in this place, a fundamentally British value: religious tolerance. It must become a major goal intertwined with our aid programme. According to DFID’s figures in 2013, 21 out of 35 armed conflicts around the world had a “religious element”. Let us be clear that religion has a hugely positive effect in the world. It guards against extremism, runs schools and hospitals, fights against authoritarianism and gives people a spiritual life. But when faith becomes a tool for division and sectarianism, it becomes a destructive force and, like any other form of division, such as nationalism, racism or tribalism, is simply an expression of human bigotry which lays blame for our problems in the hands of those who are different from ourselves. This is why religious tolerance must be our watchword in this area. Ensuring freedom of religion and belief is our duty as a country under article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights. Therefore, I ask the Minister to take the opportunity to update us on the status of UK aid in relation to guarantees that we should be seeking on this fundamental human right of freedom of religion or belief.

In conclusion, in sharing our values around the world, whether that be democracy, the role of women, religious tolerance or LGBT rights, we should be proud to use our aid programme to promote those values in every corner of the globe. That means having tough but honest conversations, but by doing this we will help to free the world from ignorance and bigotry, as well as poverty.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Let me start by referring the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. When I heard last week that we were going to be debating the international development budget, I thought this would be the ideal opportunity to quiz the Minister on the Government’s commitment to continuing our funding to the Global Fund. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister must have read my mind, as she beat me to it; as other Members have done, I welcome Saturday’s announcement, which will be putting other countries on the spot to continue their commitment, too.

The Global Fund commitment means there will be an additional £1.4 billion spent over the next three years as the UK’s contribution to this important fund. It has been estimated that this will benefit many millions of people globally. It will provide life-saving antiretroviral therapies for 3.3 million people suffering from HIV; it will provide TB treatment and care for 2.3 million people; and 120,000 people with drug-resistant TB will now get appropriate treatment. When I visited Ethiopia earlier this year, I saw the grassroots work being carried out on multi-drug-resistant TB. My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) has already outlined the importance of tackling malaria, and the provision of 92 million mosquito nets is a simple, low-cost solution that provides a huge benefit.

Some of my constituents see 7p in every £10 of the public purse as a lot of money, and, as other Members have indicated, we do receive emails objecting to this amount, but I hope to illustrate that this 7p is leveraged time and time again. I have seen for myself during my visits to Rwanda in 2007 and 2008, and my more recent visit to Ethiopia, just how important the voluntary sector is. It has brought international development to life. Seeing how the 0.7% is spent on the ground has been very valuable, so I wish to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who is no longer in his place, for his vision in setting up Project Umubano. So many of us, including my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), know the importance of international aid on the ground. It is about building capacity and providing practical solutions for some of the most vulnerable in a country, and so often it is about giving children and young people a chance in life. I hope that, in a tiny, tiny way, I have played my part in doing just that.
During my first visit to Rwanda in 2007, I learned that when children first started school they needed to take their own pen and the parents sacrificed everything to make that happen. But of course that pen ran out and parents then had a choice: did they fund another a pen or did they put food on the table? So often that second pen was not funded because the food was necessary. I therefore set up a project called Pen4Life, whose goal was to give more children pens, because giving a child a pen means giving the child an education, which provides opportunity and a better chance in life. This caught the imagination of many people—many of whom I have never met—not just locally but across the country. I estimated that in a three-year period I collected about half a million pens, which I managed to get out to Rwanda. Donations came from Rotary groups, roundtables, Soroptimists, churches and schools, and from all across the country. One pensioner who lived locally to me bought a pack of pens every time he went to Asda—people can buy pens from other supermarkets—and brought them to me. Everybody came together to give some of the poorest in society a chance in life, and I am sure some of those pens are still being used today. Voluntary projects such as that add to the DFID spending and make it even more effective.

I have described how I have played a very small part in ensuring that children get an education, but there is more happening and more does need to happen. That is why I was delighted recently to learn more about the "send my friend to school" campaign. It was inspiring to talk to young people about their work on this amazing project, where they were playing their part in creating a positive change globally. Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to see how international aid is delivered at the grassroots level in Ethiopia. There were similarities between Ethiopia and Rwanda, but there were also differences. Some of these things are such simple measures, such as the WASH—water, sanitation and hygiene—programme, which is effective in reducing so many transmissible diseases. I also saw solar technology that was developed in Bognor Regis and is now helping to ensure the effective delivery of vaccines as part of a vaccination programme. In the middle of what seemed like nowhere, I was amazed to see a solar-powered fridge that is being used to keep life-saving vaccines viable. We need to do more to ensure that technology developed in the UK is effectively transferred to the developing world, and we need more cross-departmental work to ensure that that happens.

In conclusion, I feel very positively about the Government’s commitment to continuing the 0.7%—or 7p in every £10—funding target, but it is vital that that spending is transparent, provides value for money, allows measurable outcomes and is open to scrutiny. I commend all those involved, whether from the Government, NGOs or charities, for all the work they carry out on behalf of some of the most vulnerable around the globe.

7 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I thank all those who have made such huge and valuable contributions today.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who is my esteemed colleague on the International Development Committee, from the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), and not least from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), who is not in his place at the moment, back in 1970 the UN General Assembly adopted the 0.7% GNI aid target for donor countries to contribute to overseas development assistance. The original proposal envisaged that the target would be met by 1980 at the latest, and that the need for such aid would no longer be required by the end of the century. Sadly, as we know, that was not to be the case: only a handful of countries have ever met and maintained that level of aid spending. The UK is one of those countries, having first endorsed the target in 1974, having met it for the first time in 2013, and having enshrined it in law in 2015. The UK has taken great strides ever since, as we have heard from many great examples, not least from the hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup).

I reiterate the obvious: the Scottish National party’s support for the 0.7% spending commitment is absolutely resolute and clear. Although a number of questions have been asked today about how the money is spent, what concerns me the most is the legally binding commitment, which seems highly likely to come under threat. All Members present are here for one reason, which is to support 0.7% spending on aid, but that is not the case for every Member in this House, as I shall come to later. It is imperative that we use this opportunity to defend the 0.7% target vigorously; to highlight the need for the spending to be part of a focused strategy, aligned with Departments across Government to achieve the sustainable development goals; and to stress that we cannot allow the commitment to be put in jeopardy by the hard right of the Conservative party and to be compounded by the desire for a disastrous Brexit.

The SNP has always been clear that development spending must be focused on helping the poorest and most vulnerable, and on alleviating global poverty. In addition to maintaining the 0.7% ODA spending commitment, we want the entirety of that amount to be spent by the Department for International Development, not spread among other Departments. The proportion of aid spending in other Departments has been steadily increasing over recent years. Currently, some 27.5% of ODA funds is spent in other Departments, such as the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence—a 9.2% increase since 2016. This is worrying, because other Departments do not report their aid spending with the same level of detail and do not necessarily have poverty reduction as their main focus. A recent National Audit Office report concluded that aid spending outside DFID was not transparent enough.

Let me give just one example of how spending in other Departments brings the system into disreputable. The International Development Committee heard that in 2016 some £46.9 million of UK ODA allocated funds had been spent by the Foreign Office on diplomatic activities in China. That is absurd; such abuse of funds must end. Similarly, the Select Committee’s subsequent report found that aid delivered through the cross-Government prosperity fund was “insufficiently focused on the poorest”.

This appears to be common in other instances of ODA funds being spread across several Departments. For example, just last month the Independent Commission for Aid Impact’s report on the current state of UK aid suggested that the UK needed
“a stronger strategic direction for its conflict-reduction work, and a more integrated approach across humanitarian, peacebuilding, development and international influencing efforts, especially in protracted crises.”

At the same time, the estimates show that DFID’s allocation from the cross-Government conflict stability and security fund will see a reduction of 45% from last year. The current situation is clearly not working. How on earth can we expect to meet the objectives of strengthening peace, responding to crises and helping the world’s most vulnerable when the Department that is meant to be responsible is not taking the lead and being held to account on ODA spending?

DFID’s strategic ability to deliver on its aims is further threatened and undermined by the Brexit shambles that is unfolding. Public money has already been taken away from Departments and public services to prepare the country for the disastrous prospect of leaving the EU, and the Department for International Development has been unable to avoid this. DFID has already sent more than 30 staff to other Government Departments in preparation for a no-deal Brexit, and could deploy another 170, according to a letter to the International Development Committee from the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), in March. It has since been reported that officials at DFID were told that up to 600 of just 3,000—that is, 20% of their numbers—may have to be redeployed to Departments that are suffering from staff shortages because of their Brexit workloads.

It is unacceptable that public money that is committed to vital priorities that the UK has subscribed to under international agreements is already being used to pay DFID staff to manage the chaos of a hard Tory Brexit. Let us not forget that this money saves people’s lives and alleviates the worst aspects of poverty, vulnerability and chaos in some of the most hard-pressed countries in the world.

In two weeks, the UK will present its voluntary national review of the sustainable development goals to the UN at the high-level political forum on sustainable development. At a time when we should be using our aid funding and resources to ensure high-quality education around the world, reduce inequality and tackle the climate emergency, it beggars belief that the UK Government are wasting resources attempting to manage and mitigate the needless damage of Brexit. It is something we simply cannot allow to happen, so I am pleased to have added my name on behalf of the SNP in support of the amendment, tabled by the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) and the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), that would have stopped the mobilisation of departmental spending to facilitate a no-deal Brexit.

Worryingly, it is not just Brexit that threatens the UK’s international development work. The commitment to 0.7% ODA spending is under threat from the right wing of the Tory party, which believes that aid spending should be slashed, and would heartlessly endanger the lives of hundreds of thousands of people around the world.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman misjudges the whole debate with the speech he is delivering. How would it help the world’s poorest people to block any further spending on international development, as that amendment would suggest? Both candidates for the leadership of my party are committed to honouring the 0.7% target, so the hon. Gentleman is presenting a wholly spurious argument and ruining the tone of the debate.

Chris Law: The hon. Gentleman is misinformed: the amendment was not about blocking spending on development. Furthermore, I shall develop the point—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I should just say that the amendment was not selected, so we do not need to worry about it. That might help us.

Chris Law: As I further develop my argument, the House will find that one of the two Conservative party leadership candidates does not share the view of the hon. Member for Stirling, although he and I do share the same view on the 0.7% target.

Let me put this into perspective: that 0.7% is 7p in every £10, as we have heard several times, or 70p in every £100. That is our commitment. When I visit schools and ask children, who are a great litmus test of where society is, to disagree with that spending, none of them raise their hand; in fact, they often suggest that we should spend more. Why, then, do the leadership candidates for Prime Minister support such brutal and callous action? For example, the one-time leadership candidate the right hon. Member for Tatton (Ms McVey) said that the UK should halve its aid spending, and blamed the Government’s failure to fund the police on their aid commitment.

Alec Shelbrooke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Law: I would like to press on because I am coming to my key point.

We all know that what the right hon. Member for Tatton said is not the case. Although the right hon. Lady was quickly eliminated from the leadership race, the favourite to be next Prime Minister does not fare any better. The right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) has previously said that aid spending should be used in the UK’s “political, commercial and diplomatic interests”, and has called for the Department’s purpose to be changed from poverty reduction to furthering “the nation’s overall strategic goals”.

It could not be clearer. Those are not my words but those of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, who is currently leading the race to be Prime Minister. I hope that that answers some questions.

Our future Prime Minister has little clue about either the importance of or the necessity for protecting the most vulnerable in the world and fails to see that it is in our strategic interests to do so. The Tory right can absolutely not be trusted to protect ODA spending, with the likely future Prime Minister calling for DFID to be mothballed and brought back into the Foreign Office. That flies in the face of the advice from a former head of the Foreign Office, Peter Ricketts, who said that DFID “has established a worldwide reputation which is good for Britain. It was not a happy time when aid was part of the FCO: too easy to have conflicts of interest and aid badly used for political projects”. 

It was not a happy time when aid was part of the FCO: too easy to have conflicts of interest and aid badly used for political projects.
Indeed, the 2018 aid transparency index, the only independent measure of aid transparency among the world’s major development agencies, rated DFID as very good, whereas the Foreign Office, which the lead prime ministerial candidate led as Foreign Secretary, was rated as “poor”.

Let us be in no doubt that it is essential that the UK’s ODA spend must contribute in a focused manner to sustainable development and the fight against poverty, injustice and inequality internationally. It is vital that it is never allowed to be viewed through the prism of national and commercial interests and as part of pet projects such as global Britain. The Department for International Development must remain dedicated to its core mission of helping the world’s most vulnerable people. Anything less is not only a complete dereflection of duty, but an absence of humanity.

To conclude, I cast my mind back three weeks to the debate in this House on sustainable development goals, when we were in agreement on the importance of tackling the massive challenges that we as a planet will face in the coming years—whether it be disease, displacement, food security, poverty or climate change. We are already in a position to have a significant impact on tackling these challenges, but only if DFID is adequately resourced and funded. We cannot let other Departments, Brexit or future right-wing Tory Prime Ministers derail that and we must be resolute in our defence of international development and the 0.7% commitment.

7.11 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I have thoroughly enjoyed the last couple of hours. I think this has been a high-quality debate. Too often, when it comes to DFID, we talk about things in the deficit—whether it is about the 0.7%, the existence of the Department in and of itself, or a particular aid project that has not gone very well—so it is very nice to have had the chance to listen to hon. and right hon. colleagues talk about the positives in DFID and the reasons to be proud of it. I commend the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) for his leadership in that and for the way in which he set the tone. He started by saying that he feels lucky to be born in this country. I know that he, like me, loves his country and that he, like me, is a patriot, but he, like me, looks at the things that we have and wants that for others, too. That was the right tone to set. He talked about not only doing the right things ourselves, but the permission that it gives others when we do so. That was an important point to make.

The hon. Gentleman was followed by two towering figures in this field: my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). My hon. Friend talked about those of us who are passionate about this having an added responsibility to justify value for money. Interestingly, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made a similar point, but came at it in a different way. It shows that, across this place, we often start in different places, but arrive at similar conclusions. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield made an articulate defence of a separate but co-ordinated DFID, to which I am sure we will refer.

When the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) rose to speak, I hoped that he would reference Malawi and he did not disappoint. When I was in Lilongwe last year, people locally spoke positively about that proud connection that they have with Scotland. My take-away phrase of the debate came in an intervention from the hon. Member for Ewelme and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) when he said that we should sell the principle of aid—sell it like it could go tomorrow. That was a call to action, which, again, I will come back to.

My two near neighbours, the hon. Members for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) and for Erewash (Maggie Throup), made characteristically articulate points. The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire made some points on whistleblowing and I liked what the hon. Member for Erewash said about the Global Fund. On Wednesday, I was at an event with the Minister of State, Department for International Development, the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), whom I shadow, talking about the need to make an early decision on the Global Fund. I have to say that it felt like it was more in hope than expectation, but he had a little twinkle in his eye and now we know why.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) mentioned his strongly held view that enterprise and trade are the way forward for development and we agree with that, but what we would say, which is why we are so focused on public services, is that without decent education for boys and girls, without reliable healthcare, and without access to good nutrition, people will not be able to enter those jobs. Nevertheless, that was an important point to make.

We should be proud that the UK is one of the biggest aid donors in the world, and one of only five countries to have met the UN target of 0.7% of national income on overseas aid. In the two decades since the Labour Government established the Department for International Development as a stand-alone independent Government Department, DFID has become a global leader in its field. Every year, it spends UK aid in ways that make life-changing, material differences to people’s lives across the world. DFID has helped some of the world’s poorest people to access health and education services. It has provided humanitarian aid in times of crisis and led the way in putting gender equality at the heart of international development work. We know that spending money in this way is the right thing to do and that, as one of the world’s wealthiest countries, we must play our part in creating a fairer world. We also know that, as a country that has sometimes contributed to some of the inequalities that we see today, that duty is made all the stronger. So it is right that we set aside a fraction of our wealth to help to bring about a world where humans are all granted basic dignities such as health, education and nutrition. The UK public should be proud of the important poverty reduction work that our money has supported in recent decades.

The tone of the debate was so positive that, in trying to measure my remarks, I thought that I had better be careful that I did not push my points too hard. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield was right in saying that it is important to be reflective and to be critical where necessary. So that is the spirit in which I go into the next section of my speech. We should be worried about, and act on, the steady decline in the proportion of the ODA budget going to DFID. It is now at one quarter, as we have heard, which weakens the Department and weakens our ability to scrutinise it. We have heard that the front runner to be the next
Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), has been on record about dismantling the Department altogether; it is not beyond his power to fall short of that. Instead of maintaining an independent DFID, he has suggested repurposing the aid budget so that it would no longer be directed towards poverty reduction; the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) referred to that. Members should not take this just from me. Just last week, the Secretary of State told the Select Committee that there will be, at the very least, a reorganisation in which there would remain a Department and a Secretary of State, but with more influence perhaps exercised by the Foreign Secretary. That is what is to come, but there are challenges now on which we should reflect. I will be interested to hear the Minister’s views on that.

In the past, we have had Members leading the Department who do not actually believe in it themselves. The former Secretary of State for International Development was reported as saying that the aid budget is unsustainable—the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) drove a coach and horses through that idea very effectively indeed. Her predecessor was on record as saying that she did not believe in an independent DFID. It does feel slightly strange sometimes to defend from the Opposition Benches Government Departments from Government Ministers. That seems a little tangled up. There have been lots of ten-minute rule Bills from Government Members on the issue of folding the Department or cutting and repurposing the aid budget. Clearly, those are disastrous ideas. Folding DFID into the FCO or any other Department would be catastrophic for our country’s aid programme because it is only DFID that has that explicit sole purpose of achieving poverty reduction overseas. To care about that is to care about an independent DFID. Any such merger would undermine that.

The International Development Committee, under my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby, insisted that all ODA must be directed primarily at reducing poverty, rather than “being used as a slush fund to pay for developing the UK’s diplomatic, trade or national security interests”.

It goes further, recommending that the Secretary of State should have the ultimate oversight of the UK’s ODA and that the Department should have the final sign-off. Let me take this opportunity to state clearly on the record that Labour will oppose any attempts to merge, shut down or dissolve the Department for International Development. Furthermore, we believe there should be a freeze on the proportion of ODA being spent outside DFID and we of course stand by the commitment to maintain 0.7% of GNI as a minimum spend for our aid programme.

That is not to say that, within that, there is not scope for making changes. Too often, aid is still prioritising helping UK companies to enter overseas markets, or security projects that have actually endangered people and undermined human rights. There is an increasing and worrying trend of aid being spent in ways that are not about poverty reduction—we heard that from a number of hon. Members. This is a downward spiral—the opposite of a virtuous circle—because these are the discreditable projects on which the media pick up, which further undermines confidence in the budget.

It is clear that anyone who wants this country to play its part in international development must stand ready to defend the Department and the budget, as if they would go tomorrow—that is a good way to think about it—and I am ready to do that. I am proud that Labour is an internationalist party that believes in global solidarity. We must never turn our backs on problems, especially when sometimes we have helped to make them. We must step up and take action to make the world a fairer place. The least we can do is spend a fraction—less than a penny in each pound—of the country’s income on this.

Of course, aid alone will not solve the world’s problems, as many hon. Members have said. There are many other things we can do on the international stage to help to address global poverty fully. The Opposition’s approach is to commit to dealing with the root causes of poverty, and to be prepared to rewrite trade policies, put an end to debt burdens and clamp down on corporate tax avoidance, all of which are vital for creating a more global economy.

I will finish with four questions for the Minister, on which I hope she can give some guarantees. First, does she agree that, now that we are being told by former Foreign Secretaries and Tory leadership contenders that there is £26 billion of so-called headroom, there is no possible excuse for abandoning our commitment to 0.7%? Second, will she commit to standing up to any attempt to undermine our country’s commitment to that target, wherever such attacks come from, including her own Benches? Thirdly, does she agree that the best way to manage this spending is through a dedicated Department for International Development standing on an independent footing? Finally, will she commit to ending the misuse of aid as a slush fund for other Departments’ priorities and as a means of expanding commercial interests overseas, and instead commit to focusing all aid spending on its core objective of poverty reduction?

This has been an excellent debate. We should all be very proud of the work that we have talked about. We must now come together to make it even better.

7.21 pm

The Minister for Africa (Harriet Baldwin): May I start by saying what an absolute privilege it is to respond to the debate, and to have had an extended period of time for scrutinising the Department for International Development’s spending? I therefore sincerely congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), my constituency neighbour, on securing the debate. We have heard a range of really excellent contributions. I also salute my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ethiopia and Djibouti. It is interesting to note how many times Ethiopia has been mentioned in the debate.

While listening to the contributions, I was struck by the consensus that emerged on the importance of the 0.7% commitment, and our pride, as British citizens, that the UK was the first major country to put that into statute, which has gained us remarkable recognition around the world. I am very happy to be part of the Government who put that commitment to the Minister for Africa (Harriet Baldwin): It is clear that anyone who wants this country to play its part in international development must stand ready to defend the Department and the budget, as if they would go tomorrow—that is a good way to think about it—and I am ready to do that. I am proud that Labour is an internationalist party that believes in global solidarity. We must never turn our backs on problems, especially when sometimes we have helped to make them. We must step up and take action to make the world a fairer place. The least we can do is spend a fraction—less than a penny in each pound—of the country’s income on this.

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This has been an excellent debate. We should all be very proud of the work that we have talked about. We must now come together to make it even better.
My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) suggested that this is no longer a political issue, but I submit that it is, because although all parties elected to this Parliament stood on manifestos that included the 0.7% commitment, the party that has recently been topping the polls has announced that it would halve international development spending. I therefore think that this relates to the important political commitment that we have made democratically to deliver Brexit on behalf of the people of the United Kingdom. If we do not, we stand to lose seats to a party that does not believe in the 0.7% commitment. That is where I diverge from the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), who I do not believe has ever seen a referendum result that he wanted to respect. It is really important that we, as democrats, respect referendum outcomes.

I can reassure colleagues that I do not think there are any more than a few voices in my party who believe that 0.7% is an inappropriate target; I do not believe that in this Parliament there is any chance of it being at risk. I also happily support having an independent voice at the Cabinet table for development spending, which has been very important for delivering on the spending commitment.

We have had an excellent debate, with first-class contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who for so long provided the Department with such great leadership, and the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). My hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), in a really excellent speech, brought us back to the powerful moral arguments for development assistance. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke of his exceptionally generous constituents, who also want us to be thrifty.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire continued a valuable campaign that she has been involved in for many years, focusing on the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse, and the need for the UK to show leadership in combating it. She will be pleased to read in Hansard tomorrow that, following the most recent story about Oxfam in the newspapers over the weekend, we have checked and do not believe that any DFID funding is involved. As the House will know, we hold our suppliers to account.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and for Erewash (Maggie Throup) paid tribute, as did other hon. Members, to the important work of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. We were so proud to announce at the G20 over the weekend that we are increasing our contribution to the Global Fund, because literally millions of lives will be saved by that important contribution.

I want to tackle some of the common themes that emerged during the debate. First, everyone agrees that transparency is a good thing, that there is a lot of transparency in overseas development assistance spending, and that it is important that we focus 50% of our spending, as we do, on the most fragile and conflict-affected states. In the next spending review we aim to keep 75% of overseas development assistance spending within the Department for International Development—I put that down from the Dispatch Box this evening. We can follow that with interest as we go into the spending review.

It is early days for the prosperity fund, but we have seen some very good outcomes in the multilateral agreement that was delivered by the fund to return stolen assets to countries such as Nigeria—$321 million will return to Nigeria through our small amount of spending in the prosperity fund. There have been very good examples of spending from the conflict, stability and security fund. For example, through anti-human trafficking work in Kenya, 90 victims of trafficking and sexual abuse have been rescued. There have been some really good examples from the Newton Fund, which is spent by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, on the feasibility of creating a vaccine for the Zika virus. There are some really good examples, and these funds publish their annual reports on spending. I think that we can all agree that transparency is very valuable.

Points were made consistently about the value of small charities and civil society organisations. We have done a lot to try to make it easier—for example, through the small charities fund and Aid Match for specific programmes—to ensure that some of those fantastic smaller charities get the chance to deliver projects with overseas development assistance. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact and the importance of its work were cited a few times. It has done some very good scrutiny of our multilateral spending, and I think that we have all been able, through multilateral initiatives such as the Global Fund, to see the value of spending through such organisations. We try to publish as much as we can on our own website as well, as through those multilateral organisations, to show how that money is spent.

Jim Shannon: One of the things that many of us spoke about, and which I spoke particularly about, was education. Through DFID we will be able to increase levels of education, achievement and attainment, and thereby opportunity, particularly for young girls and young women.

Harriett Baldwin: Indeed. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of—and, I am sure, champions in Strangford—the opportunities that come through Connecting Classrooms. We will all have been lobbied by the wonderful “send my friend to school” campaign, which my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash mentioned. I love that campaign, and I wish I were in a position to announce more than the fact that we will continue our championing of the important work that is being done on education in difficult areas and refugee camps.

Another theme that came up was the importance of our being able to help with tax revenues. Experts within Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs have been able, via spending through another Government Department, to deliver huge increases in tax revenues in some countries. That is proving to be one of the very best ways in which we can spend the overseas development budget. In addition, there is the work that we have done through funding posts within the International Trade Department and the National Crime Agency. We are seeing some real benefits, with money going back to developing countries for them to spend on their priorities. Some really valuable contributions are being made.

A number of Members mentioned the CDC and the amazing number of jobs that it has created. It is important to point out that it has not invested in any new coal
projects since 2012, although it does have some investments in fossil fuels. When it is making its policy, it examines whether that is the right thing to do going forward. Obviously, it will make that decision independently. We need to recognise that a lot of the developing world lacks access to energy, which is sometimes an important part of their being able to develop.

We heard about the Scotland Malawi Partnership. I always love paying tribute to that, because it is such a rich partnership. The hon. Member for Glasgow North made a sensible point about trying to map the range of different ways in which civil society links with the developing world.

My hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell made a moral point about development. He mentioned UK Export Finance and some of its support for fossil fuel. He may want to raise that with the Department for International Trade with regard to some projects.

I can tell the House—I do not think this got anywhere near the media coverage that the Global Fund announcement got—that the Prime Minister also announced at the G20 that in future all our overseas development assistance will be deployed in line with our Paris commitments. That is a really big announcement that did not get much coverage, so I am pleased to be able to mention it from the Dispatch Box.

A range of other important points were made today. We heard about malaria and work against AIDS, and the number of people whose lives will be saved. My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling mentioned the Chinese belt and road initiative. We do take a different approach to development—there is no question about that—but we find that there are some occasions when our development priorities may overlap, and we are open to looking at those occasions when they arise. We spend a lot of time encouraging the deployment of development assistance from China in the same kind of way that we would deploy it, for example, to multilaterals such as the Global Fund—specifically, at the moment, with the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo, it would be wonderful to see a bigger contribution to the World Health Organisation from Chinese development assistance.

If I may, I will take just a couple more minutes, Mr Deputy Speaker, but you are giving me that look, so—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** Just to help the Minister, we all agreed to 10 minutes each. I have no problem with that, but the list for the education debate has just been added to, and that is what I am bothered about. I am just trying to make sure that we get equal time.

**Harriett Baldwin:** In that case, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will be very brief in summing up.

Our annual report is going to be published next week, on 11 July. That will be a very good way in which we can summarise all the different ways in which the 0.7% commitment is saving lives, making a difference to our world, and giving our children and our grandchildren a brighter future. We do this very proudly as the UK, with deep expertise and a real commitment not only morally but in statute to continue to lead in this important area.

_Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54(4))._
Robert Halfon: I am going to talk about the funding issues for schools and colleges in a bit, but I think we should welcome the fact that all the candidates—the last two and those who have been knocked out—I have talked strongly about increasing education spending. I greatly welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip said yesterday on the Sky show with Sophy Ridge that he would be spending over £4.6 billion. It is very good news that education has featured as a priority for the potential new Prime Ministers.

As I said, my Committee will be publishing a report on school and college funding with a view to helping the DFE to make the strongest possible case for the upcoming spending review. The Government have not been idle, to be fair. The national funding formula has been a highly welcome first step towards overcoming the postcode lottery of school and college funding.

The Department has announced almost £900 million to fund teachers’ pension contributions, and the introduction of T-levels promises to make a substantial difference to the provision of technical education across the country. I am glad that total funding for high needs will reach £6.3 billion this year—a £1.3 billion increase from 2013. I pay tribute to the work of the Minister for School Standards, and particularly the work he has done to improve literacy in our schools, which will be remembered for years to come and will have a huge influence on the life chances of thousands of children across our country.

However, as our inquiry has shown only too clearly, the education funding landscape for schools and colleges is still bleak. Expanding student populations, education reforms and increasingly complex special needs requirements have put a significant strain on the education sector. Costs have increased across a wide range of areas, and funding has not kept pace. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, total school spending per pupil has fallen by 8% in real terms between 2009-10 and 2017-18.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I visited three rural primary schools in my constituency on Friday, and a common feature was the £6,000 initial cost of an education, health and care plan. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one thing the Government could do immediately is abolish that? It is so counterproductive. It puts schools in an enormously difficult position, with parents against them, and if children do not get an EHCP, schools are blamed every which way. Does he agree that that could happen straight away?

Robert Halfon: As my Education Committee colleagues who are here today will know, we are doing an inquiry into funding for children with special educational needs and the implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014. The Act is very good, but there are significant problems with implementation, funding and many other areas. We will hopefully publish a report by September, and I think the hon. Gentleman will be particularly interested in what we say.

I would like to draw particular attention to the plight of further education funding, which is close to my heart. For too long, this area of education has been considered the Cinderella sector. Participation in full-time further education has more than doubled since the 1980s, yet across 16-to-19 education, funding per student has fallen by a full 16% in real terms between 2010-11 and 2018-19. That is twice as much as the 8% school funding fall over a similar period and, as I mentioned, it is decreasing again this year. This dip in 16-to-19 education makes no sense, given the importance of further education and sixth-form colleges in providing a gateway to success in later life. Those who call it the Cinderella sector should remember that Cinderella became a princess, and we should banish the two ugly sisters of snobbery and underfunding.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend, on behalf of all of us, on the excellent work he does as Chairman of the Select Committee. Talking of princesses, will he pause for a moment and join me in thanking the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, my right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Anne Milton), for her incredible support for the reopening of the sixth-form college in Haywards Heath? The college was closed under an earlier Administration, having run up an enormous amount of debt, and this is an incredibly important step for Mid Sussex—one of the fastest growing bits of the United Kingdom. Without the support and energy of the Department for Education, the Minister and her excellent officials that simply would not have happened.

In the middle of what is a very difficult period indeed for finance in the Department, the Minister deserves particular praise and consideration for what she has so brilliantly done.

Robert Halfon: I am delighted that my right hon. Friend’s college has reopened—that is excellent news—and I pay tribute to the Minister. She has passion and enthusiasm for further education, skills and apprenticeships. She said in a recent interview in Schools Week that hers is the best job in Government. I absolutely agree, and that shows her commitment to further education.

The debate around school and college funding has become deeply polarised. On the one hand, there are those on the Government Benches who say that more money than ever is going into the system. On the other hand, we hear that the funding system is nearing breaking point because pupil numbers are rising, and education institutions are having to provide an increasing variety of services. I hope we can move beyond that divide by focusing more closely on providing what schools and colleges actually need, rather than how we choose to interpret statistics.

That brings me on to the most important point in this debate on the DFE’s estimates: what is the Department trying to achieve with its spending? The Department is certainly not short of ideas for policy initiatives and announcements. However, my Committee has become increasingly concerned about the lack of clear long-term thinking and strategic prioritisation. It is partly driven by the politicised nature of the funding system and the short-term thinking that is encouraged by the three to four-year spending review process.

There are serious issues that we need to address. We should start focusing a lot more on tackling the gap between education and employment. The troubling state of social justice in this country will only get worse with future changes to the labour market and the march of the robots unless we take a more strategic and decisive approach to funding vocational and skills-based education routes. High-needs funding, which was mentioned by
the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), is threatening to spiral out of control unless we can get to grips with the underlying drivers more effectively.

I am not confident that those big issues can be addressed within the current funding framework. The Department must recognise that education is a strategic national priority and should not be used as a political football that gets kicked around every few years during election periods or the spending review. Our school and college funding system is under severe financial strain. Simply securing a moderate top-up in the spending review will be little more than a sticking plaster.

That is why we need a 10-year plan for education, backed up with a multi-billion-pound funding settlement. The Health Secretary made a statement in the House today, setting out the NHS 10-year plan. If the Health Secretary can come to the House with a 10-year plan and an extra £20 billion-a-year funding settlement, which Members on both sides of the House welcome, why can the Secretary of State for Education not come to the House with a 10-year plan and a minimum five-year funding settlement for the education system, with the funds that it needs? Why does the Department for Education—our schools, colleges, universities, apprenticeships and skills system—not also have a 10-year plan?

The plan would need to take a long, hard look at what schools and colleges are needing to deliver and what it costs. Taking the politics out of funding with a 10-year plan would mean that we can have a properly financed education system that is characterised by strategic national priority and should not be used as a political football that gets kicked around every few years during election periods or the spending review. Our school and college funding system is under severe financial strain. Simply securing a moderate top-up in the spending review will be little more than a sticking plaster.

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The plan would need to take a long, hard look at what schools and colleges are needing to deliver and what it costs. Taking the politics out of funding with a 10-year plan would mean that we can have a properly financed education system that is characterised by strategic investments rather than reactive adjustments. Only then will we ensure that children and young people receive the high-quality education and support that they deserve, and our education system will be confident that it has the plan and the funds that enable it to plan properly for many years ahead. We must build a sturdy education ladder of opportunity fit for the 21st century, so that everyone, no matter what their background, can climb it to achieve jobs, security and prosperity.

7.48 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the Chair of the Education Committee. He speaks with tremendous authority on these matters, and his expertise is well recognised around the House and beyond. I cannot match that expertise in this policy area, but I want to raise a number of issues that I see in schools and colleges in my constituency and, indeed, in wider support for children. In particular, in the context of this estimates day debate, when we look at the spending and policies of one Department, I want to make the point that many of the issues that I would like to talk about cannot be dealt with in a siloed, single departmental context. We need to look at how to bring different Departments and agendas together to ensure that everyone can use their learning opportunities to make the most of their potential.

I would like to start, as I think we all probably would, by saying a little bit about school funding. I was able to participate in a very valuable debate in Westminster Hall on 4 June on this subject. Since that debate, I have been contacted by the Trafford headteachers standing conference, which wanted to express its deep concern at the pressures schools are under in relation to not just the funding for schools themselves, but, as was referred to in the Westminster Hall debate, the fact that schools operate in a wider and very pressured social context.

My headteachers are committed to continuing with early help for vulnerable pupils, but they point to the pressures on a range of support and social welfare services that support families and the children whom they educate. There is a particular worry about children who are not officially defined as in need or who do not meet the threshold for child protection, but who are still in need of significant support and who will fall under the radar in relation to getting it. Their view is that we need to look holistically at the needs of these children and to look holistically at the different departmental and Government strands, both local and national, that support them. That includes adequate funding for local government services in the round and for mental health provision, about which I will say a little more in a moment, as well as support for families, and indeed for family incomes, because currently schools are picking up the pieces of the wider austerity agenda.

As I say, mental health is a particular concern, with parents and children in my constituency experiencing very long waits for referrals and appointments. It was really good to hear the Secretary State for Health earlier this afternoon committing to a four-week waiting time for children and young people, and to a programme of work with schools and health professionals together. That is really important, but in my constituency I see mental health pressures at every stage of a student’s life, particularly at the points of transition during the teen years and at exam time.

May I say that, in common with other colleagues, I have concerns about the mental health of university students, given we have seen some very alarming reports of student suicide? I very much welcome the work by Universities UK and Public Health England on the #stepchange programme and the university mental health charter, but it would be really helpful if the Minister could update us on how that work is panning out in practice.

May I raise a very particular issue? I know it is not the direct responsibility of this Minister, but perhaps he can speak to his colleagues. In the case of a student suicide at university, no redress is available to the family if they have concerns about the welfare support that the student received. If a student is dissatisfied, he or she can go to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, but their family members or parents do not have that access; nor will the Office for Students look at individual cases. May I ask the Minister to use his good offices to talk to colleagues about how we can ensure there is support for family members who have concerns about the care of their children? In particular, when there has tragically been a suicide, how can the family, after the death, continue to have access to redress?

Parents in my constituency report that both exams and school admissions decisions have very adverse effects on children’s wellbeing, and cause them considerable stress and anxiety. Last week, during business questions, I raised my concerns about exam paper security, in that exams are not always kept confidential until the point at which students are taking them. For example, I have been made aware of the same examination being made available on two different days in two different locations, and that cannot be fair to the students who take it on the first day if the children taking it on a subsequent day are able to have any advance notice of what is in the papers. Again, could the Minister, with his colleagues,
look at what more we can do to ensure, when public examinations are taken, that all students take them on a level playing field?

The pressure on school places, and therefore the difficulties that parents in my constituency can find in accessing the school they choose for their child, is another concern that causes considerable stress both to the children and to their parents. In my borough, this is exacerbated by our selective secondary system. Clearly, what we need is a strategy, and this is where the Chair of the Select Committee is absolutely right. It needs to be a long-term strategy to ensure we match the supply of places to where those places are going to be needed.

May I say—I know the Minister has heard me say this before, but I will say it again—that I do think the funding that has been set aside for grammar school expansion is particularly perverse in that context? I am seeing non-selective secondary schools in my constituency under huge funding pressure. They educate the vast bulk of children overall, the vast bulk of children on pupil premium and the vast bulk of children with special educational needs and disabilities, yet they see the funding going to a very small number of grammar schools to expand by a very small number of places for a very small proportion of children.

I agree with the Chair of the Select Committee about the importance of post-16 and further education. I am particularly concerned that, even in these days of near full employment, we still have 50,000 NEET young people—those not in education, employment or training—in England. According to the Learning and Work Institute’s Youth Commission, of which I have been very lucky to be a member, progress in the number of 19-year-olds gaining level 2 and level 3 qualifications has stalled and fewer young people are doing apprenticeships. In particular, the youngest and least well qualified are losing out because employers are preferring to fund higher level apprenticeships, and only 15,000 of those on benefits move into work via an apprenticeship.

With 3 million benefit claimants, it seems to me there is a huge missed opportunity there for the Department to be working with the Department for Work and Pensions and with the devolved Administrations. I do not mean just the nations, but the devolved administrations such as my own in Greater Manchester, where there would be a real opportunity now for the Department to look at how it could link post-16 study, employment prospects, skills and the region’s industrial and regeneration strategies.

Finally, and on a slightly different tack, I would like to raise a very particular issue in relation to EU national looked-after children who may now be eligible for the Home Office settled status scheme or, indeed, for British citizenship. It is for the local authority, as the corporate parent of those children, to apply for settled status for them, but the social workers who support those families may lack the expertise and knowledge to do so. Indeed, I think it is highly likely that social workers will not have that knowledge. Moreover, for looked-after children where the local authority has not assumed parental responsibility, the only arrangements in position are in the form of guidance simply to signpost children to make their own application, which is even weaker protection for those I think we can all accept are quite vulnerable children. May I ask the Minister to say now, or perhaps to speak to colleagues and respond to me in more detail in due course, what work his Department is doing with the Home Office to ensure that we protect the best interests of those children in relation to their status?

I wanted briefly to highlight policy challenges where the DFE remit needs to be aligned with the policies and spending of a number of other Government Departments, nationally but also regionally and locally. Lifelong learning, which I think we can all agree is a very worthwhile aspiration, requires lifelong and holistic support for learners to make the most of their potential. Our obligation to our children’s future encompasses their learning, of course, but also their health, material security, happiness and wellbeing across the widest range of social policy. As I say, today’s debate obviously focuses on the role and expenditure of one Department, but I hope the House will agree that this is a challenge for the whole of Government.

7.58 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), a fellow member of the Home Affairs Committee. May I endorse her last point about children coming from Europe and assessments? However, there is a bigger issue about asylum-seeking children, who often have family connections over here. Certainly from my experience—having visited Greece, in particular, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan)—a delay is often caused by social worker assessments for the fitness of whatever accommodation those children may be coming to in the UK taking quite a long time to undertake. In the meantime, they are kept in refugee camps and in unsuitable conditions overseas. That is just another aspect of social workers, who do of course come under the Department for Education, being problematic.

School funding is the most important issue in my constituency, and in the constituencies of all hon. Members who represent West Sussex and other counties like ours that have been historically poorly funded. We are seeing the cumulative effects of many years of underfunding, to the extent that, as I have said in every debate in which I have spoken over the years, the tank is now empty. The capacity to make further savings or cuts elsewhere simply does not exist. All those savings—all that fat—went a long time ago.

We were obviously grateful for the additional £28 million that West Sussex was given, but we went from being the worst funded shire authority for schools to about the seventh worst, which means that we are still in the bottom decile. The Minister for School Standards will know from his own West Sussex constituency that the new fair funding formula is only a work in progress.

Last week’s Department for Education report referred to the fact that children in schools in coastal areas achieve several grades lower than other children, certainly at GCSE level. My constituents therefore suffer from the double whammy of being in one of the lowest funded local authorities for schools, and the serious challenge to schools in pockets of deprivation, often in coastal areas, of which there are many on the south coast as well as in other parts of the country.
I therefore ask the Minister to look again at the suggestion that I made last year—I wrote it again in my letter of 12 September to the Secretary of State—to consider a coastal schools challenge fund to examine plugging that gap in the outcomes for children in coastal constituencies. The London Challenge, which the Labour Government set up in 2003, went a long way towards plugging the gap between outcomes in London and in other parts of the country. However, it is now a problem that there is such a large gap between schools in London and those in West Sussex and other shire counties.

Sir Nicholas Soames: My hon. Friend has been a fantastic champion for West Sussex schools. I endorse his suggestion for a challenge fund. It is an extremely good idea and I hope that it makes some progress. He and I have sat in endless meetings with the Secretary of State and others, and he knows that the funding situation is not confined to the coastal district and that it is just as serious further inland.

Tim Loughton: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that the situation is not just confined to coastal areas. However, the problem is that there tend to be more deprived communities in coastal areas around the country. Seemingly affluent shire counties such as West Sussex disguise pockets of deprivation. We have high special educational needs in many of our schools and we need to focus more on bringing the funding up to at least the average in the rest of the country to give those children a better chance.

I have spoken in numerous debates on the problems that schools in my constituency face. I wrote my notorious eight-page letter to the Secretary of State last year after I had summoned all the heads of all the schools in my constituency and all the chairs of governors and asked them to tell me not what they thought might happen and their fears, but what was actually happening now. That included the reduction in teaching assistants and the fact that, with 90% of school budgets in many cases being spent on staffing, any cut means that non-staffing expenditure on, for example, maintenance and buying new computers, does not happen, and real reductions mean fewer staff, or, as happens in many cases, less qualified staff being taken on to replace experienced staff who have left to take other jobs, retired or gone on maternity leave.

I was particularly concerned about the cuts to counselling services in schools. As the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston said, we need a much more joined-up approach to that. I welcome the Prime Minister’s approach to that. I welcome the Prime Minister’s fantastic champion for West Sussex schools. I endorse his suggestion for a challenge fund. It is an extremely good idea and I hope that it makes some progress. He and I have sat in endless meetings with the Secretary of State and others, and he knows that the funding situation is not confined to the coastal district and that it is just as serious further inland.

Children’s social care is in a state of crisis. I want to spend a few minutes dealing with that subject. Before doing so, I endorse the comments of the Chairman of the Education Committee on the problems that face further education. I know about that from colleges in my constituency and I endorse his frequent calls for a 10-year education plan to allow teachers and lecturers to plan ahead in the same way as the national health service.

There have been so many reports in recent months. The all-party parliamentary group on children, which I chair, produced “Storing Up Trouble”, which gave an alarming account of huge variations in the experiences of children coming into the care system, or not reaching the threshold for coming into the care system. In Blackpool, 166 in 10,000 children are likely to end up in care, whereas the figure for Richmond is only 28 in every 10,000. There are differences in deprivation between Blackpool and Richmond, but by a factor of seven? The Department is not properly assimilating that sort of information and data, which our report revealed. That is one ask from our report.

There have been several reports, for example, by Action for Children, the Children’s Society and the Education Policy Institute. The Children’s Commissioner for England recently found that England now spends nearly half of its entire children’s services budget on the 75,000 children in the care system, leaving the other half for the remaining £17.7 million. The Children’s Commissioner will produce a further report at the end of this week, identifying the percentage of children in need, constituency by constituency, and asking why we are not doing more to focus on those children at an early, preventative stage.

The evidence is there. Local authorities say that they face a shortfall of at least £2 billion by 2020 in children’s social care. We have a recent record of the number of children in care at the moment. There are other issues around the funded 30-hour childcare entitlement, of which I am a big supporter. However, many of my independent providers tell me that the remuneration they get is not nearly enough to cover the cost. There is a danger of losing places, and the least well off, who most need them, will not be able to access places for their children.

I have concerns about social worker recruitment. Despite the Munro report and everything we did for the social work profession some eight or nine years ago, too many social workers are being driven out of the profession early. I also make a plea for the troubled families programme, which has its origins partly in the Department for Education. It was one of the Cameron Government’s
most successful initiatives. It was about joining up the different Departments because, in a family with problems, the problems are not limited to mental health, physical health or school truancy. It is usually a combination of those and they need to be dealt with holistically. When the funding comes to an end in 2020, it is absolutely essential that the project is continued. I would like to see a pre-troubled families programme to deal with families much earlier on—from, as I said, perinatal mental illness stage onwards—so that they are less likely to express those symptoms, which then cost us so much as a society. Child neglect in this country costs £15 billion a year. Perinatal mental health problems cost some £8.1 billion a year. We are spending £23.1 billion a year on getting it wrong and dealing with the problem. That money could be used much more effectively earlier on.

My final point is to ask what has happened to the inter-departmental ministerial group, which was being chaired by the former Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom). That was a great initiative which brought together Ministers from six different Departments, including the Children’s Minister from the Department for Education and the Chief Secretary to Treasury, who will be conducting the comprehensive spending review. It is all about having a joined-up approach and pooling funding to make sure we put investment in to support families where they need it early on to see them through those challenging early years. That work is groundbreaking and it is absolutely essential that it continues. Perhaps the Minister can update us on where it has got to. It is essential that it is a major component of the comprehensive spending review, so that we stop wasting money dealing with the symptoms of failure and start investing upstream to prevent the huge social problems that bring about huge financial problems. If we get that right, it will be better for all our children and young people.

We need more money for our schools. I am glad that all the leadership candidates and the Prime Minister recognise that, but please do not forget children’s social care. If we do, the problems of dealing with children with problems when they arrive at school will be far higher and far more challenging than if we sorted them out before they are even born.

8.11 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I begin by saying thank you to the hard-working teachers and support staff both in County Durham, which I represent, and throughout the country. I would also like to pay tribute to the parents, guardians and school governors who give up their time, which is not usually recognised, to help and support the education of our nation’s children.

Education is a basic and fundamental right. We take it for granted in this country, but we should cherish it and we should all be entitled to it. It changes people’s lives and is one of the ingredients of the glue that holds our society together. Many of our schools are at the centre of our local communities. My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) rightly pointed out that they are also a magnet for a lot of problems in society that have nothing to do with education. I know from my own constituency that many schools and teachers deal with problems that are less to do with education than with the austerity agenda of the past nine years.

People do not think that mental health is an issue for schools, but unfortunately they have to deal with it on a daily basis. I welcome what the Government have done in announcing funding for counsellors and so on in schools, but that is only part of the solution. The real issue is addressing the mental health of young people and children outside school. Many individuals who present with very serious mental health problems do not actually attend school in the first place.

I take the view that education is an investment in our economy not just for now, but for the future. Every successful economy in the world puts investment in education at the centre of its economic policy and this will become more important in the coming years. With rapid technological change, people will not be in the same job for 20 or 30 years. They will need upskilling and training throughout their lives. Investment in education will have to be not just in schools but throughout people’s lives if we are to achieve individual fulfilment from education as well as the economic benefits.

It is important that we realise that education, as the Chair of the Education Committee, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), said, has to be joined up with other Government Departments. Over the past nine years, that has not happened. Education has not been free from the austerity axe. I was interested to hear what the Chair of the Select Committee said about taking politics out of education. I think a lot of teachers would agree with him on that, but the Government have had an ideological obsession with education. Free schools have diverted attention and resources from what is really needed. In County Durham in the early years of the coalition Government, we wasted over £4 million—almost £5 million—on a free school that was not needed. That was done for ideological reasons. Scarce resources that could have been put into the local education community were just wasted on an ideological initiative.

Ministers always say that we spend more on education now than we did in 2010. Of course we spend more: there are nearly 700,000 more pupils in primary and secondary schools, and we cannot educate them without putting more money in. If we actually look at the figures, however, there has been a reduction in real-terms spending on our schools and colleges from £95.5 billion in 2011-12 to £87.8 billion last year. That is a reduction in the amount we spend on education as a percentage of GDP from 5.69% to 4.27%. Are we taking on board the figures, or are we just wasting on an ideological initiative?

There are other pressures facing our schools—certainly the ones in Durham that I speak to. I have already mentioned that there are 700,000 more pupils than there were in 2010. Teachers have rightly been awarded a 3.5% pay increase. The sting in the tail was that that would not be wholly financed by central Government, with 1% falling on schools’ budgets. Schools are already in a very tight fiscal situation in balancing their budgets. The Government are purporting to put more money in, but by sleight of hand they are putting more pressure on the system. The Chair of the Select Committee argued the case for longer-term funding over a 10-year period. I agree with him. If we want education in this country to be an investment in our knowledge, the
wellbeing of individual citizens and the economy, a long-term plan is needed. Schools are also feeling the pressure from contributions to teachers' pensions. The Government has met one-off funding of £40 million for one year, but we need to make the case for future years. Again, we have to be careful that the costs do not fall on individual schools, because as it stands future contributions will have to come out of their budgets.

We only have to look at the number of schools, especially local authority schools, that are running budget deficits to realise there is a problem. In 2017-18, about 10% of all local authority maintained schools were running budget deficits. It is okay for Ministers to keep saying that more money is going in, but Government initiatives—for example the apprenticeship levy, which everyone supports—are putting the costs on schools. The Government are giving with one hand but taking away with the other. We can add to that such things as the GCSE changes. Putting aside the practical implications for teachers, there are costs involved for schools, and all these things add to the pressure on individual schools' budgets.

Let me turn to special educational needs. County Durham is no different from any other area: it is struggling to meet the requirement to provide education support for the most vulnerable pupils. Last year its budget was overspent by £4.7 million, and this year it is forecast to be £5.1 million overspent. It has asked to take money out of the dedicated schools grant, which would direct money away from others into this vital area. We need to ask: why? As has been referred to, such things as the Children and Families Act were well meaning, but there has been a knock-on effect on individual budgets. For example, identifying those with SEN in the early years is very important, but it brings increased pressures. In County Durham, the number of children who have direct support in the early years has gone from 90 in 2014-15 to 287 in 2017-18, so there has been a huge increase in support. I am not saying that children do not need that support, but it has highlighted the issue.

Another issue is young people needing statements in mainstream education. In County Durham—this is the same elsewhere—there has been a decrease in the number of children needing statements who are accessing their education in the mainstream sector. It has dropped from 1,008 to 818 this year, because they are now being provided for in the private sector. That is not just down to the individual choice of parents, but because the provision that those individuals need cannot be provided. On average, it costs about a third more—if not more—to offer that type of provision in the mainstream sector, which puts pressure on the system.

On students in further education with special educational needs and disability, there is huge pressure on Durham County Council to support young people from 19 to 25. In 2015 there were 166 such individuals, and now there are 233. That requires not just support for those individuals, but adaptations that need to be made.

We can add to that the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), to ask him to come and look at the issues in County Durham. She wrote on 22 November and got a reply in January saying that, unfortunately, the Minister’s diary is overcommitted. May I invite him again, through his colleague the Minister for School Standards, to come to County Durham and meet the professionals on the ground?

Finally, I turn to capital. In my constituency, since 2010, there has not been one single new capital build project that was not already agreed under the last Labour Government. Under that Government, I had a new academy and secondary school, a new school at Pelton, a new school at Catchgate, Greenland juniors, and the refurbishment of St Joseph’s. Not one single new capital project has since been put forward in County Durham, despite the county council recognising that across County Durham, there is a backlog of repairs and capital funding of £125 million. To add insult to injury, the council was told in 2010 that it would not be getting any funding to meet its basic capital funding needs. Sometimes I look at some of the figures, including, for example, for my favourite council, Wokingham. Its basic needs funding allocation per head is £309.43, whereas Durham gets £37.46. That cannot be right. I do not want to go on much longer, but I could name a few more such examples.

In conclusion, education is in crisis in this country and it is no good hiding from that. No matter how many times the Prime Minister says that austerity is finished, at the chalkface in classrooms, teachers and headteachers are struggling to manage budgets. I accept what people are saying about the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson); he has discovered the magic money tree, which we were told did not exist—actually, if we look at all his commitments, we see that he has discovered an entire equatorial rainforest of money trees. I come back to where I started: education is a fundamental right for individuals in this country. We all benefit from it and, if we want a strong society and a prosperous economy, we need to invest in it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We have plenty of time for this debate, and I thought that we would not need a time limit, but there have been some rather long speeches. I am still hoping that I will not have to impose a time limit if hon. Members take between eight and nine minutes each, which is a very long time. Stop and think about it: if you cannot say it in eight minutes, is it really worth saying?

8.27 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I will do my best to take that advice, Madam Deputy Speaker—I do like to hear the sound of my own voice, though, as many of us in this Chamber do.

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on education as a member of the Education Committee, and I hope to be able to contribute something of use. With an ongoing
leadership election and a forthcoming spending review, there is a great opportunity to make progress not only to continue some of the great work that is happening, but to change things. Education is a broad and varied subject, so forgive me if I hop about a bit.

The most prominent education issue, as we have discussed across the House in this debate, is school funding. To put it bluntly, there is not enough of it. I absolutely welcome the Government’s steps to increase support through the national funding formula, ensuring that every school gets a rise and gets above a set minimum level of funding. That benefits schools in constituencies such as Mansfield, which have historically underfunded. It is a positive step, but the truth is that we are also making it harder in some areas. It is positive that the Government have protected the state sector from pension contribution rises next year, for example, but at some point that will hit schools in the wallet. At the same time, the apprenticeship levy inadvertently affects schools’ core budgets—for example, we have not protected the independent school sector from the contribution rise in the same way. Some people will say, “Why should we?” but if it impacts the independent sector to the extent that some suggest, we could see closures in that sector, and if that happened, state schools would have to pick up the pieces, which is not in our interests either.

There are significant challenges with special educational needs provision. The Select Committee, which is to report on this later in the year, has received reams of evidence from across the sector. SEND provision, too, impacts on schools’ core budgets, as was mentioned earlier by an Opposition Member, as schools are expected to find the first £6,000 for pupils with SEND, which stacks up, particularly if a school has a reputation for delivering excellent and inclusive education for those pupils. A good reputation attracts more children with SEND to that school, and this success creates budgetary problems as more and more of its funding is spent on SEND. Without extra support, that is not sustainable. We should reward good practice. These issues, whether school places or school funding, are increasingly visible in my constituency surgeries, and I hear the same from colleagues across the House.

I am a Tory MP—I am a conservative with a big C and a small c—and I believe in people taking personal responsibility for their lives. I believe a person’s success is down to them, their hard work and their talents, and responsibility for their lives. I believe a person’s success is down to them, their hard work and their talents, and responsibility for their lives. I believe a person’s success is down to them, their hard work and their talents, and responsibility for their lives. I believe a person’s success is down to them, their hard work and their talents, and responsibility for their lives. I believe a person’s success is down to them, their hard work and their talents, and responsibility for their lives. I believe a person’s success is down to them, their hard work and their talents, and responsibility for their lives. I believe a person’s success is down to them, their hard work and their talents, and responsibility for their lives.

The education system is the best chance the state has to fulfil its duty to ensure that everybody can succeed on their own merits, regardless of background, upbringing and barriers in early life. It is also an opportunity to deal with issues early on and so save the taxpayer money later. We have to ensure that parents take their responsibilities seriously and that we support them when they need it, but we should also do more to give children in the most deprived communities and from the most challenging backgrounds the basic tools they need for life. Visiting schools in Mansfield, a former coalfields constituency with significant social challenges, I have come to realise that schools are the only place some kids have that are warm, safe and welcoming and where they can find people they trust—I would make the same case for youth clubs and other youth and children’s services. If we are asking schools to properly support those children, they will need significantly more money.

Schools funded to be flexible and inclusive of all but the most challenging students benefit the community and in the long run the taxpayer. I have been genuinely delighted to hear so many positive pledges for school funding throughout the leadership contest, and I look forward to them being taken forward as soon as possible. We should also look at the opportunities that technology brings to reduce teacher workload, to manage data, to enable personalised lessons and assessment and generally to take the strain off teachers and allow them to focus on supporting their students. We have 25% of the world’s edtech businesses here in the United Kingdom, but no clear route, as far as I can see, by which to roll out and test that technology in our schools. I have a great proposal for a pilot project that I am recommending to the Minister— I can recommend a good constituency for him to try it in as well—but perhaps we could also take it forward in the Select Committee. I have raised it there too.

Despite the many challenges, there are some excellent schools delivering incredible education and opportunities to young people. Very few weeks go by in the academic year when I do not visit a school or college in Mansfield. Just last week, I visited Brunts Academy to see what it was up to for school sports week, which is an excellent initiative that needs more promotion. I met Miss Lockwood and pupils to hear about the extra-curricular opportunities and the great work they do to go above and beyond for their pupils. Such work is always fantastic to see and a great credit to the many schools and teachers who do a great job. As a way to boost facilities and capital spending, I have suggested that we build new school buildings and relocate existing schools to these great new facilities and that we cover some of the cost by developing the old sites. I would love to chat about that with Ministers. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said of his constituency, this has become the biggest issue in my constituency and in my inbox. It needs a resolution.

Another challenge in this sector, and an appropriate one for an estimates debate—I could go through the whole system and come up with a ream of different ideas and suggestions, but I will stick to Government spending—is further education funding. Those who look at the detail will see that FE is the part of the sector that gets the least support, which is incredibly frustrating. Colleges are in a constant state of reform, realignment and merger, which makes it incredibly difficult for them to focus on what they are there for. My local
college, which has long been a beacon of aspiration in our community, has its own problems. Some were created by the previous local leadership, which has now moved on, and the college is having to be helped to restructure and refocus on the local provision that matters. It is doing a grand job actually and is getting back on track, which is fantastic.

I know that Education Ministers are staunch advocates of college funding. We must make colleges places that are getting young people ready for work. We are rolling out T-levels, which are a step in the right direction in balancing the equation between academic and technical education. We should value technical skills and qualifications as much as other routes. I hope the Government can make a success of that. We are often guilty of talking about aspiration and social mobility in terms of how many people go to university, but university is not the right choice for everybody. I would be so bold as to say that too many people go to university, chasing promised outcomes that do not exist, when they would be better off taking alternative routes.

For many people, college is the direct route into work at 18. Often vocational and technical courses are more expensive to run and need specialist equipment, while the additional pressure of unfunded requirements for pupils with SEN—up to 25 now—is another challenge. For these pupils, the support they get at college can determine whether they are ever likely to get into work. Not only does extensive, rounded support help them with their additional needs, but it helps us all as taxpayers, because if they can find meaningful work and support themselves, it saves us all money later on.

The recurring theme in schools and further education—and in, for instance, early years, children’s and youth provision services—is that these are not costs but investments, and that evidence shows that they lead to great savings further down the line. Early spending in the education system reduces the number of exclusions, behavioural problems, social care needs, the cost of adult support services, and the number of young people who end up in prison, and saves the state money in countless other ways. The Government’s own figures show that: the 2018 health profile for England states that educational attainment is “strongly linked” with lower instances of long-term disease and mental health conditions.

Investing money at an early stage in health visitors, early years and primary schools means saving it in our NHS later. Similarly, investment in schools and colleges, helping young people into work, and helping adults to retrain and change careers or achieve basic skills will save money in the welfare system, boost productivity, and produce a happier and healthier population. FE funding needs to increase, and again, I welcome the pledges that have been made throughout the leadership contest.

Part of the college and FE system includes apprenticeships. Apprenticeship spending has gone through the roof, and I welcome that, although the levy is still a work in progress. I echo what has been said about the Minister for School Standards, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), who takes his job incredibly seriously and seems to enjoy it along the way. However, I should like to see increased flexibility to ensure that the money is used. I have suggested that part of the levy pot should be used to plan training and development, that there should be a plan for how the rest of the levy should be spent, and that employers should have an opportunity to realise the potential benefits. That might help to ensure that more businesses make use of the cash that is available. There should also be more flexibility when it comes to how the cash can be used. For instance, recruitment firms could be allowed to spend their levy pots on upskilling jobseekers and helping people to prepare for work, which would, in turn, boost overall productivity. I should be happy to discuss those ideas further.

The Augar review provides an opportunity for big changes to be made throughout further and higher education to meet some of the challenges. Although not all its ideas are good, it certainly shows some positive ways in which reform could benefit the whole sector.

I am flying through this now, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I am close to the time that you specified. I am nearly there. However, you have got me on my favourite subject, so I am going to get it all out! Let me end my speech by raising some fairly disparate points about other areas of education.

I massively welcome the children’s social care innovation programme. The Government have invested £200 million in up to 98 projects for local authorities to develop, test and scale new approaches to supporting vulnerable children in our care system. However, we need to find answers to a great many questions about children’s services, not least the question of how we can take a more proactive and preventive approach that will mean taking fewer children into care. Learning in that regard is hugely important—as is the extra £1 billion quid in the next year’s budget, which is very positive. I have spoken about the amount that front-loaded education spending will save in the long run; the same is true of spending on children’s services, and perhaps even more true of spending on young people who are often very vulnerable.

I also welcome the additional funds to support maintained nurseries in the period preceding the spending review, which were greatly needed. We should consider how we can best utilise early years funding to support those who need it most. As I have said before in the Select Committee, while I am personally very excited about my youngest turning three next month and about how much that will save me in childcare, I am not convinced that my family is among those most in need of that financial help. It is brilliant to be able to reduce people’s childcare costs and help people to take on more hours or go to work, but perhaps we could revisit the thresholds. Perhaps we could put some of that money to more effective use, or look again at the funding for nurseries for the delivery of those free hours to ensure that it is sustainable. Better career paths, training and staff development in nurseries would help to reduce staff turnover and offer better support for children, just as such opportunities for teachers would do in schools.

Needless to say, I am a passionate advocate of delivering for our young people. I think that if there is any sector in which Government money should be spent, it is education and children’s services, which should be a key priority. The statistics on ever-improving school standards and attainment are massively welcome—more children are meeting basic standards in literacy and numeracy, there are more good and outstanding schools, and there has been some excellent progress of which we should be proud—but there is much more to do, particularly for
the most vulnerable. I hope that that will be the No. 1
domestic priority for the next Prime Minister later this
summer.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I
thank the hon. Gentleman for his efforts. I am sure it is
not his rhetoric that is lacking; it may be merely his
arithmetic. Let us now look on this as a test in primary
school arithmetic: let us try adding eight and then
stopping. Otherwise, I will impose a time limit.

8.39 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I will try
to be the swot here today, Madam Deputy Speaker, and
it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mansfield
(Ben Bradley).

I regularly meet headteachers, governors, teachers,
teaching assistants, families and pupils, and without
exception there are huge levels of concern regarding
many different aspects of our education system. As a
former teacher and the mother of two young children, I
wholeheartedly share their worries. One headteacher
said to me recently, “Laura, the difference between the
year 7 children I now have and those who are leaving
this year is huge. The range of needs that they have is
dramatically different but, Laura, we have to remember
this is now a generation that has known nothing but
austerity.” This comment really struck me: there are
children now who have never known anything but cuts
and starved public services and the damage that this
political choice has made.

Let me be clear about what that looks like in towns
such as mine. It means children who are not being fed
adequately. It means kids moving house countless times
and living in properties that are completely unfit. It
means children who see the insecurity of their parents
regularly being out of work or in low-income jobs. It
means not enough food in their bellies, coming to
school with no underwear on, rolling loo roll in their
knickers to deal with their periods. They see and experience
mental health problems and the reality of no money to
pay the bills. And these are not scare stories; this is
reality—a shameful reality that needs to change.

There are so many different aspects of school funding
that I could focus my remarks on today. However, a
recent survey that I sent to local schools in Crewe and
Nantwich concurred that top of the list of urgent
problems that need addressing is special educational
needs provision. I know as one of the vice-chairs of the
parliamentary f40 group that this is something we appear
to agree on across the House; indeed, a huge number of
f40 MPs have recently written to the Chancellor asking
for an urgent injection of £1.4 billion to be put into the
system to deal with the high needs crisis across the
country. The stark truth is that even though there is a
statutory obligation, schools and councils are struggling
to make this a reality.

This is where we seem to go around in a continual
circle: schools report the difficulties they face; local
authorities report the difficulties they face; and the
Government respond by saying that there is more money
than ever before. Meanwhile, we all know that there is a
significant problem with children not receiving the education
they are entitled to receive, and the evidence points
overwhelmingly to the fact that there simply is not
enough money in the system to meet children’s needs. It
is not just about how the Department for Education
divides up its money and the new funding formula; it is
also about the fact that the Treasury has not recognised
the required amount to make it fair.

This ultimately results in headteachers making difficult
decisions that can bring them into conflict with parents.
Some schools compromise on the kind of support they
provide while others have no choice but to encourage
parents to educate their children at home instead, and
none of this is what they want to be doing. Shockingly, I
now know that there are schools in my constituency
that have not taken children with education, health and
care plans into their schools because they do not have
the teaching capacity, the resources or the money to be
able to meet their needs. I also know that there are more
children being excluded or off-rolled than ever before.

How is it happening that children with needs are
starting to be cleansed from our mainstream schools? I
have spoken to countless parents who are unable to get
their child’s needs met in mainstream; they are also
unable to, or do not wish to, enrol their children in
special needs schools. This then can result in parents
withdrawing their child from school and trying to meet
their needs themselves in their own home. I do not have
time to go into detail about the problems that arise from
that, but this is simply not the path that parents should
be left with.

A report by the think-tank IPPR North revealed that
the north had been worst affected, with cuts of 22% per
pupil, and research has found that Government spending
on support for children and young people with the most
complex special educational needs and disabilities has
failed to keep pace with rising demand, resulting in a
reduction in funds available per pupil. The report also
found that the cuts to education and local government
budgets had led to a dramatic reduction in support for
children with less complex needs and had increased
demand for more intensive support.

Many I speak to in the profession have explained that
this affects not just those with, or in the process of
trying to get, an EHCP; they now have what would be
considered more children with moderate needs in their
classroom who are also not having their educational
needs met. The fact is that everyone seems to be being
let down by our education system: pupils, families and
the staff working in our schools. We know that cuts to
budgets have meant that support in schools and local
authorities has been drastically reduced, leaving the
most vulnerable students without the full support and
care that they need. Parents and carers will not forgive a
Government who do not believe that a fully funded and
resourced education system is a priority.

Heartbreakingly, the picture facing schools supporting
children with special educational needs is bleak. School
budgets are at breaking point, and there have been
severe cuts to health and social care provision. Schools
and local authorities are left struggling to meet the
needs of pupils. Without sufficient funding and a more
coherent approach, the SEN code of practice is nothing
more than an empty promise from Government to
parents and children. The fact is that most children with
SEN do not have any additional funding afforded to
them. That means that the financial burden of additional
support penalises those mainstream schools that are the
most inclusive. That is unsustainable. Schools are seriously
struggling to fund SEN support in the face of crippling budget pressures that force them to cut critical support staff. We urgently need the Government to recognise the scale of the problem and to secure an immediate increase in funding from the Treasury.

Quite simply, it is make or break time for our school funding. It is absolutely essential that schools have the support of specialist services to meet children’s needs, and the Government must provide more funding for health and social care services as well as for education. This is why the comment from my headteacher—that her children have known nothing but austerity—is so pertinent. The whole system is starved. I urge the Chancellor to meet the asks that the F40 group made to him recently and to provide the funds needed so that all children, wherever they live and whatever their needs, receive the education that they deserve. Do not tell me that there is not enough money in this country. Maybe those who have been gorging on the cake for so long should now consider sharing it as a matter of absolute urgency.

8.47 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I would like to take the Chamber on a tour around some of the schools in my constituency. It will be a very positive tour, as I have some great schools in my constituency with some great education being delivered in them. I apologise in advance to those schools that I do not mention tonight, but that does not mean to say that they are any different from the ones I am going to talk about.

I shall start in Long Eaton, at Wilsathorpe School, where last September the students were able to walk through the doors of a newly rebuilt school, which was absolutely fantastic. I was delighted to take the Secretary of State there to do the official opening. The students now seem to walk around the school with a spring in their step and really enjoy their new environment.

Still in Long Eaton, last week I was delighted to host eight students from Long Eaton School. They attend the enhanced resource centre there, which supports students with a diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder. All eight students were a true credit to the school and a delight to be with. They came to London because they are learning about transport, so they walked from their school to the train station in Long Eaton and got a train to London. They then got on the tube and had that experience. They came to Parliament and then did some walking and sightseeing, going to Buckingham Palace and Trafalgar Square before getting a bus back to the station to go back home. I know, just from the first part of their day, that the rest of the day will have been fantastic for them.

I was also delighted to host the Minister for School Standards at Cotmanhay Junior School in Ilkeston, in one of my most deprived wards. We went to the school on the same day as an unannounced Ofsted visit, which was probably not the best time, but I am delighted to report that the school has been rated as good, so the visit from the Minister and me did not affect that. The Minister described the school as a happy school, and I went back a few weeks later to the infant school at Cotmanhay to find that it is just as happy.

Not far from Cotmanhay Junior School is Chaucer Junior School, where the pupils share my passion for gardening. I pay credit to Kerry Wheatley, who has run the school’s gardening club for 17 years, and I am sure that the pupils will be busy harvesting their vegetables and fruits as we speak. The school has entered the Keep Britain Tidy competition and was a regional winner last year, and the pupils just love litter picking. They understand the importance of not dropping litter and the cost to the taxpayer of picking it up.

Going back to Long Eaton, Dovedale Primary School took part in Long Eaton’s carnival just a couple of Saturdays ago. The fancy dress was inspired by “101 Dalmatians”, but there were so many of them that it seemed more like 1,001 Dalmatians, with students, teachers and parents taking part. Everyone really enjoyed the day, and the school won the walking parade competition.

Moving on to Sandiacre, I had the pleasure of going along to the opening of an astroturf pitch a couple of weeks ago at Friesland School. The pitch is not just for the school but for the whole community, and it is now a community asset. A tremendous amount of fundraising was done by the school, by the Football Association and by the community as a whole, and I was pleased to learn that funding was also secured from the sugary drinks levy. While on the subject of school sports, I have a question for the Minister about the school sports premium. It has been a real positive for many primary schools across Erewash, but several schools have shared concerns about the provision of the funding and their fear that it may be cut. Will the Minister clarify the situation when he responds?

Schools do a lot to improve not just their facilities but also their teaching environment, and they often think outside the box. Historically, Derbyshire is recognised as an area of below average funding, but the situation is improving. I hope that the schools I have highlighted on my whistle-stop tour demonstrate that this is not just about the amount of funding that a school receives, but about how that money is spent. This is about the dedication of our teachers and teaching assistants and the involvement of parents and volunteers. This is about everyone working together to ensure that our children, who are the future of our country, get a great start in life and a great education.

8.52 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): When talking about education, it is important to recognise its position within the wider national context. Some of my colleagues have already talked about this, but I will focus my remarks on the most vulnerable children who go to our schools. I recently read a fascinating report written by LKMco and others for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is a couple of years old, but it talks about a few interesting things, including inter-generational disability and the likelihood of a child with SEND having parents who also have special needs and disabilities.

The report focused on the link between SEND and poverty, and some of its conclusions were quite stark. It said that “children with special educational needs and disability…are more likely to experience poverty than others.” It also stated that SEND “can be a result of poverty as well as a cause of poverty.” It highlighted that 28.7% of children with free school meals have SEND and that “more than half of children with behavioural difficulties or physical difficulties were living in poverty at the age of 9 months”. The study went through all the years of the children. The report also found that “the families of children with SEND are more likely to move into poverty.”
When I looked into all that, I thought, “Why would that happen? Why is it that a child with special needs is more likely to live in poverty?” The report said that there was an increased risk of family breakdown as a result of a stress on the family, and that the chances of both parents being able to work are less likely if they are caring for a child with special needs and disabilities; childcare is near impossible to find and can end up being more expensive, and time away from work to care for a child with SEND means that someone is less likely to advance or pursue their own career. All these things need to be taken into account when we talk about funding for children with special needs and disabilities. The report also says that it is not just that children with special needs and disabilities do not achieve as well. The report looked at the interconnecting factors—including the area where a family live, whether they live in poverty and whether they have special needs and disabilities—and how those factors combine to give these vulnerable children the worst possible chance and the least likelihood of progressing and achieving. When we talk about cuts and a lack of funding for SEND, we have to place it in the reality that these children are already at a significant disadvantage and are likely to come from poorer backgrounds.

Last year, Hull headteachers wrote to the Secretary of State asking for extra money to help these children, and they have failed to receive that money. The support, although targeted through the education, health and care plans, is still more readily available to parents on higher incomes. We saw that at the Education Committee, where parents described having to fight all the time to get a plan, having to go into battle and having to enter tribunals. I have absolute respect for each and every parent who has done that, but I am fully aware that so many parents out there do not understand how to fight the system or, for various reasons, are unable to do so. Even after getting an EHC plan, over 4,000 children are awaiting provision.

I was lobbied the other week by Sense, which talked about parents whose children have been awarded a placement only to find that they have not been awarded the transport to get there, so they are unable to take up that place. The charity told me this is happening throughout the country. I have tabled nearly 20 parliamentary questions on this issue, so we will see all the facts when we get the answers back from the Department.

I have had examples from Elizabeth, who spent over £5,000 on independent assessments, and from Sharon, who spent £7,500 on individual private assessments. I totally understand that. Would not any parent here do the same for their children? We have the financial advantage to do that, but not all parents of children with special needs do.

Children with special needs and disabilities are less likely to report themselves as happy, which I find really sad. They are more likely to report that they feel bullied, and they are more likely to report that they do not feel they have friends at school. I ask the Minister to look at redesigning the whole way in which special educational needs and disabilities are funded, because the high-needs block, based on historical data and information, does not work, and nor does the notional £6,000. A fundamental rethink is needed.

We also need a fundamental rethink of how we support these children in our schools, because it is not just about money—I agree with the point made by the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley). It is about support, it is about designing the curriculum, and it is about recognising that these children come to school from a different position and often face more disadvantages than many of the other pupils.

I finish by saying that it is far easier to build strong children than to repair broken adults.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and to have listened to her elegant speech.

Being a Member of Parliament is a great privilege, and one of the greatest privileges is going to schools in my constituency to speak to the young people. In the past month alone, I have had the pleasure of speaking to young people at Saint John’s Church of England Primary School, St James’ Church of England Primary School, St Mark’s Church of England Junior School and Lakeside Primary School.

The children from Lakeside Primary School came to the Parliamentary Education Centre. They might think they got the opportunity of asking me questions here, but it is actually me, as a Member of Parliament, who derives the greatest benefit. I find it hugely valuable and stimulating to hear from young people about their aspirations and what matters to them.

This debate has focused a great deal on funding, and I will come to that, but we ought to pause and take a moment to recognise so much of the good and positive work taking place in our schools, which is certainly the case in my Cheltenham constituency. One example, in particular, is critical to underscore: literacy improvements in our schools are astonishing. The phonics screening check has led to an enormous increase in the percentage of six-year-olds who are on track to become fluent readers, from a figure at or around 50% to well over 80%. That is a stunning increase. It is also the case that a full 85% of children are in good or outstanding schools, which compares with 66% in 2010. These are not just glib statistics; these are thousands of pupils getting a better education, setting themselves up for a better life. We should recognise that and celebrate it, and I wish to pay tribute to the teachers in my constituency, who are working phenomenally hard to deliver those excellent education outcomes.

Other exciting initiatives are taking place in the educational sector in Cheltenham, one of which is a formal partnership that has been set up between All Saints’ Academy and Cheltenham College. That is working to provide richer extra-curricular provision, shared knowledge and expertise in learning techniques, and improved career professional development opportunities. The partnership is working well and we should support it.

In addition, Bacarras is spearheading the GLOW maths hub, which provides additional teaching resources to schools, not just in Gloucestershire, but beyond. That is being headed up by Steve Lomax, who is doing a tremendous job, again raising standards and aspirations in mathematics across my constituency and beyond.
Some additional funding is also coming to Cheltenham, in the form of more than £20 million for a new school that Balcarras will be running in the south of Cheltenham. So this is additional funding going into my constituency. Although I am talking about funding, it is right to say that not every problem in our schools can be solved by finance but it does remain an issue, and I make no apology for referring to it. True it is that the Government have supported schools with additional funding—in particular, the planned increase in employer contribution rates is going to be met by the Government and the increase in pay grants—but schools have been shouldering additional pressures in national insurance and pension contributions.

The point I really want to focus on in the time left available to me is the issue of special needs funding. The budget for special needs is about £6.3 billion, which is a significant sum. To put it in context, the entire prisons budget is about £4 billion. Although the Government have continued to put money into this important sector, the need has grown, if not exponentially, certainly very dramatically. That was brought home to me when I went to a special school in Cheltenham, where I met a teacher who had been teaching for some 20 years or so. He said that when he began teaching in a special school in Cheltenham, the pupil to teacher ratio could be about 15:1; these were children who needed a bit of additional support, with which they would have been able to enter the workplace successfully and go on to lead a full and fulfilling life. The reality now, however, is that such is the level of complexity that 15:1 is manifestly inadequate. Schools that are nominally intended to be catering for children with moderate learning difficulties are increasingly dealing with children with severe learning difficulties, and schools that are supposed to be dealing with children with severe learning difficulties are addressing the needs of children far beyond what was ever anticipated, even as recently as 10 years ago.

In my constituency, we have the Battledown children’s centre, which is providing specialist assessment, as well as Belmont School, Bettridge School and The Ridge Academy. The common theme we see when we visit any of these schools is that the level of complexity has gone up. We have had teachers who had been teaching for some 20 years or so. Some people say to me that it is to do with social breakdown. Others say that there is the role of social media. Others say, in an observation that perhaps causes us some concern and is difficult to articulate but may be true none the less, that there are children surviving childhood who might very well not have done 20 years ago. That is a matter for great celebration but it potentially has a knock-on impact. I wish to make it clear that I do not know whether that is a cause, but it has been raised with me. The point is that these needs are there. With some modest additional support, the schools can keep functioning, but if they do not get that additional support soon, I fear that some of them will be placed under intolerable strain.

I wish also to reiterate a point that has been made by others, including the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), who is no longer in his place. He made the point that mainstream schools often absorb and address some of the need within mainstream provision, but increasingly they are dismancised from doing so because they are required to cover the first £6,000, which needs to be paid from within their existing budgets. As a matter of fact, that rule was set at a time when we could understand the logic for it—because otherwise there was a risk of creating a perverse incentive: schools would wish to mischaracterise and over-diagnose SEND to ensure that funding was provided—but that was in an era when the level of demand was nothing like what it is now.

We have to support responsible schools, including in my constituency Balcarras School, which does a fantastic job for pupils with SEND but needs to be encouraged to continue to do so, because if the school cannot provide that support, those children will go out into the schools that cater for children with moderate learning difficulties, and in turn that will shunt children with severe learning difficulties out of their schools and so on. Ultimately, if they cannot be educated in that system, they will move into alternative provision, which is fantastically more expensive and drains the high-needs budget fast.

I invite the Government, who are making really important strides to support the SEND budget—the high-needs block—to consider two things in particular. The first is the £6,000 issue to which I just referred. The second thing is that the common message coming out from special schools in my constituency is that, when they have to deal with episodes of mental health crisis, which they do increasingly regularly, they find it difficult to know what to do. Should they deal with it in-house with teachers who, truth be told, are not expert in this area, or should they take the children down for a long wait in A&E, which is unlikely to be the best place for them? If we could have specific support, no doubt commissioned by the clinical commissioning group, to provide on-tap mental health support for those schools, that would make an enormous difference and free up resources to allow teachers to do what they want to do on doing teaching some of the most vulnerable students in my constituency.

9.7 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who spoke so well and in such an informed manner, particularly about the demands and challenges of special educational needs. I thank all the great teachers and headteachers, the leadership teams, the teaching assistants, and all the governors who provide their time voluntarily to some great schools, of which I am proud to have so many throughout the constituency of Warwick and Leamington.

As far as I am concerned, education is probably the greatest gift from one generation to the next, and it always has been. But all that is changing, and it is changing incredibly quickly. From the wholesale closure of children’s centres to the pressures on higher education, every facet and every sector of education is in or potentially faces a funding crisis, but for the purposes of this debate, I wish to focus primarily on our schools and colleges.

In recent weeks I have had the privilege of visiting many primary schools, including Woodloes, Westgate, Telford, St Margaret’s, Bishop’s Tachbrook and Clapham Terrace. Just 37 days ago I visited a great little school—perhaps not so little—and met the children, who were all highly motivated. I took questions from years 5 and 6, and they asked about climate change and plastics in our environment, and there were even questions on Brexit and its impact on exchange rates. I thought it was pretty tough. I got talking to the headteacher, who
confided that sometime that day he was going to have to find £50,000 to meet a budget cut. He introduced me to a pupil with special needs. The child needs one-to-one support, but the school cannot afford it, so the headteacher is left trying to square a difficult circle. Since 2015, the school has lost more than £340 per pupil. Of course, the school is not alone in that. In fact, that sum of money is pretty typical across our primary schools.

Thirty-two days ago, I went to a special educational needs picnic in the constituency. It was brilliantly organised by some wonderful parents—Cassie, Ellie, Froo, Helen and Emma. The event brought together parents from across Warwickshire and gave them a voice, enabling them to speak about the crisis that we are facing in special educational needs and disability funding. The parents are desperate. As we have heard from Members across the House, their children are being squeezed out of mainstream education by schools that cannot afford to teach them. Some schools can provide only a limited number of hours a day or week, so the children spend much of their time at home. Some of the most vulnerable children in our society are being denied a full education. It all sounds faintly Victorian, but I do not blame schools and nor do the parents—but they do blame the Government.

Eleven days ago, I hosted a meeting for parents at a local secondary school. Some 60 people attended. They feel anger and frustration. Just nine months ago, only days before the start of the academic year, the headteacher was suspended, the board of governors dissolved, and an interim executive board introduced. Months later, the sixth form faces closure and the school faces significant cuts. The pupils and parents are being left in limbo; their choice is limited. They are having to look around for alternative sixth-form provision—as if that is going to be easy.

Earlier in the week, I was talking, by chance, to a sixth-form student at another secondary school who had just finished her A-levels. Her story well illustrates the destruction of the provision and choice available to this next generation. Like several of her friends, she wanted to study poetry, but there were too few of them—just six—so the choice was withdrawn. She took German instead, but the teaching staff had to be cut, so she ended up teaching herself for her final year. What chance is there for her?

Ten days ago, I visited another primary school—again in Warwick. I met the school council. The headteacher talked me through the financial crash that the school has faced. It has lost £97,000 since 2015-16—that is £511 per pupil. It has lost two teaching assistants, and the school has just 200 pupils. The headteacher has to cover special educational needs and disabilities in the absence of sufficient special educational needs co-ordinators. As a result, it is typical for the school to have up to 3% of pupils excluded at any one time. As if that were not enough, the future appears even bleaker: there will be an average of £35,000 deficit next year followed by a £140,000 deficit the year after. This school is, of course, not alone. It is not just primary schools facing massive financial pressures, but our superb nursery schools, such as Warwick and Whitnash. Since 2013, we have seen the dismantling of our precious children’s centres. In Warwickshire, the Government’s funding cuts, together with the failure to raise sufficient money by claiming zero council tax increases, have seen the wholesale closure of the children’s centres, with 26 of 39 being closed.

As the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) rightly observed, the first 1,000 days are critical for both child and parent, yet we are seeing the withdrawal of these services for many in our community. Across Warwickshire, the bigger picture is pretty bleak. Schools have lost £50 million in total since 2015—that is an average of £244 per child. It is not as if Warwickshire already had very high per-pupil funding; it comes 120th out of 140.

It is easy to talk about these cuts in the abstract. They are extremely damaging to our children, their parents and the teaching staff, but they are also damaging, as we have heard elsewhere, to our society and to our communities, as schools are so often at the very centre of them—they are the very heartbeat of them. The cuts are also damaging to our cultural wealth and our economy, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) illustrated so well earlier on.

How can it be that we have cut music, arts and design and languages from so many schools’ provision and choices? Those sorts of subjects are increasingly the preserve of private schools. It has to be a concern that so many in our society are being denied that choice.

I am afraid to say it, but I think that what the parents of Warwick and Leamington appreciate so well is that the Government are failing the next generation. It cannot be right that so many young people are being denied the education that they deserve and that would ultimately serve this country well. But they are also being failed in the protections they need, whether safeguarding or mental health provision in our schools.

In conclusion, I agree with the notion of a 10-year education plan, as mentioned by the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). He is right that we need long-term planning—schools are crying out for it—but that means nothing without the massive increase in investment that we need in our education system. I urge the Minister to fight hard for that in the spending review. However, that would benefit only those born today. As it stands, this Government have failed the next generation, and the young people let down by an ideology born of austerity will never forget it.

9.15 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for adding me to your list of speakers. I begin by declaring my interests, as the husband of a higher-level teaching assistant currently working in a west midlands primary school, as the father of two young children who attend primary school in Dudley, and as somebody who, like many Members across the House, simply would not be here without the benefit of excellent state schools and the support of parents who placed a huge value on good education, despite—or perhaps because of—not having any formal qualifications themselves. It is hard to imagine any area of policy that is more vital to our society, our economy and
our communities than education. Education lies at the heart of opportunity; it drives social mobility, it reinforces inclusion and it strengthens community cohesion.

Schools in Dudley face many challenges. The debate around school funding is often framed in terms of inner-city schools or remote, rural village schools, but schools in industrial towns face their own challenges: in educating many children, often with multiple indices of deprivation; in bringing together and educating children from many diverse backgrounds and cultures, often with first languages other than English; and in educating in a post-industrial age, with changing work patterns and a move away from children following their parents into traditional industries, with the impact that has on aspirations and educational expectations.

However, Dudley also has many excellent schools, and many outstanding teachers and other staff who are doing amazing work to give our children the best possible start in life, regardless of their background. Like other Members, I regularly visit schools in my constituency—I have now visited almost all of them three times in the four years since being elected. In the past two weeks I have seen the outstanding work being done on sports and physical education at Glynne Primary School, which I visited ahead of sports week to see how it is using the school sports premium to support greater participation and love for sports among children at all levels of physical activity. I have visited Dingle Community Primary School and St Mark’s Church of England Primary School in Pensnett—two schools that arguably had not been meeting their full potential or delivering what they perhaps should have been for local children—where new headteachers who have started in the past few months are already making a real and visible difference.

I have revisited Pens Meadow School, a special school where I formally opened a post-16 unit three years ago, to see the incredible work it is doing with children across the age range, many of whom have very complex special needs—the headteacher told me that, although it is a small school, typically it loses at least one pupil each year because of serious health conditions. Each of these schools and many others are delivering exceptional results against very tight budgetary constraints. The additional £1.3 billion being invested last year and this year, over and above what was set out in the 2015 public spending review, is important, as is the Government’s decision to meet the costs of schools’ increased employer contributions. That issue was raised by many school headteachers who were concerned that their existing budgets simply could not cope with this additional cost.

This debate is about the estimates, but it would clearly be impossible to separate that from the forthcoming spending review, which is the context in which they must be considered. Reassuringly, at all the meetings with Treasury Ministers that I have been to with Conservative colleagues, it has become clear that while we are very pleased to see the large increases in funding for the NHS announced last year as more money becomes available for this spending review, our schools, colleges and maintained nurseries must, alongside policing, be the priority for additional investment.

Nowhere is that money more desperately needed than in special schools. We see in these estimates increased funding for high needs, but going forward we need more. We need significantly more capacity for special educational needs, particularly in special schools. In Dudley, all our special schools are assessed as either good or outstanding. Unusually, parents, when given the choice, would rather their child went to a special school than be educated at one of the mainstream schools. However, too many pupils who need a place at a special school this autumn are being told that no places are available. Incredibly, 40 children who have been assessed as band E or higher—so with very, very severe learning disabilities or complex special needs—are without a place at a special school this September. This needs to be addressed, and that can only be done with significant capital funding to increase capacity.

Of course, education is not only about our schools. At either end of the state education spectrum, our colleges and state nurseries are disproportionately underfunded. I welcome the £24 million of additional supplementary funding that has been provided for state nurseries, which will make a big difference, but there is clearly a need to provide greater certainty further into the future. As the headteacher of Netherton Park Nursery School, the only maintained nursery school in Dudley, has written to me to say, unless this funding can be put on a sustainable footing going into the future, it will probably mean cuts to staffing and services or even the closure of her school. She writes:

“We do not know what places we can provide after Summer 2020. We are making decisions that could be detrimental to the future of our schools because we have no clear direction from the government about our funding.”

We need to provide that clear direction. It is essential that that is done in the weeks—at most, in the couple of months—that lie ahead, so that schools can plan for 2020-21, nurseries can provide people with the best start in life, and we can deliver the state educational system that all our communities deserve.

9.24 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for letting me speak in the debate, which it has been a great pleasure to listen to. I concur with almost everything that has been said by Members on both sides of the House.

Education is in a state of crisis. In Derbyshire, I live in one of the f40 areas. Our schools have some of the lowest funding, and they are struggling. House of Commons Library research shows that the 50 schools in my constituency have lost more than £2 million over the last five years. They are having to lose teachers—in particular, teaching assistants—which is having an impact on pupils. It is also having an impact on the governors, who have to make some incredibly tough decisions, and on the school leadership, the support staff; the tutors, the parents and the children themselves.

I pay tribute to the incredible dedication and support that is given across the education sector, particularly by those who work in it and do hours over and above the call of duty, but also by the parents, who contribute; by governors, who give up their time; and often by the children themselves, who bake cakes for fundraising days, have school councils and contribute where they can.

The impact of our crisis in education is felt most sharply by our children. My hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) spoke
movingly about the impact of austerity on children in their constituencies, which I concur with. Our schools are having to deal with children who turn up hungry, who do not have school uniform, who are struggling for housing and who simply cannot do homework because they do not have the resources—for example, access to the internet—or support, or even somewhere quiet at home to do their homework. Schools are also suffering from the mental health crisis, as we have heard, and from county lines, drug pushers and knives. Increasingly, our schools are having to deal with problems that we would usually ask youth services or the police to deal with. So much more is being placed upon their shoulders, with fewer resources to do it.

I would like to concentrate my speech on the early years, which we have heard little about today but which is facing at least as much of a crisis as any other part of the education system. The hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) spoke about maintained nurseries, but there is only one of those in his constituency, and there are only three in mine. Around 3% of children are educated in maintained nurseries. Everywhere is struggling. We have seen over 10% of nursery provision close in the last two years alone. This is a crisis.

I regularly meet people who work in nurseries across my constituency, and they tell me the struggle involved in making the 30 hours’ funding stretch. It is based on costings from six years ago. Since then, they have seen rises in the minimum wage, pension provision, rent, rates and all the other costs they face, and it simply does not cover them. We had a meeting this afternoon with the Minister and nurseries from across the country, to launch a report by the all-party parliamentary group on Ofsted results for early years education, which it has been my pleasure to temporarily chair. There is incredible anger across the nursery sector that they are essentially working for nothing. They are having to employ people with the great skills, dedication and qualifications to deliver the best for children but they cannot pay more than the minimum wage on the amount they get from the 30 hours’ funding. It is an absolute scandal. They are having to work longer hours, with more bureaucracy—monthly payments mean monthly assessments for children—and it is difficult to offer contracts.

That has an impact on the best providers. Nurseries that seek to employ qualified staff and support them, to do more for their children and to have low ratios are the ones that suffer most from a lack of funding, as well as nurseries that take children with special educational needs—many nurseries do not because they simply cannot afford to; they do not get the support they need to do that. So many of the special needs problems we are seeing in our schools, which have been very passionately spoken about by Members from across this House, could be addressed by investment in the early years—in speech and language development for children, or in support with their social issues at a very early age—before they get to school, where they have to be assessed all over again and where those special needs become even more of a problem. On behalf of the whole nursery sector, may I make a plea to the Minister to look at this across the country? The f40 group, which has been fighting just for schools, has realised that we are on the brink of a crisis in nursery education. We have seen 10% of nursery provision close. We will end up at a stage where we do not have enough nursery places for our children, and the best providers will suffer most.

The other issue that is raised so often in my constituency is further education and sixth-form provision. We have seen New Mills sixth form have to close after 21% cuts to the funding for school sixth forms. That means we have provision of just two sixth forms left in my entire constituency, out of 50 schools. Buxton Community School is left offering just 10 A-levels. Hundreds of young people simply do not have the choice to be able to do the courses they want to do or aspire to doing. They often have to travel an hour each way to access the colleges that do offer A-levels in particular, but also the vocational courses they want to do. And it costs: they get no support from 16 with the funding for that, not even a youth rate of bus travel. That means young people from deprived backgrounds, whose parents do not have the income to pay the often £1,000 a year in bus fares, cannot afford to go on to that provision. They cannot afford to have the aspirations we would want any of our children to be able to achieve. That is absolutely devastating for those young people, for their life chances and for our communities, where young people cannot achieve all that they want.

I spoke to year 9s in one of our local secondary schools last week. I spent the whole day there, and the headteacher joked that an innovative way to cover the cuts was to get the MP in to teach some of his pupils. I asked those 13 and 14-year-olds what they wanted from me and what they wanted from the Government to see what they could aspire to. Do you know what they asked for? They wanted a covered bench in the park because they get wet when it rains. That I am afraid, after a decade of austerity, is what our young people are aspiring to: they just want to stay dry. I think that is an absolute indictment of our society and of our system. Young people have had their aspirations limited by what opportunities there are for them in youth provision out of school, but also within school, in spite of the very best efforts of the fantastic teaching staff and support staff in all our schools. It is here in this House that we are failing our schools, our children, the parents who are fighting day and night for special educational needs provision for their children, and the staff that go over and above to provide it. We need to do our part and support those schools, nurseries and colleges so that our young people have the aspirations and the achievement they deserve.

9.33 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George). Far from being wet, I noticed it was 30° heat at the carnival in Tideswell on Saturday, as I paraded around with my pipe band. Far from needing shelter, I have to say it was more like a Tuscany hill town.

Ruth George: It does rain occasionally.

Mike Kane: It is true that it does rain occasionally in the Peak district.

We have had a good debate. May I congratulate right hon. and hon. Members from across the House on their contributions, and obviously the Chair of the Education Department for Education 1 JULY 2019 Department for Education 1022
Committee, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), on his articulate opening? I also congratulate him on how well he chairs that Select Committee.

When I last spoke in this Chamber about education cuts, I was positively surprised about how many Members from the Conservative party were in open dissent, and it has been no different really tonight.

I will pick out a few contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) said that education was the greatest gift that we could pass on from one generation to the next. That is true, but we have heard the bleak reality today. The Chair of the Education Committee said that funding was “bleak”—several Members used that adjective—and that there is little long-term thinking about education and its budgets compared with the Department of Health and Social Care.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) talked about the double whammy that some coastal towns suffer in terms of education standards and attracting the calibre of people needed to our education establishments. He said that the tank was now empty. That was the best metaphor of the evening. He went on to say that there was a crisis in children’s social care on this Government’s watch.

The debate reinforces the unity in this legislature that things must change. Members who criticised the Government on education funding did so bravely and well. As they vie for the leadership of their party and the country, the right hon. Members for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) and for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt) have pledged new funding for education. Whether they fulfil their promise—I suspect that they will not—the pledge is an implicit criticism of their Government’s neglect of education.

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The hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) spoke well. He spoke for many of us when he said that his constituency surgeries were often rammed with parents who are desperate to get SEND provision for their children. Many Members will recognise that situation.

The hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) spoke passionately about the schools in her constituency. She mentioned the good work that the Long Eaton School is doing, despite suffering a £385,000 cut since 2015.

The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) spoke well and passionately about the schools on his patch, but Gloucestershire has suffered a £41.7 million cut to its funding since 2015.

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman will know that one of the issues that Gloucestershire has had to face is inheriting an unfair funding formula. Will he take his share of the responsibility for bequeathing to the Government a funding formula that disadvantaged rural authorities in favour of urban authorities?

Mike Kane: I remind the hon. Gentleman that, as a representative of the Trafford authority, I, too, am from one of the F40 authorities, so I know what underfunding looks like. We know that the fair funding formula is making no difference because it does not level up all schools as required.

We also know about the frustration in the Department. After all, the Secretary of State said that he had heard the concerns about education funding “loud and clear”.

Last year, it was reported that he was trying to squeeze more money out of the Treasury. He also told us that every school would see “at least a small cash increase”—[Official Report, 29 January 2018, Vol. 635, c. 536.]

However, we have seen nothing substantial—nothing that will wind back the years of austerity that No. 11 has waged against Sure Start centres, schools, colleges and universities and all those who work in them.

Instead, all the Chancellor offered in the last Budget was “a few little extras”. It is worth unpacking what he meant by that. When he was pressed, he said it could be for “a couple of whiteboards, or some laptop computers, or something”. It is no wonder that the Secretary of State was said to have cringed. That is another example of how isolated the Chancellor is from everyday reality. That “little extra” does not match the £3.5 billion that the Government took out of capital expenditure in the last Budget. It will not address the link between poverty and special needs, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) articulated brilliantly.

The Opposition know that the massive cut, along with the impact of the public sector pay freeze, has engendered an unprecedented crisis in teacher recruitment and retention. New teachers are less likely to stay in our schools now than at any time in the past 20 years. This week alone, the statistics are getting worse. That is happening at a time when there are some 45,000 more pupils in supersized classrooms, according to the Department’s figures, which were released last week. Schools have more pupils, but fewer teachers, fewer teaching assistants and fewer support and auxiliary staff.

The latest OECD international survey ratings confirmed that England has the eighth biggest problem in the world for secondary school teacher shortages and the third highest level shortages in Europe.

At the advent of a new Tory Prime Minister, it is perhaps of little worth inquiring whether we will see the money the Secretary of State said he was trying to squeeze out of the Treasury. I wonder if the Secretary of State has made representations to the leadership candidates. The right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) said that there would be a pay rise for public sector staff, but that seemed to be rolled back almost immediately the other day. Again, I suspect that that promise will not be fulfilled, but I hope the Secretary of State has informed both candidates of what teachers and pupils are going through. In fact, can the Minister even tell us if the School Teachers’ Review Body will publish its annual report before the summer recess, or will a new Prime Minister just kick that down the road?

The recent report by the UN special rapporteur found that children are showing up at school with empty stomachs, and that schools are collecting food and sending it home because teachers know that students will otherwise go hungry. The rapporteur also found that teachers are not equipped to ensure that students have clean clothes and food to eat, especially as teachers may be relying on food banks themselves. It is worth noting that the Chancellor rejected the report, dismissing it as nonsense. It is no wonder that the Secretary of State has not been able to get anything out of him.

The early years are the most important in anyone’s life. We have had some excellent contributions. My colleague in Trafford, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), said that schools
are picking up the pieces of the wider austerity agenda, particularly when it comes to mental health. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) in a passionate speech said that this generation of children are the austerity generation—a shameful reality, she said. The hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) spoke with passion about campaigning for the maintained nursery in his school, but his authority, Dudley, has suffered £27 million cuts since 2015. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak said that 10% of nursery provision has been closed in the past two years.

My hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State has spoken about her local Sure Start and how it changed her life. She speaks for many. The policy area is equally important, and yet since 2010 over 1,000 Sure Start centres have closed. We cannot quantify how many people will have missed out because of that and it is a false economy. The latest Institute for Fiscal Studies report showed that Sure Start saved the NHS millions by reducing the hospitalisation of children, a point made by a number of hon. Members across the House. Is the Minister aware that right now there are 1,500 children with special educational needs and disabilities without a school place? What is his Department doing to help them?

There is one area that has suffered the deepest cuts and there is no reason to believe that a new Prime Minister will reverse the damage. Further and adult education has suffered funding cuts every year since the Conservative party came into office. The cuts stand at £3 billion. The Chair of the Education Committee said that FE has suffered twice the amount of cuts of other sectors. If the candidates to be Prime Minister want to make a real difference, they should look at ending the double whammy of having the Schools Minister and an Ofsted inspector there on the same day. My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) was equally passionate about the schools in his constituency, not just because his wife is a high-level teaching assistant.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) raised the important issue of mental health, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham. Mental health is a priority for this Government, who are working closely with Universities UK on embedding the #stepchange programme, which calls on higher education to adopt mental health as a strategic priority. The university mental health charter, announced in June last year, is backed by the Government and led by the sector, and it will drive up standards in promoting student and staff mental health and wellbeing. The charter will reward institutions that deliver improved student mental health outcomes.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston also raised the tragic issue of young suicide. Following a conference in spring last year on understanding suicide in the student population, Universities UK worked with a range of experts to develop guidance on measures to help to prevent suicide. The Government have also published the first cross-Government suicide prevention plan for wider society. The plan, led by the Department of Health and Social Care, sets out actions for local government, the NHS, the criminal justice system and the universities sector.

The Government are determined to create a world-class education system that offers opportunity to everyone, no matter what their circumstances or where they live. That is why we are investing in our education system to make sure that schools, colleges and universities have the resources that they need to make this happen. In 2019, the Department for Education resource budget is around £68.5 billion, which we are debating today. Of that, £54 billion is for estimate lines relating to early years and schools, £14 billion is for estimate lines relating primarily to post-16 and skills, and £0.4 billion is for social care, mobility and disadvantage.
My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow also raised the issue of the long-term plan for funding education. I share that view. At the spending review, we will be considering our funding of education in the round and looking to set out a multi-year plan. This will look at the right level of funding as well as how we can use that funding.

Since 2010, we have been reforming our education system to ensure that every child, regardless of background, is able to achieve their full potential, and to close the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged, which is also a priority for my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham. Thanks in part to those reforms, the proportion of pupils in good and outstanding schools has increased from 66% in 2010 to 85% in 2018. In primary schools, our more rigorous curriculum, on a par with the highest performing in the world, has been taught since September 2014, and the proportion of primary school pupils reaching the expected standard in the maths test rose from 70% in 2016, when the new curriculum was first tested, to 76% in 2018, and in reading it rose from 60% to 75%. Moreover, this country has seen a 6% joint 10th to joint 8th in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study—PIRLS—survey of the reading ability of nine and 10-year-olds.

In secondary schools, our more rigorous academic curriculum and qualifications support social mobility by ensuring disadvantaged children have the same opportunities for a knowledge-rich curriculum and the same career and life opportunities as their peers. The attainment gap in primary schools between the most disadvantaged pupils and their peers, measured by the disadvantage gap index, has narrowed by 13.2% since 2011. Our vision is for a school-led system that recognises headteachers as being best placed to run their schools and to drive improvement based on what they know works best. The reforms of the last nine years show that autonomy and freedom allow the best heads and teachers to make the right decisions for their pupils to enable them to reach their full potential. Over half a million pupils now study in good or outstanding academies, which typically replaced underperforming local authority maintained schools. There are more than 2,000 sponsored academies—schools taken out of local authority control because of performance concerns—and seven out of 10 are good or outstanding, despite their having replaced the most underperforming schools. Some 50% of pupils are now taught in academies.

To support these improvements, we have prioritised and protected education spending while having to take difficult public spending decisions in other areas. We have been able to do that because of our balanced approach to the public finances and our stewardship of the economy, which has reduced the annual deficit from an unsustainable 10% of GDP in 2010—some £150 billion a year—to 2% in 2018. The economic stability that has provided has resulted in employment rising to record levels and unemployment being at its lowest level since the 1970s. This has given young people leaving school more opportunities to have jobs and start their careers.

This balanced approach allows us to invest in public services and education. Core funding for schools and high needs has risen from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion this year. That includes the extra £1.3 billion for schools and high needs that we announced in 2017 and invested across 2018-19 and 2019-20 over and above plans set out in 2015.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am not sure what colour the sky is in the Minister’s world, but it is certainly not the same colour as it is for many teachers I speak to in my constituency. He has obviously visited many Conservative constituencies at the behest of his colleagues. Can I challenge him to come to Durham to speak to the local authority and SEN teachers, who are under huge pressure because of the policies he is pursuing?

Nick Gibb: I am aware of the pressures that schools are under, and I am very happy to come to Durham. I went to university there and would be happy to make a nostalgic trip back. I meet two or three times a week with groups of headteachers brought here by Government Members as well as Opposition Members to discuss these issues. I am fully aware of the pressures that schools are under as a result of the increased costs they face from national insurance and other issues. We take these issues seriously and will take forward a well-configured spending review as we enter the next spending review period.

We are committed to directing this school funding where it is needed most. This is why, since April last year, we have started to distribute funding to schools through the new national funding formula. The formula is a fairer way to distribute school funding because each area’s allocation takes into account the individual needs and characteristics of its schools and pupils, not accidents of geography or history—not, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow put it, on the basis of a postcode lottery.

Schools are already benefiting from the gains delivered by the national funding formula, which provides every local authority with more money for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the schools that have been most underfunded. This year, the most historically underfunded schools will attract increases of up to 6% compared with 2017-18. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) raised concerns about the historical unfairness of funding in West Sussex, of which, of course, I am well aware. As he will know, the new national funding formula has sought to address that unfairness. That is why it was introduced, why schools in his constituency are attracting 5.5% more per-pupil funding in 2019 than they did in 2017-18, and why West Sussex as a whole has received a £33.5 million increase since that period.

Tim Loughton: As I said earlier, the extra funding is welcome, but it takes us from the bottom of the last decile to the top. A moment ago, my right hon. Friend mentioned a balanced approach. Will he at least make some mention of children’s social care? So far he has not mentioned it once, although it is the issue on which I focused most of my speech.

Nick Gibb: I hope to deal with that issue in due course. However, when we are putting together a league table of local authorities, if we ensure that the funding system is fair, the funding will reflect the level of prosperity

Nick Gibb:
of a particular local authority area. Someone has to be at the top and someone has to be at the bottom of a league table showing funding per authority. However, our national funding formula system is fair, because it allocates three quarters of the funds on the basis of the same figure for every pupil and the rest on the basis of the needs of those pupils, which I think is absolutely right. The principles of the formula attracted widespread support when we consulted on it.

Our commitment to helping all children to reach their full potential applies just as strongly to children with special educational needs and disabilities, and we know that schools share that commitment. We have therefore reformed the funding system to take particular account of children and young people with additional needs. We recognise the concerns that have been expressed about the costs of high-needs provision, an issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham. We have increased overall funding allocations to local authorities year on year, and high-needs funding will be £6.3 billion this year, up from £5 billion in 2013. That includes the £250 million that we announced in December 2018 for high-needs funding. However, we understand the real, systemic increase in pressure, and it will be a priority for us in the forthcoming spending review.

We also want to ensure that the funding system for those children and young people works effectively, so that money reaches the right places at the right time. That was raised by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle. In May we launched a call for evidence to gather the information necessary to make improvements where they are needed, so that the financial arrangements help headteachers to provide for pupils with special educational needs. We have paid particular attention to the operation and use of mainstream schools’ notional special educational needs budget of up to £6,000, which was an issue of concern to my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, a former children’s Minister, raised the issue of children’s social care. I said that I would come to it, and this is the point at which I have done so. All children, no matter where they live, should have access to the support that they need to keep them safe, provide them with a stable and nurturing home, and enable them to overcome challenges to achieve their potential. The Government are committed to improving outcomes for children who need help and protection. Our children’s social care reform programme is working to deliver a highly capable, highly skilled social workforce, high-performing services everywhere, and a national system of excellent and innovative practice. We recognise that local authorities are delivering children’s services in a challenging environment, and are having to take on those challenges.

We are making big steps in relation to our schoolteacher workforce. We have provided more than half a billion pounds through a new teachers’ pay grant of £187 million last year and £321 million this year, and we remain committed to attracting even more world-class teachers. We also continue to focus rigorously on the curriculum to ensure that children are prepared for adult life. We have reformed GCSEs and have introduced the EBacc, which encourages the uptake of subjects that provide a sound basis for a variety of careers for those over 16. Since our reforms began in 2010, entry levels for EBacc science have increased dramatically, from 63% in 2010 to 95% in 2018.

The Government have achieved a huge amount since 2010. There are 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools, the attainment gap between rich and poor pupils has shrunk by 10%, a record proportion of disadvantaged students are going to university, and we are developing a truly world-class technical education system through T-levels and high-quality apprenticeships. However, there is still much work to be done, and as we look to future funding settlements beyond 2020, we must ensure that the momentum does not slip.
Children’s Palliative Care

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

10 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The subject of tonight’s debate is not an easy one to talk about, but it is very important. This evening, I am going to talk about the 49,000 children throughout the UK who have life-limiting conditions.

As a consultant paediatrician, I have looked after quite a number of these children over the years. I have been the person who has made that diagnosis, who has given that devastating news to families, who has looked after these families during various different points of the journey and, indeed, who has been there in those final minutes and hours. Through that time, I have watched as some of these families have just about managed, but others have really struggled to cope at all and have gone from crisis to crisis. For me as a paediatrician, the opportunity to be a politician gives me the chance to stand here and advocate for those families and for those children and to use this platform—this House—as a vehicle for change, and to make these treatments and the care that these children receive much better.

Children’s palliative care is not, as it is often misrepresented to be, only about the care that someone receives at the very end of their life: it is about improving the quality of their life while they are living with that life-limiting condition from the point of diagnosis. I shall take as an example a child with Batten disease. A child with Batten disease may present as apparently healthy, but they have a gene that will ultimately cause neuro-degeneration. So they will lose the skills that they had—the walking, the talking. Their skills will go backwards, until they become increasingly dependent on their families. Often, they die of chest infection.

The care for those families involves helping the child, the family and the siblings to understand the diagnosis and prognosis, providing support such as physiotherapy to keep the child mobile for as long as possible, providing home adaptations to train their parents in how to use things such as Mic-Key buttons, to provide tube-feeds and to use wheelchairs and hoists in the care of their children, and helping them with medical things such as seizure management, giving medication and speech therapy, as well as with how to navigate the benefits system, applications for a blue badge, education and when to move from mainstream into more specialist provision.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this matter to the House. There will not be a single elected representative who is not aware of someone who has been through this. Is she aware that the money that each children’s hospice has to spend each year to meet the needs of seriously ill children and their families has grown to an average of £3,681, which is a 4.5% increase between 2016-17 and 2018-19, faster than the rate of inflation, yet the funding has been cut or frozen for each of the last three years, leaving children’s hospices struggling to make ends meet? Does she share that concern, which we all have?

Dr Johnson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I do indeed share his concern and will come to some of those figures in a moment.

To return to the care that is provided during the palliative care process, finally, the care will indeed be about end of life care and bereavement counselling. Children’s hospices throughout the United Kingdom provide some of this fantastic care. They have specialist medical, nursing and other professional staff and volunteers, and I pay tribute to them, as I know other Members do, for their dedication and the fantastic work they do.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): My hon. Friend is a great ambassador on this very important subject. I pay tribute to the Chestnut Tree House hospice, which does such a fantastic job in West Sussex. Does she acknowledge that, because of medical technological advances, many of these children will live for much longer than was anticipated many years ago, and for many of them this is about not care in a hospice but outreach care outside the hospice? It is therefore important that we have good support packages for the parents, including respite and care over a longer term, and that we are more imaginative in the way we build houses, so that children with life-limiting conditions can live in houses—perhaps new social house build—that reflect the increasing physical demands that they will have, so they can stay in their homes to be cared for appropriately?

Dr Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is indeed right. The demand for children’s hospice care is rising because there has been an increase in the number of children with life-limiting conditions and because those children are living longer and therefore require care for a longer period. The cost of providing that care is also increasing at a rate faster than inflation and faster than the money that the sector receives, which means that in some areas the money received has fallen in real terms.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The hon. Lady and I work together closely on this issue as co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group for children who need palliative care, and we hosted an incredibly moving discussion during Children’s Hospice Week at which we heard really powerful stories from parents who had recently lost children. I am sure she appreciates my concern that the hospice care that children receive is often needed not just at the end of their lives but throughout their lives in order to give them the best life possible in the time that they have, and that it is not funded on a sustainable footing. Children’s hospices must not be left to rely on the ability of local areas to fundraise for them. They must be put on a sustainable financial footing to give the children and their families the support that they need.

Dr Johnson: The hon. Lady is right. In fact, NHS and local authority funding represents just 21% nationally of the money that children’s hospices need. The rest is raised by charities, but for some hospices in less affluent areas, raising the additional money that is required can be very challenging.

I welcome the fact that the Government have made the end of life care choice commitment, which is really clear about the care support choices that children should have. In our roles as co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group for children who need palliative care, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine...
McKinnell) and I carried out an inquiry last year to find out the extent to which this commitment was being met. We found that Ministers were at risk of failing to meet that commitment because of funding, as described, and because the quality of palliative care that children and families can receive is variable, depending on the area in which the child lives.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way, and I pay tribute to her expertise on this issue. Does she recognise that north of the border, in Scotland, the Scottish Government have recognised the need for parity of funding between adult care and children’s care, and that that is not the case in England? Will she join me in calling on the UK Government to look at the model in Scotland to see what a difference we have made and what has been delivered by, for example, CHAS—Children’s Hospices Across Scotland?

Dr Johnson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I am not familiar with the details of how hospices are funded in Scotland, but one of our report’s recommendations was that the grant for children’s hospices should be increased to £25 million. That is something that I repeat this evening.

On 27 December last year, we received a late Christmas present when Simon Stevens, the chief executive of NHS England, announced that £7 million of funding over the next five years would be available to children’s hospices each year in addition to the £11 million children’s hospice grant, if the clinical commissioning groups could provide match funding. I understand the benefits of match funding because it increases the engagement of the CCGs locally, but where CCGs are not providing the funding, it can lead to services not being provided properly in that area. Also, later, when the long-term plan was produced, the detail showed that this funding was not only for children’s hospices but for other palliative care services. This was recognised as useful for providing services for children in areas currently not covered by a hospice, but it could equally mean that the money might be diluted into other causes and not reach the children who need it.

Two weeks ago, as the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North said, we joined our secretariat, the excellent charity Together for Short Lives, which does much work in advocating for these children and their families, and we met parents and representatives from several hospice charities to discuss these issues further. One real concern to us at that time was that one of the charities, Acorns, which receives the most Government funding, was struggling to raise charitable donations in its area to cover costs and was consulting on closing one of its children’s hospices, in Walsall, meaning that families would have to travel much further for the care and support they needed. I know that that is something that no one in this House would want to see happen. Indeed, I have raised the issue with my hon. Friend the Minister for Care and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, both privately and in the House. I ask the Minister to fund and make such services available?

Dr Johnson: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention.

Turning to those who do not receive valuable hospice care, as a doctor I have seen too many families in crisis, struggling to cope with patchy provision or the lack of hospice or home care or respite. As children’s hospices are frequently set up by charities, their locations across the country have not been planned, so some families find themselves too far away from services to be able to use them. I want NHS England to review the provision of services to ensure that care is no longer patchy and no longer dependent on where a child lives. The hospices that I have spoken to have asked me to make the Minister and NHS England aware of how the funding cake is split. Hospices—both the well funded and the less well funded—feel that funding should be disbursed more fairly based on clinical need, so an examination of that situation would be helpful.

Another area on which I would be grateful for the Minister’s response is respite care or short breaks. For most people, an evening out requires a quick call to a friend or relative. If Mr Johnson and I want to go out for dinner, I just need to ask someone to come to our house for a few hours. I do not need to spend weeks planning to take the children away for several nights or a week at a time. I can pop out for a curry for two hours. For families whose children have many complex medical and physical needs, things are much more difficult. Short break provision is often patchy and inflexible. I might want a babysitter so that I can attend my brother’s wedding, but for someone whose child has complex needs, if the weekend on which respite care is available is not the same weekend, that may not be much help. Sadly, having got all the plans in place, respite care is all too often cancelled at short notice. In my time as a doctor, I have seen families pitch up at the hospital with their child, who has remained in an acute hospital bed for the weekend simply because, where else can they go?

I would like an army of help for families, not a patchwork system. I want each family to have the guarantee of short breaks and the opportunity to access trained care assistants who can be booked to come to the family home, like any other family can have if they want to go out for a meal or attend a sibling’s school play—Mr Speaker, you mentioned that your daughter Jemima was in a play recently, and I am sure that it went extremely well. Children with complex needs may have siblings, and the parents will want to be able to attend their plays. The Government should provide such a service through the NHS, and there should be a set amount of guaranteed free home respite care time per year, perhaps with additional subsidised capacity above that amount.
I know the Minister understands how important children’s palliative care is to children and families, and I know how hard she has worked and pushed for this issue in her Department. I know she understands the need for the Department to work with NHS England to review this provision and how it is spread across the country, and I hope she will be able to assist with the provision of respite care breaks so that these very vulnerable families find it easier to have short breaks and access to childcare, like any other family and any of us would want. Most importantly, I ask the Government to make sure that NHS England now honours the original announcement by recommitting to protecting the children’s hospice grant for the long term and by increasing it to the £25 million a year that is needed.

10.15 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) on securing a debate on this important matter. I particularly thank her for the fantastic work she does both as a medical professional—a paediatrician—and in her role as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for children who need palliative care, on which she has been a tenacious, passionate and very effective campaigner.

The APPG produced a report last year on children’s palliative care, to which the Government responded in full, and today we have an opportunity to pay tribute to the incredible work offered by children’s palliative care providers, many of which are hospices, in supporting some of our most poorly children and their families.

Children’s Hospice Week took place last month, and this year’s theme was “moments that matter.” As MPs, we are all very aware of the crucial role played by hospices in supporting and caring for our communities at a time of great need. I first became aware of that many years ago, when my mum was involved in fundraising to build the Naomi House children’s hospice near Winchester. In fact, she embroiled my whole family in a series of embarrassing fundraising activities to further her ends.

Since then, I have been privileged to visit Naomi House and, later, Jacksplace, a facility for young adults collocated on the site, to see for myself the incredible care and support they offer to very poorly children and their parents, both on site and more broadly in the community.

In my role as Minister for Care, I see how crucial palliative and end of life care services are for families in need. We know that many areas across the country are delivering excellent support and palliative care for children, but there is no room for any kind of geographical inconsistency, which is why it is crucial that more is done to challenge and support areas that are not providing it. That is why we have made children’s palliative and end of life care a priority in the NHS long-term plan, particularly in supporting children’s hospices.

NHS England’s hospices programme currently provides £12 million a year for children’s hospices, helping to provide care and support to children with life-limiting conditions and their families. I am delighted to announce, and my hon. Friend and other members of the all-party parliamentary group will be very pleased to hear, that NHS England has committed to increase the funding to £25 million by 2023-24. That will guarantee the additional £13 million for the children’s hospice grant. Clinical commissioning groups had been asked to provide match funding, but NHS England has now taken the decision to guarantee the investment after concerns were raised. As my hon. Friend said, match funding would not necessarily achieve the full investment anticipated.

I care very deeply for the hospice movement, and I hope this funding will provide it with full reassurance of the Government’s commitment to and support for its incredible work.

Dr Caroline Johnson: I thank the Minister for this fantastic announcement, and I know the money will make a phenomenal difference to the lives of the poorest children in this country.

Caroline Dinenage: I thank my hon. Friend for that. She must take some of the credit, because it is her work, along with that of her co-chair of the all-party group, that has helped to secure these strong commitments from NHS England, so I wish to pay tribute to them this evening. But there is more. We know that children’s hospices are not evenly spaced throughout the country, so NHS England has also committed to undertake a needs assessment to understand whether additional investment, nationally or from clinical commissioning groups, is required where palliative care is provided by means other than hospices.

Catherine McKinnell: I, too, thank the Minister for this announcement, which is very welcome, but I cannot pass up this opportunity to intervene, when NHS England is in the mode of looking to fund these services. The hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) gave as an example of children with life-limiting conditions those with Batten disease. A family in my constituency have two daughters with Batten disease. It has progressed in one, but the other is receiving totally innovative enzyme treatment that has stemmed any development of the disease. Yet at the moment NHS England is unwilling to fund this treatment for 13 children in England. So I just want to put on record that this is about not only supporting children with life-limiting conditions, but giving them access to the treatment that will prevent them from going down that road if we can.

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady has powerfully put her sentiments on the record, and I absolutely with them. In parallel with the announcements that NHS England has made on the much-welcomed investment, it is working to develop commissioning models specifically for children and young people with palliative care needs, to support CCGs. We know it can be difficult for some commissioners to meet the needs of this vulnerable group, and these models will help them overcome the challenge of delivering services for small and geographically spread groups of patients, whose conditions can fluctuate over the course of their lives. Together for Short Lives is involved in this important work, and I also wish to put on record my thanks to it for its continued support.

My hon. Friend mentioned Acorns hospices, which is currently consulting its staff on the closure of one of its children’s hospices at Walsall. I have been made aware that there is a financial aspect to this consultation, but there are other aspects to it, such as a reduction in the number of bed days used by in-patients. As I say, this is
a consultation at this stage and I am hoping that the announcement of this money will help to make a difference to its decision.

In “Our Commitment to you for end of life care”, we set out what everyone should expect from their care at the end of life, and the actions being taken to make high quality and personalisation a reality for all in end of life care. The choice commitment is our strategy for end of life care, which, through the NHS mandate, NHS England is responsible for delivering through its national end of life care programme board, with all key system partners and stakeholders, including Together for Short Lives. This presents the best opportunity to continue to deliver the progress we all want to see and make the choice commitment a reality for both adults and children.

Looking to the future, the NHS long-term plan has set out a range of actions to drive improvement in end of life care and deliver the choice commitment. In addition to the £25 million of investment in children’s hospices announced today, the NHS long-term plan has made a number of commitments that will improve palliative and end of life care for children.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Along with the all-party group and Together for Short Lives, we have asked the Minister for three things this evening, and we appear to have received two of them—the extra money and the NHS England review. We will keep pushing for the third—respite care and an army of babysitters—but as Meat Loaf said, “Two out of three ain’t bad”.

Caroline Dinenage: As I said at the beginning, my hon. Friend is nothing if not utterly tenacious and passionate in her pursuit of this. I will talk about the short breaks now. She is absolutely right on this; I do not think families are necessarily looking for big long holidays, they just need short breaks, but for those need to be reliable and consistent. People need not to be let down at the last minute. That is the message I am getting loud and clear. Local authorities have a legal duty to commission short breaks, as established by the Breaks for Carers of Disabled Children Regulations 2011. Although the NHS role is not statutory and is a matter for NHS commissioners, the NHS may provide the clinical aspects of care to support such services, if appropriate.

According to the 2018 Together for Short Lives report, 84% of CCGs reported that they commissioned short breaks for children who need palliative care. That is an increase on the support in 2017, when it was 77%, but I recognise that we have much further to go. Parents desperately need short moments of respite and to know that their children will be well cared for at such times. The breaks also need to be reliable, and we will continue to work on that.

Catherine McKinnell: I just want to make sure of something. The needs of the child who requires care and support in order for there to be that respite are often too great, meaning that local authorities feel it is not within their remit, yet the clinical needs do not necessarily meet the NHS thresholds, so many families just fall through the cracks in the requirements. That often results in really difficult family situations and sometimes in family breakdown, which is not in anyone’s interest at all. If the Minister can do anything to consider this issue holistically, across the local authority and the health service, to try to bring things together and close the gaps, that will change the lives of so many families up and down the country.

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point with her customary insight. I care deeply about this matter, totally understand what she says and very much recognise the point that she is trying to get across. The problem is that local commissioners are best at designing the local services that best meet the needs of their local populations, but occasionally we find that families fall between the gaps between children’s social care and local health commissioning. I would be happy to continue to meet both co-chairs of the all-party group and Together for Short Lives to look at ways in which the Department of Health and Social Care can help to address the gaps so that people do not fall through them.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham for securing this debate. I hope she has been reassured by the commitments made on ensuring the future of palliative and end of life care services for children.

Question put and agreed to.
House of Commons

Tuesday 2 July 2019

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Poverty: Social Security

1. Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the adequacy of social security spending in tackling poverty throughout the UK.

Elizabeth Truss: I can tell the hon. Lady what would lead to greater poverty in this country: a Government who wanted to overthrow capitalism, declare business the enemy and ruin the private sector businesses that are employing people and giving them extra wages.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Chancellor has been at the forefront of arguing that a decade of austerity was necessary. This has led to 24% of Scottish children and 30% of English children being in poverty. If the Chancellor believes that this pain was not ideological and unnecessary, will he vote against a Tory tax cuts for the rich Budget, as proposed by the Prime Minister’s most likely successor?

Elizabeth Truss: With respect to the hon. Lady, she clearly did not hear my earlier answer, when I said that absolute poverty after housing costs is at a historic low for children. That is true right across our country. Of course, the Scottish National party Government in Scotland could take steps to help children by improving educational standards; that is what they should be focusing on.

Kirsty Blackman: The Minister might not want to tackle inequality, but the Scottish Government do. The polls show that a majority of Scottish people support the tax changes that mean the Scottish Government can fund a £10 a week payment to families with the most vulnerable children, mitigating the ideological austerity obsession of this Conservative Government. If the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) becomes Prime Minister, 53% of Scots will support independence. And who can blame them, given the Scottish Government’s plans to support and help young people, and this Government’s ideological austerity obsession?

Elizabeth Truss: The reality is that the Scottish Government are now forecast to bring in lower rates of income tax than expected, because they have not followed through on our raising of the threshold to £50,000, so people in Scotland on £50,000 are now paying £1,500 more tax. The fact is that raising tax reduces incentives for people to get up the earnings ladder, reduces economic growth and means that we do not have the opportunities and funding for public services.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Change UK): As my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) said, the poorest, most vulnerable people in society, even those who are in work but struggling to make ends meet, will be hit particularly hard by a catastrophic no-deal Brexit. The Minister cannot get away with simply deflecting this into an attack, which I would share, on the economic policies of the Labour party. This is the clearest, most present danger facing our country, and surely she will not happily move towards a no-deal Brexit.

Elizabeth Truss: What the hon. Gentleman is missing is the fact that if we continue to delay Brexit, first, we would not be delivering on what British people voted for over three years ago; and secondly, there will be continued delay in our economy—a continued lack of investment—due to a lack of certainty.

Debbie Abrahams: Some £30 billion of support to working-age people has been cut from the social security budget, and there is more still to come. Eight out of nine disabled people will not benefit from the measures introduced in last autumn’s Budget and over 4 million are living in poverty. In the Chancellor’s last few weeks in post, what will he do to right this wrong?

Elizabeth Truss: I do not agree with the hon. Lady’s analysis. The fact is that income inequality is lower now than it was in 2010 and absolute poverty after housing costs is at a historic low for children.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Can the Chief Secretary confirm that the number of children living in workless households is now the lowest ever record achieved in our country?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is because of our welfare reforms and economic policy that more people are now in work and are benefiting from our cuts to basic rate tax, giving working families £1,200 a year extra in their pay packets.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Chancellor has been brave recently, speaking out on how no deal will impact our economy. Poverty will only get worse if we face no deal, so will the Chief Secretary be as brave as the Chancellor and tell this House the truth about poverty and no deal?
Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Yesterday, the Chancellor slapped down both Tory leadership candidates for making irresponsible spending promises. Has the Minister noticed, as we have, that not one of those promises was aimed at lifting the 4 million children out of poverty? She is responsible for the management of Government finances—heaven help us! What does she think this says about the Tory party and the next Prime Minister?

Elizabeth Truss: I am incredibly proud of our record, as a Government, of reducing inequality. Income inequality is now lower than it was in 2010. We have also cut taxes for basic rate taxpayers by £1,200 a year and put an extra £630 into universal credit for working families.

Leaving the EU: Scotland

2. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Scotland on the economic effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): I regularly discuss EU exit with the Secretary of State for Scotland and other members of the Cabinet. The Government remain committed to securing a deal that works for the entire United Kingdom.

Patrick Grady: There might be two people competing to be Prime Minister, but I think there are at least five who think they will be the next Chancellor, so perhaps the right hon. Gentleman should just get to stay in post and then they will all be equally disappointed. He seems to be concerned that they are somehow going to ruin his deal dividend, but is not the truth that there is no real dividend from any Brexit, that the best possible deal for Scotland and the rest of the UK is the one we already have, which is membership, and that that is the case that he and other sensible Government Members should have the courage to be making?

Mr Hammond: I have consistently made the case and explained to this House that there is fiscal headroom within the current fiscal rules. If we have a smooth exit from the European Union through a transition that will remove the economic uncertainty that is hanging over our economy, it will then be safe to release that headroom and make it available for additional public spending or, at the choice of the next Government, to reduce taxation. Either way, we have the headroom available once we have removed the Brexit uncertainty.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): Is it not the case that Scotland, like everybody else, will know the plans for future public spending, for fiscal headroom and for the economic effects overall if the comprehensive spending review were to be started sooner rather than later? Is the Chancellor able to tell the people of Scotland, the people in this House and the people beyond when the comprehensive spending review will be starting?

Mr Hammond: I announced at the spring statement that it is the Government’s intention to conduct a three-year spending review concluding this autumn, subject to a deal with the EU being completed. Departments are already commissioned to carry out the work necessary for such a spending review, but it will be for the new Government to decide whether the circumstances make it appropriate to conduct a full three-year spending review or a single-year exercise.

22. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Mark Carney has warned that Brexit has already cost households up to £900, with the Fraser of Allander Institute suggesting that it could cost Scotland 100,000 jobs by 2030. Given that the Chancellor was a remainer himself, will he, as a Back Bencher—I wish him well in that, incidentally—vote against any deal removing us from the single market and customs union?

Mr Hammond: As I have consistently said in this House, I do not believe that a no-deal exit would be in the interests of this country, and I will do everything I can to ensure that we avoid it, but an exit based on a negotiated deal that allows us to continue a close trading relationship with the European Union can work for Britain, and that is what I will be arguing for.

Chris Philip (Croydon South) (Con): Is the Chancellor aware that only 18% of Scottish exports go to the rest of the European Union but 61% go to the rest of the United Kingdom? Is not the Union that really matters to Scotland the Union of the United Kingdom?

Mr Hammond: Yes, my hon. Friend is exactly right. The Scottish economy would be far more adversely affected by a breach of trading relationships with the rest of the United Kingdom than it will by a breach in trading relationships with the European Union.

Shared Prosperity Fund

3. Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): What progress the Government have made on establishing a shared prosperity fund.

5. Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): What progress the Government have made on establishing a shared prosperity fund.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The Government will establish a UK shared prosperity fund to spread prosperity and opportunity across all four nations once we have left the European Union and the EU structural funds. The fund will seek to raise productivity, focusing on levelling up parts of our country whose economies are further behind. More details will be announced following the spending review, and the Government will consult widely on the funds.

Preet Kaur Gill: Analysis of local enterprise partnerships by the charity think-tank NPC found that only 26% of board members were women and that only 5% were black, Asian and minority ethnic. When will the Government finally come forward with their consultation on the shared prosperity fund? Does the Minister agree that funneling the UK fund through the LEPs would be a mistake unless they are made more representative?

Robert Jenrick: We intend to consult later this year, following the spending review. Officials at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government have already held 26 engagement events and have met more than 500 representatives from across the United Kingdom.
With respect to the hon. Lady’s very important point about representation on LEP boards, I should say that the LEP review conducted by MHCLG jointly with the Treasury last year did conclude that they needed to have broader representation from the groups that she mentioned—and from private sector businesses, large and small. Those rules and guidelines are now in force.

Catherine McKinnell: Shortly after the referendum on Europe, I asked the then Prime Minister David Cameron what would happen to the £726 million of European funding that we were due to receive in the north-east. He could not answer. We are now three years on and none the wiser about the supposed replacement—the shared prosperity fund. How can anyone have confidence in this Government and their handling of Brexit if they cannot give even that basic information to the region that is set to be the worst hit by any form of Brexit?

Robert Jenrick: The people of the north-east of England voted to leave the European Union; I know that the hon. Lady takes a different view, but we are trying to deliver on the outcome of the referendum. Had she voted for the withdrawal Bill, these matters would, of course, be progressing. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has already said, we are guaranteeing funding to the beneficiaries of all EU structural funds to 2023, so there is a degree of certainty as we move forwards. But the sooner that this House can coalesce on a good deal and that we can leave the European Union in an orderly fashion, the sooner this matter can be cleared up.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): My constituency and the rest of Cornwall continues to be one of the less developed areas, even though there is much going for where we are and where we live. What would the Minister say to my county, the Duchy of Cornwall, about how soon it can expect to really contribute to the process of the shared prosperity fund?

Robert Jenrick: As I have already said, we intend to consult later this year. I strongly encourage my hon. Friend’s constituents to take part in that consultation; he and I have already spoken about this. I have met representatives from Cornwall Council, for example, to talk about the issue and some of the projects that they care strongly about—including, of course, the stadium in Cornwall, of which my hon. Friend has been a strong proponent.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Rebalancing the economy is not just about north and south or the different nations of the United Kingdom. Will the Minister ensure that the shared prosperity fund is distributed using a range of indicators, such as gross value added, the regional human poverty index and disposable income, so that areas in the west midlands in need receive their fair share?

Robert Jenrick: Absolutely—those are exactly the kinds of questions that we dealt with in the consultation.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Of the problems in our United Kingdom can be traced to the disparity between the regions and nations of the UK. Will the Minister ensure that the shared prosperity fund is not the end, but just the beginning, of ensuring that there is prosperity across the entirety of our nation?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: there are disparities of income and productivity across the United Kingdom, and what he mentions will be one of the key objectives. But the shared prosperity fund is not our only intervention in this area: we are taking a range of measures, including significantly increasing the amount of public investment in infrastructure—to the highest levels in this country since the 1970s.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Despite pledges that the Government would provide details on the shared prosperity fund by the end of last year, the Chancellor has been silent on how much communities could lose from the £17 billion-worth of structural funds. The Chancellor has only now woken up to the danger, splurging nearly £10 billion, almost half that amount, on tax cuts for the well off—as advocated, of course, by the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). Surely the only shared prosperity under the Conservatives is for those who are already well off.

Robert Jenrick: Clearly, it is not possible to progress this matter until we have greater certainty about our exit from the European Union. Those Members of this House who want to see this matter progressed should be voting to leave at every opportunity, as we on the Government side have done. The important thing to point out on regional disparities is that this Government are investing far more than the previous Labour Government. In fact, £430 million a week more in real terms is being invested by this Government than under the previous Labour Government on infrastructure in all parts of the UK.

Northern Powerhouse

4. Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): What fiscal steps the Government are taking to support the northern powerhouse.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The Government are supporting the northern powerhouse through devolution deals for, among others, Manchester, Liverpool, the West Midlands and, most recently, North of Tyne, as well as through over £13 billion of investment in better transport across the north. In addition, we have invested over £3 billion from the local growth fund in the region since 2015, and we committed at the Budget to announce a renewed northern powerhouse strategy later this year.

Rachel Reeves: It is quite an achievement for the Minister to get up and say that without any sense of irony whatsoever. The truth is that we have had the incredibly disappointing news this week that Pacer trains in the north of England will not be removed by the end of this year, as previously promised. Despite the warm words about the northern powerhouse, the truth is that since 2014 spending on transport in the south of England has risen twice as fast as in the north of England. Will the Minister use the spending review as an opportunity to rectify these imbalances and finally give meaning to those words, “the northern powerhouse”?
Robert Jenrick: With respect to the hon. Lady, she is not correct on the numbers. This Government are investing more in the north than the previous Labour Government. Over the course of this Parliament, central Government investment in transport infrastructure will be higher in the north of England than it will be in London and the south-east on a per capita basis. We have seen a 40% increase in central Government funding per person in the north under this Government.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that this Government have invested more than £500 million in the northern powerhouse, attracting more businesses and creating more jobs?

Robert Jenrick: Over the course of this Parliament and the last, this Government will have invested £13 billion in transport for the north. With respect to Northern Powerhouse Rail, which was mentioned earlier, over the last two years we have given £97 million to Transport for the North to build the business case and prepare the ground for that project. In the course of the spending review—our zero-based review—we will be considering how to take forward that project.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): My constituents in Barnsley Central and people right across the north of England will judge this or any Government on deeds, not words. Does the Minister agree with me that if the northern powerhouse agenda is to be taken seriously, we need to see schemes such as Transport for the North’s strategic transport plan, which includes Northern Powerhouse Rail, properly resourced by the national Government?

Robert Jenrick: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and that is why we have given funding to Transport for the North to prepare a properly thought-through business case. We of course have decisions to make in the spending review about which of those projects should be taken forward and which provide good value for money. In the hon. Gentleman’s own city and city region of Sheffield, we have of course given money through the transforming cities fund to improve inter-city connectivity for his constituents.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): My constituency and the wider Humber region would greatly benefit if there were improved rail-freight connections east-west. What plans does the Minister have to fund those?

Robert Jenrick: We have received representations from the Midlands engine, and from Midlands Connect in relation to transport, about both road and rail east-west connectivity. We are considering them carefully, and they will form part of the spending review.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I spot the Leader of the House on the Treasury Bench, but I do not know whether he wants his old job back.

The Exchequer Secretary talks a good talk on fiscal steps to support the northern powerhouse, but the broader facts speak for themselves. Since 2015, for the first time in 50 years, the UK Government no longer provide regional investment aid in England, according to the Industrial Communities Alliance’s evidence to the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee inquiry. What is his explanation for that?

Robert Jenrick: We give many other funding streams to northern communities, including £3.3 billion through the local growth fund and £13 billion for wider transport schemes.

Peter Dowd: So that’s an unambiguous no. The north is home to 15 million people in five major city regions, 265 towns and 1,000 villages and smaller communities. It has 29 universities, the UK’s largest airport outside the south-east and eight major ports, one in my constituency. Does the Exchequer Secretary agree that changing those eight ports, as suggested by the Foreign Secretary and the former Foreign Secretary, into not economic hubs of excellence but potential revenue-draining, tax-avoiding, money-laundering free ports—more like free-for-all ports—is no substitute for a focused, well-resourced and sustainable economic strategy for the north?

Robert Jenrick: Perhaps unlike the hon. Gentleman, I am interested in any proposal that can drive economic growth in the north of England. Free ports are an interesting proposal, which we have discussed with a number of communities. We have urged them to come forward with well-thought-through business cases. We have yet to receive them from many places, but we have received one from Teesside and we will consider them carefully in future.

Loan Charge

6. Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): What estimate the Government have made of the number of promoters of loan schemes subject to the 2019 loan charge who have been convicted; and if he will make a statement.

10. Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What assessment he has made of the effect of the 2019 loan charge on people working in the (a) public and (b) private sector.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The loan charge tackles so-called disguised remuneration arrangements, which use loans to avoid tax. It applies in the same way to people in the public and the private sectors. A tax information and impact note published in 2016 and a report on disguised remuneration published in March 2019 both considered the impacts.

Sir Oliver Heald: What more can be done to tackle the promoters of loan schemes who gave workers and businesses assurances, even though the Treasury had made it clear that the schemes were unacceptable? Should they not be brought to book? Have any of them been convicted yet?

Jesse Norman: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right and HMRC will continue to take firm action against those who promote tax avoidance schemes. As he will know, and I think has been made public, it currently has more than 100 promoters under civil inquiry. It is important to be clear that although there are no criminal offences of promoting or marketing tax avoidance schemes specifically, HMRC may conduct criminal investigations and make referrals to prosecuting
authors where, for example, there is evidence that promoters have deliberately misrepresented the facts to it.

Jamie Stone: Perfectly innocent working people are caught in a terrible trap here and there have already been several suicides. HMRC said that “teams are trained to identify customers who are anxious, worried or need extra support to ensure they get the help they need.”

Will the Minister confirm whether those people have had that training? Will a dedicated helpline be set up to help people who are under huge stress?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Gentleman is right that there is stress, but he should also be clear that a large number of people have been systematically using those means to avoid paying tax, and the potential amount payable is more than £3 billion. He should be protective of the tax base more widely when he reflects on those matters. He is right that HMRC is taking careful steps to ensure that it protects and supports those who may be in genuine difficulty, and those who have other personal concerns can of course be referred to outside agencies.

Justine Greening: The reality is that many people caught up in the loan charge scandal were effectively mis-sold schemes that they were told had been QC vetted and were perfectly legal. That is underlined by the fact that no criminal charges are being pursued against any of the individuals who sold the schemes. Is it not time for this fresh Minister to take a fresh look at the Treasury’s approach to all this?

Jesse Norman: I think that my right hon. Friend misstates the case. A disclosure of tax avoidance number was associated with a large number of those cases. The people knew that they were in schemes that were potentially suspect. Every person is responsible for signing off their own tax return. I trust that my right hon. Friend will be reassured by the fact that recently six individuals were arrested on suspicion of promoting fraudulent loan charge arrangements. That speaks to a wider picture.

20. 911694 Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Economic crime defrauds the Exchequer of countless billions in revenue. Two and a half years ago, the Ministry of Justice launched a call for evidence on corporate liability for that. Incredibly, as of this morning, it says it is still analysing the evidence that it received. Clearly, cracking the problem is critical to the Treasury’s funding public services. What are Treasury Ministers doing to wake their colleagues up?

Jesse Norman: I can only admire the ingenuity of a man who can crowbar a question about the Ministry of Justice, unrelated to the loan charge, into this issue. Let me point out to the hon. Gentleman that regardless of what may be the case on that, HMRC is taking tens of billions of pounds, relating to avoidance and evasion matters, that are due. He should be very grateful and delighted about that.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The loan charge all-party group claims evidence for four suicides relating to the loan charge and HMRC has referred itself with respect to one. When I asked a parliamentary written question on the assessment the Treasury had made of the impact of the loan charge on the mental health of the people subject to pursuit, the answer was, to put it mildly, less than satisfactory. Will the Minister now tell us what effect the Treasury believes its policy has had on the mental health of all the people subject to pursuit in both the public and private sectors?

Jesse Norman: May I put on record my surprise that a former chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, with its concern for the public finances, should take that view? Some people may have been very adversely affected in mental health terms and we must protect them at all times using all proper measures. HMRC is attempting to do that. However, there is a much larger number of people who are simply seeking to avoid paying tax due.

Nic Dakin: People were told that they could work particular jobs if they took on this way of remuneration. Will that be considered? Will the Minister take on board what the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) said and just take a fresh look at this issue?

Jesse Norman: I remind the hon. Gentleman that there were other signs that indicated to people that they were in tax avoidance schemes—for example, a very low or relatively low effective rate of tax. The signs were there and people would have been right to pick up on them. Even if they were mis-sold, that does not have a bearing on the question of whether tax is now due.

Off-payroll Working Rules

7. Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle stakeholders’ concerns on the roll-out of the off-payroll working rules to the private sector.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): In response to stakeholder representations at Budget 2018, the Government announced that the extension of the off-payroll working rules reform would not take effect until April 2020. That was designed to allow organisations more time to prepare. The reform will also not apply to the smallest 1.5 million organisations. The Government have now consulted on the detailed design of the reform. Responses to that consultation will be taken into account when drafting the legislation.

Mr Baron: Nevertheless, there are concerns within the private sector about the forthcoming adoption of IR35. What lessons are there from its application to the public sector?

Jesse Norman: That is a very important question. I hope my hon. Friend will be reassured. Independent research shows that the public sector reform has been meeting its objective of improving compliance with existing off-payroll working rules without disrupting public services or reducing labour market flexibility. The Government recognise that the private sector is much more diverse, but HMRC will continue to work with stakeholders to improve employment status checks and associated guidance. It will also provide a significant package of education and support to businesses to help with implementation.
Will the Minister join me in urging the Chancellor to ensure that the 2019 Budget and Finance Bill improve the rule or scraps it altogether?

Jesse Norman: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be aware that there is only about a 10% compliance rate with proper tax payable in this sector. He should therefore be applauding, as I am, the means to raise the level of compliance. In many ways, this is a simplification of the rules, which is being carefully and deliberately handled.

Early Years Education

8. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent representations he has received from the Secretary of State for Education on the level of Government funding for early years education.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): I regularly meet the Secretary of State for Education to talk about education funding. This issue will be settled as part of the spending review.

Kerry McCarthy: I hope the Chief Secretary has learned from those conversations and will go out to talk to early years providers. The shortfall in funding is having a huge impact. I visited a nursery in my constituency recently and it is clear that it is the staff who are bearing the brunt of it. They are on only just above minimum wage. I cannot help thinking that if the people working there were not women perhaps their work would be valued more. Will she ensure that she makes representations, when the spending review comes, on lifting the freeze?

Elizabeth Truss: I point out to the hon. Lady that we are spending a record amount on childcare and early years support—£6 billion a year, which is £700 million more than in 2015—but of course we will look at representations as we go forward into the spending review.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I welcome the benefits that electronic payments are bringing to people and businesses across the UK. However, the Government recognise the importance of cash to many, particularly the most vulnerable members of society. That is why we have committed to safeguarding access to cash for those who need it. In the light of changing payment trends, the Government have created the Joint Authorities Cash Strategy Group. That Treasury-led group will seek to bring together the regulators and the Bank of England to inform and co-ordinate members’ activities related to cash and safeguard access for those who need it.

Kirstene Hair: I recently sent a survey about access to cash to thousands of my constituents. There was an overwhelming response, because they are terrified that we are going far too fast into a cashless society. The next time the Minister meets banks, will he raise with them the impact that rural banking hubs could have on our local communities, just as the pilot business hub has had in Birmingham?

John Glen: I recognise my hon. Friend’s excellent campaigning on this matter, which we have had meetings to discuss. The Government have no direct role in the matter, but we recognise the role that banking hubs have played for businesses across six trial sites. We are looking at that carefully, and I will be very happy to raise it with the banks when I meet them next.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Will the Government commit to working with cash machine suppliers to ensure that cash withdrawals remain free across the board? Charges disproportionately affect those on lower incomes, who make smaller cash withdrawals.

John Glen: Absolutely. We are looking into that. The Payment Systems Regulator, which was set up four years ago, is responsible for overseeing LINK. It has two schemes in place to safeguard access to cash in the most impoverished communities and to ensure that, when an ATM is vulnerable to closure, there is a responsibility to keep it open if constituents would have to go more than 1 km to access cash.

21. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The town of Bungay has been without a bank branch and a free-to-use 24/7 town centre ATM since last May. That is causing serious challenges for traders, the elderly and
those managing on a tight budget. Will the Minister put in place a regulatory framework to reverse this regressive trend?

John Glen: I acknowledge the difficult situation that my hon. Friend has in Bungay. The Government-established Payment Systems Regulator is closely monitoring developments in ATM provision and, as I said, there are mechanisms in place to intervene. I am very happy to meet him to discuss the application of those to the situation in Bungay.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Given that post offices and credit unions provide easy access to cash, is it not now time to offer business rates relief to both to enhance the provision of cash and other affordable financial services?

John Glen: Of course small businesses receive that relief. The Chancellor will have heard that representation for the next fiscal event, but it is not a matter that I can comment on specifically at this point.

High Street Bank Closures

11. Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the high street banking sector on closures of the last bank in (a) Staveley, Derbyshire and (b) towns throughout the UK. [911685]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): While branch closures are commercial decisions for banks, I regularly engage with all key stakeholders on this issue and I recognise that it can be very difficult for some constituents, particularly if a branch is the last one in a community. The major banks have signed up to the access to banking standard, overseen by the Lending Standards Board, and that commits them to work with communities to minimise the impact of branch closures.

Toby Perkins: When the Government bailed out the banks, it was partly in recognition of the fact that banks were public services as well as profit-making businesses. I am disturbed—as will be the people of Staveley—by the Minister’s hands-off approach. Do not the Government either need to sit down with the banks and ensure they have a real commitment to having a bank branch in towns such as Staveley or adopt Labour’s proposal for a post bank so that we can have some Government control to make sure we have services where they are desperately needed?

John Glen: I have looked into the situation in Staveley and it will be served by a mobile bank following the closure. The post office, where a 24-hour ATM is available, is just a six-minute walk from Lloyds. The number of people visiting the counter at Lloyds bank in Staveley fell by 22% in the last year, so it is understandable why Lloyds has made that decision. The Government’s investment in the Post Office and its banking services facility is our solution.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The Minister should make no mistake: communities up and down Britain are being deliberately starved of cash and banking services as the banks, with the support of Government, are trying to create a near cashless society. Can he say a bit more about what he is doing to help the more than 1 million poorer people who do not have access to a bank account?

Mr Speaker: A bit more, but not too much more.

John Glen: I recognise the difficulty and I am happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss the issues in his constituency. We have invested considerably in the post office network and I am meeting the Lending Standards Board to look at the mechanism for transfer to the Post Office and to consider solutions on a case-by-case basis.

Spending Review

12. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Whether he plans to launch a three-year spending review before the summer recess; and if he will make a statement. [911686]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): As the right hon. Gentleman would have heard me say if he had been in his place earlier, I announced in the spring statement that it is the Government’s intention to conduct a three-year spending review, concluding this autumn, subject to a deal with the EU being completed. He asks whether I plan to launch the spending review before the summer recess: I can tell him that Departments have already been commissioned to carry out the work necessary for such a review. It must be for the new Government to decide, in the circumstances, whether it is appropriate to conduct a full three-year spending review or a one-year exercise.

Tom Brake: I can assure the Chancellor that I saw him give that response on television earlier. What would be the impact on the comprehensive spending review of either the proposal of the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), for a £13 billion cut in corporation tax and a £12 billion increase in defence spending, or the proposal of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) for a £9 billion higher rate income tax threshold cut, £11 billion national insurance contributions cut and showing the public sector “some love”? Would those unfunded bribes be paid for by tax increases, cuts in services or both?

Mr Hammond: I fear that the right hon. Gentleman is manifestly asking the wrong person that question. I literally cannot answer it. The purpose of a spending review is that such matters can be looked at in the round, and the responsible way to do a spending review is first to set the envelope of what is affordable, and then to look at the different bids, which will—I can confidently predict—greatly exceed the available spending power, and prioritise. That is the difficult business of government, and that is why I am not in favour of ad hoc spending commitments or tax cut commitments being made.

Mr Speaker: The Chancellor is a clever chap, but his capacities do not include the capacity to penetrate the minds of colleagues, especially those in competitive vote-seeking mode.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Homes England indicates a current pipeline of some 15,000 community-led homes in England. That shows the significant positive
impact of the community housing fund. Will my right hon. Friend confirm the continuance of the fund so that those much-needed homes can be built?

Mr Hammond: As my hon. Friend knows, we have signed off the Truro funding decision, and I am sure she is happy about that. The Prime Minister has made it very clear that dealing with the challenges in the housing market is a priority for the Government, and in the spending review we will continue to prioritise funds to support both the housing market and the provision of social and affordable housing.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (LD): If the UK leaves the EU without a deal and the Chancellor is still in his post, does he envisage there being enough fiscal headroom following the spending review to give the top 10% of earners a tax cut worth more than £9 billion? Surely that is wholly unjustified.

Mr Hammond: I think the hon. Gentleman has sketched a highly unlikely scenario, but I can answer his question. We have built up about £26 billion or £27 billion of fiscal headroom, and the purpose of that headroom is precisely to protect the UK economy from the immediate effects of a possible no-deal exit. I have no doubt whatsoever that in the event of a no-deal exit we will need all that money and more to respond to the immediate impacts of the consequent disruption, which will mean that no money will be available for longer-term tax cuts or spending increases.

Let me go further: the Government’s analysis suggests that in the event of a disruptive no-deal exit there would be a hit to the Exchequer of about £90 billion, and that will also have to be factored into future spending and tax decisions.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I certainly agree with my right hon. Friend that we need to be careful with our spending pledges, but I think that investment spending is different, particularly when the investment is in the north. Has my right hon. Friend had time to consider our letter of 29 April—signed by 80 parliamentarians—which calls for £120 billion of investment spending over 30 years and a bringing forward of the Northern Powerhouse Rail programme?

Mr Hammond: We are committed to investment in infrastructure. One of the things that I have done in my three years as Chancellor is move the balance of spending towards investment in economic infrastructure, and we now have the highest level of public capital investment for 40 years. We have a National Infrastructure Commission to set long-term guidance for the Government on how to invest in infrastructure investment, and that will be considered in the zero-based capital spending review that sits alongside the main spending review. However, I assure my hon. Friend that this Government are committed to investing in the productive capacity of the UK economy, because it is the only way to raise real wages and living standards, and that is what government is all about.

Living Standards

13. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of his fiscal policy on living standards.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): The Government’s decisions on tax, welfare and spending on public services have benefited households across income distribution, with the poorest gaining the most as a percentage of net income. That is supported by the distribution analysis published by the Treasury at the time of the most recent Budget.

Alan Brown: That is nonsense. The UK is already the most unequal society in Europe, and the gap is becoming wider. In order to mitigate the worst welfare cuts and reforms, the Scottish Government are having to pay out £125 million this year alone. The Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights has said that the situation is “unsustainable”. Does the Minister agree that instead of arguing about tax cuts for the rich, Westminster needs to reverse those welfare cuts?

Robert Jenrick: The United Kingdom is not the most unequal society in Europe; it is not anything like that. The Government’s policies, such as our policies of investing in infrastructure and in boosting productivity, have been designed to level up the parts of the UK that need it the most. When it comes to poverty and living standards, things are improving. Real wages have been rising for 10 consecutive months, and more people are in work. In the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, unemployment has fallen by 60% since 2010.

23. [911697]Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): One way in which the Minister could easily help to raise living standards would be to pay those under 25 the same national living wage rates as those over 25. I know he will not announce that at the Dispatch Box, but will he tell us what concessions under-25s are given in their housing costs, insurance costs and living costs that warrant their being paid less than those over 25?

Robert Jenrick: Our priority has been getting young people into work. In 2010 we inherited a youth unemployment rate of 20%; we have almost halved that. The priority for this Government will be ensuring young people get a great education; more young people are in good or outstanding schools than when we came into power in 2010, and we want them to get apprenticeships and get into work and get on in life.

Charities: VAT Refunds

14. Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure that charities are able to claim timely VAT refunds.

[911688]The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): Having run a capital project myself, I am keenly aware of the importance of good cash flow; I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. HMRC receives more than 2 million VAT repayment forms a year, and in 2017, the latest year for which figures are available, over 90% of them were paid within five days of receipt. A supplement is paid if it takes more than 30 days before payment is made, and HMRC also has a free dedicated charities help desk designed to help organisations with their tax inquiries.
Mrs Hodgson: [4] Louis is a charity set up in Sunderland in the memory of Louis, who was stillborn in 2009. It fundraised and built the Louis bereavement suite at Sunderland Royal hospital at a cost of £75,000, some £12,500 of which was paid in VAT. Another suite is planned at Durham at a cost of £100,000 and £20,000 of that is VAT. These huge amounts of VAT could be used by the charity to build another bereavement suite. What advice can the Minister give to it specifically on how it can attempt to get this VAT back?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady will understand that a range of schemes is available for some parts of the charitable sector. We recognise the concern that the hon. Lady is expressing; I cannot deal with individual cases, but obviously if she wants to write to me on the wider issue I will be happy to take it up with HMRC.

Mark Garnier: [W]yre Forest) (Con): A much loved local provider of employment for my constituents with learning disabilities has been forced to consider closure after a change in interpretation of the VAT rules regarding the provision of services under the personal payments arrangements; the retrospective VAT bill of around £150,000 means that Spokes, the trading arm of the charity the Emily Jordan Foundation, faces closure with the subsequent loss of a very important local resource. Will my hon. Friend consider meeting with Chris Jordan on behalf of the charity in order to discuss a way forward that can save this incredibly important local business?

Jesse Norman: Again, I absolutely recognise the concern, although of course I am not familiar with the details. I cannot get involved in a specific case, but my hon. Friend is welcome to write to me and I will refer the matter to HMRC.

Topical Questions

T1. [911699] Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My principal focus is to ensure the continued resilience of the UK economy and public finances at this time of uncertainty. Thanks to the hard work of the British people, our national debt is now falling sustainably for the first time in a generation, but it is still too high and it is vital that the Government continue to get debt down to ensure that the economy is resilient against future shocks, to prevent the wasting of billions of pounds more on debt interest payments, and to avoid burdening the next generation.

Mary Glindon: Since 2013 this Government have given tax handouts worth £4.1 billion to the big alcohol corporations at a time when the NHS is short of 40,000 nurses. Would it not be a sensible choice to invest in the nurses, doctors and police officers who have to deal with the problems caused by cheap alcohol?

Mr Hammond: We have done so: by 2023-24 we will be spending an extra £34 billion a year on the national health service. That is a record cash injection to our national health service, which represents this Government’s commitment to it.

T5. [911703] James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend the Chancellor confirm that he is absolutely committed to maintaining the independence of the Bank of England?

Mr Philip Hammond: Yes, it is a vital cornerstone of our institutional structure that the Bank of England remains independent, and those who have suggested that they would seek to politicise appointments to the Bank of England would be doing a great disservice to this country and our economy.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): The Chancellor, like most of us, has been watching the accumulation of spending promises by the Tory leadership candidates. They amount now—[Interruption.] They amount now to nearly £100 billion, and one of the Chancellor’s colleagues commented yesterday that they make me look like a fiscal moderate. May I ask the Chancellor what impact this level of unfunded commitments would have on his economic strategy, or can he tell us how they could possibly be funded?

Mr Hammond: There are many people who could comment on spending commitments that have been made by candidates in the Tory leadership competition, but the right hon. Gentleman is not one of them.

John McDonnell: Let me try this one. Both Tory leadership candidates are threatening no deal. This morning, the Chancellor has eloquently set out the consequences of no deal. Bearing in mind what he said, may I ask him very straightforwardly whether he will join us and commit himself to doing everything he possibly can to oppose the Prorogation of Parliament to try to sneak no deal through, and also to voting against no deal?

With your permission, Mr Speaker, if I may: this might be the Chancellor’s last Treasury questions and I just want to thank him for the civility with which he has always maintained our relationship. I also admit that there have been times when we have enjoyed his dry sense of humour. I gave his predecessor a little red book as a present. We have another red book today, but this is a guide to London’s rebel walks and we hope that he will enjoy it in his leisure periods.

Mr Hammond: That is very kind of the right hon. Gentleman; I much prefer this little red book to the one he gave my predecessor, although I have to say that I have not read this one and I have read the other one.

On the broader question, I have been consistently clear that I believe that a no-deal exit would be bad for the UK, bad for the British economy and bad for the British people. We cannot rule out that happening, because it is not entirely in our hands, but I agree with him that it would be wrong for a British Government to seek to pursue no deal as a policy. I believe that it will be for the House of Commons, of which I will continue proudly to be a Member, to ensure that that does not happen.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr Speaker: Thank you.
the Crown Prosecution Service to reach a decision has

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Borrowers who believe that they have been mis-sold a shared appreciation mortgage are able to take their complaint to the Financial Ombudsman Service. The Government are unable to comment on group action cases relating to this issue as we have no role in deciding whether cases may be heard in court. I note that the annual review of the Financial Ombudsman Service in 2003-04 said that in most cases it had not upheld complaints of shared appreciation mortgage mis-selling due to the information being satisfactory. That is the situation at the moment.

Mr Philip Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right to point to storm clouds over the global economy. We tend to focus on Brexit-related issues and the domestic agenda, but I have just come back from the G20 in Osaka, and looking more widely, we can see that global growth is slowing and that global trade growth is slowing even more dramatically. A great deal hinges on finding a solution to the disputes between China and the United States. It is hugely in our interests that that dispute is resolved and that normal trading relations are resumed between the world’s two economic superpowers. As a middle-sized open economy, we are bound to be adversely affected if global trade slows down.

Mr Philip Hammond: The hon. Gentleman knows, that position is enshrined in statute, and only this House of Commons could change it.

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): More of my Southampton constituents are in work than ever before, but many of their jobs are low-paid, with few career prospects, if any. What are the Government doing to improve employment opportunities for my constituents?

Mr Hammond: We have worked hard to build a stronger, fairer economy, dealing with the deficit that we inherited, helping people into work and cutting taxes for people, families and businesses, and the result is that the economy has grown continuously for the past nine years. Employment is currently at record high levels; that that remains the whole of Government policy after 24 or 25 July?

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Last month, the Wandsworth food bank published its yearly report. It showed that 5,770 emergency food parcels were handed out in a year—a 76% increase over five years; that nearly half of referrals were due to problems increased by 64% since 2013, and more than 2,000 police officers have been lost since austerity began in 2010. Will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury make money available to reverse 10 years of Government cuts to police services to ensure that my constituents can feel safe?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): I reassure the hon. Lady that we have already put additional funding into the police grant, and we have raised spending power such that it increases in real terms. Additional surge funding has been put into the west midlands to acknowledge the specific issues in that area.

Mr Philip Hammond: We made an announcement this morning about our plans for green finance. Over the coming months and years, it will be essential to demonstrate how we are able to mobilise our capital markets and the instruments of a market economy to deliver on this huge enterprise. If we do not demonstrate how the market economy can provide solutions to decarbonising our economy, there are others with alternative solutions to present.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): During the Department for International Development estimates debate yesterday, there was a clear consensus across the House that the 0.7% of GDP aid commitment should remain and, for that matter, that DFID should remain an independent Department. Will the Chancellor restate that that remains the whole of Government policy, and does he believe that it should continue to be Government policy after 24 or 25 July?

Mr Hammond: We are heading for a new global economic meltdown?
with social security, specifically the five-week wait for universal credit; and that nearly two thirds of those supported by a food bank advisor were disabled or had a long-term health condition. The consequence of Tory austerity is that record numbers of people are relying on charity to eat. Since this is probably the Chancellor's final oral questions in post, may I ask whether he is proud of that legacy?

Elizabeth Truss: The reality is that that we have got a record number of people into work. Universal credit has been shown to help more families get into work, and it has made work pay. We have also made adjustments to universal credit to shorten the wait time, and we have put in an extra £630 a week for families.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It has been a while since I asked the Chancellor about the blockchain and distributed ledger technology, so I was hoping that he could present an update on how the Treasury is embracing this new technology.

John Glen: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The UK's digital economy is thriving and is growing 10 times as fast as the wider economy. We are pursuing a range of measures to reinforce that leading position, and that involves implementing a 10-year action plan to unlock over £20 billion in finance growth in innovative firms and a further £7 billion for research and development since 2016, with internationally competitive research and development tax reliefs to support investment.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): As my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor has just pointed out, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) has made £30 billion-worth of spending pledges and the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt) has made £13 billion-worth of pledges. The Chancellor has said it will not happen on his watch, but that seems to suggest that a magic money tree has been found in the barren soil of the no deal for which we seem to be heading.

I want to ask the Chancellor about the pledges announced by the current Prime Minister in the past few weeks, which unfortunately have not included any compensation for the infected blood community. How have the Chancellor and the Treasury prioritised and costed those announcements?

Elizabeth Truss: The Prime Minister has made a number of announcements since 23 May, including on modern slavery and mental health. All these announcements have been costed and are affordable within existing budgets for 2019-20.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that dementia care is adequately funded in the next spending review?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about dementia care, which is one of the issues that will be looked at as part of the long-term plan for health. Due to the fiscal responsibility exercised by this Government, we are able to put extra money into health services to deal with issues such as dementia.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I welcome the Chancellor's remarks about a no-deal Brexit and the disaster it would be for our country, costing jobs and livelihoods. Does he agree that both Conservative leadership candidates, who support a no-deal Brexit, should stop selling out the country to serve their own political ambitions? Will he commit to joining us in voting against a no deal when and if he returns to the Back Benches, and to voting with us on a no-confidence motion, if it comes to that, to stop a no deal?

Mr Philip Hammond: At this stage of my career, I will not speculate on my future actions. What I will say is that the Government's analysis shows that a no-deal exit would mean that all the regions, nations and sectors of the UK economy have lower economic output compared with today's arrangements and compared with the White Paper scenario that the Government set out. It is important we all understand that preparing for a no deal, which is a perfectly sensible thing to do because it might happen to us without our volition, is not the same as avoiding the effects of a no deal.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Net zero emissions by 2050 is a desirable but very costly policy. Does the Chancellor agree that we must do everything to protect low-income families in my Cleethorpes constituency and elsewhere from bearing an unfair burden?

Mr Hammond: Yes. This is a huge commitment, but it is the right commitment to make. The Committee on Climate Change recommended that the Treasury should undertake a review of the funding and financing mechanisms to ensure that this huge undertaking can be funded, and that it will be funded in a way that is fair to families, households and businesses across the UK, which is exactly what we will do.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The “All Kids Count” report, on the impact of the two-child limit after two years, was published last week by the Church of England, the Child Poverty Action Group, Women's Aid, Turn2us and the Refugee Council. The report illustrates the devastating impact of the two-child policy, particularly on working families who are unable to compensate for the £2,780 a year cut by working longer hours. Before the Chancellor leaves office, will he scrap the two-child policy and its devastating impact on families?

Elizabeth Truss: The universal credit policy has been designed to make sure that people who are being supported by the Government are in a similar position to families who have to make their own financial decisions based on the wages they earn every week.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The decision by the European Union to suspend the equivalence agreement with Switzerland seems to be very damaging. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has done a fantastic job over the past few years. Will he confirm whether the United Kingdom was consulted on whether the decision should go ahead?

Mr Hammond: We have been closely involved in this issue, discussing it both in the EU and with the Swiss. I can tell the House that although on the face of it the withdrawal of equivalence had a very significant effect on the ability of UK shareholders to trade Swiss shares on the Swiss stock exchange, the measures that the European Securities and Markets Authority announced
on Friday significantly mitigate the impact. So we very much hope that the European Union and Switzerland will be able to reach agreement, and of course there is a very direct relevance to the UK’s own negotiations with the European Union.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Will the Chancellor commit to enabling the 120,000 families on very low incomes who find out about a tax credit overpayment when they claim universal credit to have a fair chance to appeal against those deductions averaging £1,500 being made and to giving them a chance to raise themselves out of poverty?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the question, and I am happy to refer her to the welfare Secretary on the matter.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Does the Chancellor share my concern about the way some local councils are misusing Public Works Loan Board loans to speculate on commercial property, including many in Surrey?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend knows that I do share his concerns on this matter. The Public Works Loan Board is there to support local authorities’ capital spending. Some of the development activities of local authorities are perfectly legitimate: for example, the regeneration of urban areas. What is not legitimate is local authorities arbitraging the low interest rates of the PWLB to buy commercial property for yield, in order to develop income-yielding property portfolios. The Treasury is looking at how we can manage that situation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have now had 20 topical questions. Whether this is the Chancellor’s last appearance at the Dispatch Box as Chancellor remains to be seen, but whether it is or not, he will always be able to tell his children that demand for him exceeded supply of him. He can say to them proudly, “I always left them wanting more of me.”
The images broadcast around the world yesterday were ones of violence and vandalism, but they were also images of fear and frustration from people who are increasingly desperate that the world looks on at their plight and will do no more than wring its hands. Will the Minister make it clear to Carrie Lam that there is much more that she and her Administration can do to reassure her own population? It is surely clear to all that a suspension—even a suspension sine die—of the Bill to allow for the amendment of the extradition arrangements is not enough. The people of Hong Kong need to hear that the Bill has been abandoned completely.

The Hong Kong police have described the victims of police violence in recent weeks as rioters, when we know that they were peaceful protesters. Will the Minister impress on the Executive that such use of language must be withdrawn? Will the Executive instigate an independent inquiry into the police violence on 12 June?

Finally, the Chinese Foreign Ministry yesterday declared the Sino-British joint declaration to be meaningless. I welcome the Minister’s repudiation of that from the Dispatch Box, but will the Government now consider all meaningful sanctions at our disposal, including the possible use of Magnitsky powers, to ensure that those who infringe the human rights of the people of Hong Kong will have no hiding place in the United Kingdom?

Mr Carmichael: I thank the Minister for that statement. May I also thank you, Mr Speaker, for again allowing an urgent question on this ever-increasing and serious matter, which is heard not just in this country, but throughout the world? Last night, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) organised a meeting in the House under the auspices of Hong Kong Watch, and she and I co-chaired it. It was a very well attended and, sadly, timely meeting, with more than 100 people, mostly Hong Kongers, present. The message from that meeting, especially from activists such as Tommy Cheung and Willis Ho, was clear: they worry that the Government of the People’s Republic of China will see yesterday’s events as an excuse for ever more direct intervention in Hong Kong’s affairs. They want to hear that this country will continue to stand with them against that threat.

Unfortunately, the images that dominated our television screens yesterday were those of the occupation of the Legislative Council building. There was much less coverage of the fact that on Monday, half a million families, young children and older people marched down major roads in peaceful protests. In his representations to Carrie Lam’s Administration, will the Minister make it as clear as possible that any consequences for the actions of the hundreds of protesters in the LegCo building should not be visited on the many thousands—in fact, millions—of people who have protested on Hong Kong’s streets in recent weeks?

The disgraceful behaviour of the demonstrators who entered LegCo yesterday and the misuse of the Union flag should be noted by Parliament, as should the
damage done to the case that they are making. I looked at the statement by the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Geng Shuang, who said that:

“the SAR government decided to suspend work on the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation (Amendment) Bill 2019.”

He also said:

“The Chinese Central Government expresses its support, respect and understanding for the SAR government’s decision”.

Surely a period of dialogue and discussion is now required to try to reach a mutually agreed solution to this complex problem.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for pointing out that I am answering questions that do not normally fall within my responsibility. My wingspan has stretched wider than I or any Member would normally expect.

My right hon. Friend is far more expert on this issue than I am, but the one point on which we can all agree is that a period of de-escalation and dialogue would be far preferable to any continuing tension and violence. I very much hope that all those who are involved in this issue can pause for thought and try to plot a way through this without further escalating any kind of conflict.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Hong Kong situation is spiralling out of control very fast now. It is unfortunate that, in the absence of a Minister with responsibility for the far east, the Foreign Secretary is not in his place. I agree with the remarks of the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). He set out well the events of yesterday. I want to concentrate on four questions for the Government. First, Hong Kongers have made it abundantly clear that they want the disastrous extradition laws to be abandoned for good. That is not an unreasonable request. Will the Government finally take the side of the Hong Kong people and call on Carrie Lam to scrap this legislation?

Secondly, I welcome and agree with the Foreign Secretary’s call for a public inquiry into the actions of the Hong Kong police force. Evidence has emerged that the order to fire tear gas on the protesters was given by Superintendent Justin Shave, a British expat now serving with the Hong Kong police, and that two other expat chief superintendents were two of the most senior officers in charge of crowd control on that day in June. What are Ministers doing to bring to book these British citizens who ordered the police brutality?

Thirdly, after firing rubber bullets on the protesters, the Hong Kong authorities accessed hospital data records in order to arrest them. That is random and unfair. Will the Minister join me in condemning this appalling behaviour? Clearly, yesterday the events in the Legislative Council were unacceptable, but the police tactics appeared to have been totally confused. Finally, the root cause of the chaos is the fundamental democratic deficit in Hong Kong. The rights enshrined in the Basic Law and the promises to move towards universal suffrage are being trampled on. When will the Government listen to the voices of the citizens of Hong Kong and put democratic reform back on the agenda?

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for once again raising this issue, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. This is a deeply serious matter, and I think that that has been expressed by Members across the House. I welcome the remarks of the Foreign Secretary and of his deputy at the moment, the Minister for Europe and the Americas, that the authorities must engage in a meaningful dialogue and that the preservation of rights and freedoms are critical. I also welcome what was said by our partners in the European Union who have said that these rights need to be respected. There is never an excuse for violence — there cannot be an excuse for violence — but we must reflect on the concerns of non-governmental organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch about the use of torture and also, as has been reflected on by the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, the concerns of the overwhelming majority who have undertaken peaceful protest; their voices must not be drowned out over the coming days. It is more important than ever that Hong Kong’s autonomy and the independence of the judicial system are respected. It will be good to hear the Minister’s plans to put that case, and also to urge the Hong Kong authorities to listen to legitimate concerns. The Foreign Office must do what it can to facilitate that and to work, where appropriate, to de-escalate tensions. Now is the time for calm heads.

Sir Alan Duncan: I think that I agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman has just said. The autonomy of Hong Kong is very important. Hence we have to strike a balance between seeing what is happening but
not dictating to Hong Kong how it should respond. On listening to concerns, it is, of course, the responsibility of the Hong Kong Government to listen to the concerns being expressed by their own people, but in terms of us expressing our concerns to them, we do so very forcefully and properly through proper diplomatic channels.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Minister has couched his response in sensibly balanced terms. Does he agree that the Hong Kong Government have said that the extradition Bill will not be brought back to the Legislative Council until it lapses and that it is, therefore, effectively dead? Does he also agree that, whatever the frustrations of some protesters, the vast majority of the half a million people who marched yesterday do not want to see the vandalism that happened at the Legislative Council; and that Her Majesty's Government should continue to balance strong support for the six freedoms enshrined in the joint declaration with support for the rule of law against violence, and encourage efforts to rebuild trust between the Hong Kong Government and the people of Hong Kong so that the territory can revert to its peaceful and successful path under the one country, two systems formula?

Sir Alan Duncan: I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent and well-informed question. His experience in the far east is very well known and understood by this House. He mentioned the procedural definition of whether the legislation is suspended or effectively dead. That is not quite for me to speculate on. From our own experience, we know the importance of procedure in this House, particularly as we are dealing with certain big issues at the moment that rely on it. As for the freedoms, indeed, the autonomy under the joint declaration is something that we condemn. We can quite understand the grievance felt, and the millions of people who have been taking to the streets show the intensity of that opinion, but in order to be effective protesters must, in their own interests, stick to peaceful protests and not allow a small number of people to destroy the credibility of their actions.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Behind the specifics of this incident, is there not a bigger, wider and more problematic concern, which is that the Chinese Communist party is fearful of losing its grip on its people? That is why it is tightening its grip—squeezing harder and harder—and Hong Kong is just a tiny aspect of that. Is there not an irony in the fact that China is trying to argue in favour of the rule of law when it constantly flouts the rule of law around the world, even though Hong Kong has done China proud over the last 50 years?

Sir Alan Duncan: There is, of course, ample scope for analysing what is going on in Hong Kong within the broader question of what is happening in China and what role China wishes to play within China itself and across the world more widely, so the hon. Gentleman’s question is a valid one. However, with regards to the specific question we are addressing today, we should keep our focus on trying to de-escalate tension in Hong Kong itself so that a path forward can be mapped out for the benefit of everybody there.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Is China in breach of the joint declaration?

Sir Alan Duncan: We obviously call on China fully to adhere to the joint declaration. I hope that will lead to the implementation of the full details under the Basic Law.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I welcome the decision of the British Government to prohibit the sale of tear gas to Hong Kong. However, the South China Morning Post reports that approved British export licences of lethal weapons to Hong Kong include grenade launchers, mortar bombs, sniper rifles, machine guns and gun silencers. Are the British Government considering those export licences as well?

Sir Alan Duncan: The primary focus of anything we have said so far in the context of these demonstrations has been about crowd control equipment. The Foreign Secretary announced on 25 June that we will not issue any further export licences for crowd control equipment.
to Hong Kong unless we are satisfied that our concerns raised on human rights and fundamental freedoms have been thoroughly addressed.

**Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): We all condemn the terrible violence that has occurred in Hong Kong over recent days. However, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is essential for Hong Kong’s future success that the full extent of its autonomy and rule of law as set out in the joint declaration and enshrined in the Basic Law is implemented? What more can my right hon. Friend do to encourage more dialogue between the parties in Hong Kong?

**Sir Alan Duncan** (Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on Hong Kong’s autonomy and upholding of the rule of law. It may well be that the most constructive right that China should see Hong Kong as something beneficial. I very much hope that in honouring the terms of the 1984 agreement in the years ahead, that mutual benefit can be put into practice and that everybody can win from it.

**Sir Alan Duncan**: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that China should see Hong Kong as something that can benefit China itself. A prosperous and stable Hong Kong is not only good for Hong Kong; it is also good for China. There is a symbiosis that can be mutually beneficial. I very much hope that in honouring the terms of the 1984 agreement in the years ahead, that mutual benefit can be put into practice and that everybody can win from it.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): It is very good to see the Minister spreading his wings. In fact, I hope he will soon return to the Dispatch Box to say something about the disgraceful and disturbing decision by the Japanese to start whaling again—killing hundreds of whales this year.

On Hong Kong, the fact of the matter is that what we have seen in the last few days is out of character. My suspicion is, who is going to gain from instability in Hong Kong? Of course, the answer is the Chinese Government, not the Hong Kongese.

**Sir Alan Duncan**: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in what he calls for. Of course, we would engage China in a proper bilateral discussion. We speak very forcefully and loudly about the Chinese regime’s human rights record and the proper implementation of the rule of law.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): At a time when democracy and human rights are under attack by authoritarian regimes across the world, it is critical that Britain sets out clearly whose side we are on. I welcome the Minister’s statement that the Sino-British agreement is still valid, but what steps is he taking to validate that validity, as it were? Does he agree with the last Governor of Hong Kong, Chris Patten, that that might be more effective if we were not simultaneously trying to negotiate a post-Brexit trade agreement with China?

**Sir Alan Duncan**: I do not think that it is really appropriate to link the two. We have the joint declaration in place; it is legally binding until 2047, and we expect China to uphold it. If there were to be a breach, we would pursue some resolution bilaterally, but in the meantime I hope that there can be an improvement of exchanges and dialogue between the Hong Kong Government and their own people to try to improve the situation that they are currently confronting.

**Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What estimate does the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have of the number of Chinese People’s Liberation Army personnel in Hong Kong, and has there been any suggestion of an increase in that number?

**Sir Alan Duncan**: I hope my hon. Friend will appreciate that I am not in a position to give him an exact number. In as much as we have such an estimate, I will certainly write to him and give him the benefit of what we believe we can pass on.

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): I welcome much of what the Minister has said today. Of course, we cannot in any way condone the vandalism or violence of recent days, but the Minister will be aware of assertions that those who are in control of the police have orchestrated the police response over the past 24 to 36 hours to aggravate the consequences of the situation. Will the Minister comment on whether he has any evidence that those assertions are true?

**Sir Alan Duncan**: I am unable to confirm that I have any such evidence; I have not been advised as such. Obviously, it is very much our view that any police response should be proportional and lawful. Of course, if the demonstrations are peaceful, we hope that no such violent, or forceful, response is in any way needed, but if there are acts of vandalism, that would then put any such engagement into a different context.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): While the escalation in violence in Hong Kong is deeply regrettable, and every effort should be made to de-escalate it, it is clear that there is continuous provocation by the Chinese side, particularly with regard to the repudiation of the validity of the 1984 Sino-British joint declaration that underpins the highly successful one country, two systems structure that has guaranteed Hong Kong’s success. Far from simply asserting Britain’s continued recognition of that declaration, what will we do to enforce it in practice?

**Sir Alan Duncan**: We are not a position to, as the hon. Gentleman puts it, enforce it, but if there were a breach, as I said, we would engage China in a proper bilateral discussion. We speak very forcefully and loudly about upholding the 1984 agreement, and, in doing so, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in what he calls for.
Problem Gambling

1.10 pm

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): Before I make my statement, Mr Speaker, I hope you will allow me to send my best wishes—and, I am sure, those of the whole House—to the Lionesses in advance of their semi-final match this evening. As you know, sport so often brings us together. The men’s football team did so at their World cup last summer and the women are doing so at their World cup this summer. We salute them for that. We congratulate them on their successes so far and wish them well for the game tonight.

This statement is about today’s announcement on support for those affected by problem gambling. While we all want a healthy gambling industry that makes an important contribution to the economy, we also need one that does all it can to protect those that use it. Problem gambling can devastate lives, families and communities. I have met those who have lost more than the UK’s annual average salary during one night of gambling online, and parents who are now without a child as a result of gambling addiction.

Over recent months, I have also met representatives from the gambling industry and colleagues from right across the House to discuss what more needs to be done. We can all agree that it is best to prevent harm before it occurs and to step in early where people are at risk, but we also need to offer the right support for those people who do experience harm. We have already acted to reduce the minimum stake on fixed odds betting terminals to £2 from £100. We have tightened age and identity checks for online gambling websites—an important step in protecting children and vulnerable people who may be at risk.

Today, five of the biggest gambling companies have agreed a series of measures that will deliver real and meaningful progress on support for problem gamblers. This announcement has been welcomed by the Gambling Commission, GambleAware and GamBan. These companies, together, represent about half of the British commercial gambling industry. At the heart of this package is a very significant increase in their financial contribution to fund support and treatment. Last year, voluntary contributions across the whole industry to problem gambling yielded less than £10 million. Now, five operators—William Hill; Bet365; GVC, which owns Ladbrokes Coral; Flutter, formerly known as Paddy Power Betfair; and Sky Betting & Gaming—have said that over the next four years they will increase tenfold the funding they give to treatment and support for problem gamblers. In this same period, they have committed to increasing the prominence to services and campaigns that support those in need of help. They have pledged to increase the volume of their customer safer gambling messaging; to continue their support for the BetRegret campaign, the multi-operator self-exclusion scheme. I am pleased that companies have committed to building on this through the greater sharing of data between them to prevent problem gamblers from experiencing further harm.

Secondly, the five companies will use emerging technology to make sure that their online advertising is used responsibly. Where technology exists that can identify a user showing problem gambling behaviours, and then target gambling adverts away from that person, they have committed to using it. More generally, the industry has already committed to a voluntary ban on advertising during live sport during the daytime that will come into force next month.

Thirdly, operators have committed to giving greater prominence to services and campaigns that support those in need of help. They have pledged to increase the volume of their customer safer gambling messaging; to continue their support for the BetRegret campaign, which is showing promising early results; and to review the tone and content of their marketing, advertising and sponsorship to ensure that it is appropriate.

These are welcome commitments that represent significant progress in the support that operators give for those impacted by problem gambling, but as technology advances, we will need to be more sophisticated in how we respond. The five companies that have proposed these measures today will be working closely with the Government, charities and regulators so that we can address any new or developing harms. I commend the leadership of the five companies who have put these measures forward. They are proposals from some of the industry’s biggest companies. I believe that it is reasonable for the largest reach and the most resources to do more and show leadership, but the industry as a whole needs to engage in tackling problem gambling, and we want other firms to look at what they could do.
can do to step up. And I repeat: it will remain open to the Government to legislate if needed, so this is not the end of this conversation. We will keep working hard as a Government to make sure we protect users, whether online or in the high street.

There is still much more to do, but today's announcement is a significant step forward. It means substantially more help for problem gamblers, more quickly than other paths we could take. We must and we will hold the companies that have made these commitments to them, and we will expect the rest of the industry to match them. They will change lives for the better and contribute to the ongoing work we are doing to make gambling safer for everyone. I commend this statement to the House.

1.19 pm

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for some, at least, of what he has said. I reassure him on a number of points. First, as he says, he has always been in favour of a mandatory levy that will raise 1% of gross gambling yield. The commitment being made by the five companies in question this morning is to fund 1% of gross gambling yield, so they are offering him what he has asked for. It seems sensible and reasonable to accept that that is what they are doing; I shall come to his other points about where the money goes in a moment.

It is also right, as the hon. Gentleman says, that the rest of the industry needs to do better—I said as much in the statement. It is important that other companies follow the example set by the five who have spoken this morning. They need to take more responsibility in the way that he suggests. As I have made clear, we do not take off the table a mandatory levy, particularly for those companies that are not prepared to proceed on a voluntary basis as the five now are.

I do not doubt that the reason why those five are proceeding in this way is a result of pressure applied by many in this House, including those of us in government who have met repeatedly with them to make clear what our expectations are and to say that, if those expectations are not met voluntarily, they will be met in other ways. I make the same clear to all those companies that have not yet come forward as those five have.

The hon. Gentleman makes the fair point that people who have met repeatedly with them to make clear what our expectations are and to say that, if those expectations are not met voluntarily, they will be met in other ways. I make the same clear to all those companies that have not yet come forward as those five have.

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will be for the Gambling Commission to audit how that spending is distributed so that we all know where it is going and we can all judge whether it has been sent to the right places. If it has not, we reserve the right to continue to act in a different way.

\[57x-2731\]announced today is to supplement that. We must make a recognised and real health problem. The money I have and Social Care to spend money on gambling, which is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health knows, commitments have already been made by those that we expect will want to make sure that the requirements for treatment are met via this contribution and those that we expect reserved for treatment over the four-year period. We that £100 million of the money announced today will be hypothecation, I should say that it has been made clear forward that this announcement represents. It would be wrong not to recognise the significant step and remain sceptical in government about this. However, comments . He is right to be sceptical: we are all sceptical of State for advance sight of his statement. I appreciate the progress that is being made. Having discussed many of these issues with the Secretary of State and his Department, I genuinely believe that he gets it and is interested in how quickly they can do things, the sooner they start, the sooner they finish. All of that is true. I said it would take at least a year; it may in fact take nearer to 18 months because any of these changes will need to begin at the start of a tax year. A mandatory levy would deliver a return of 1% of gross gambling yield. What is being put forward today—except by only five companies, but that represents about half of the commercial gambling industry—is exactly for that: 1% of gross gambling yield. We would not derive any more income from a mandatory levy than we will from this process, but via this process we will derive it more quickly, and that is a real advantage for the problem gamblers whom I know he and I are both very concerned to help.

\[57x-2624\]Jeremy Wright: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s comments. He is right to be sceptical: we are all sceptical and remain sceptical in government about this. However, it would be wrong not to recognise the significant step forward that this announcement represents.

In answer to my right hon. Friend’s point about hypothecation, I should say that it has been made clear that £100 million of the money announced today will be reserved for treatment over the four-year period. We will want to make sure that the requirements for treatment are met via this contribution and those that we expect the rest of the industry to make.

As I mentioned in the statement and as my right hon. Friend knows, commitments have already been made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to spend money on gambling, which is a recognised and real health problem. The money I have announced today is to supplement that. We must make sure that there is no duplication but rather that these contributions reinforce the money that is already committed.

\[57x-2517\]Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I appreciate the progress that is being made. Having discussed many of these issues with the Secretary of State and his Department, I genuinely believe that he gets it and is improving the situation, but I would take issue with a number of points. The statement touches on the argument for a mandatory levy, but undermines it by saying that it would take a year to complete. That reminds me of the old adage that my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) often reminds me of: “When is the best time to plant a tree?” Twenty-five years ago.” If we do not start now, we will not be any closer a year from now. Is the Secretary of State suggesting that the gambling companies would withdraw their offer? If not, there is nothing to lose by starting the ball rolling now.

What we have now is an unacceptable compromise. Any amount that cannot be guaranteed, cannot be budgeted. If we are to provide education, research and support, it cannot be done piecemeal. We need to employ people, provide training and rent premises, and we need a strategy that can be followed over a five, 10 or even 15-year period. A voluntary levy does not provide such a platform. There is no continuity or security.

This offer is an attempted pay-off—a bribe—to appease the conscience of the gambling industry, and it takes the heat off. I fear it also allows the UK Government to absolve themselves of their responsibility. It leaves the commissioning of services to organisations favoured by the Gambling Commission, which is funded by the gambling industry. That is not a good model for commissioning harm-reduction services, or education and research. Will the Minister review the role of the Gambling Commission and its funding model to make sure it is effectively regulating gambling companies, including by legislating, if necessary, to ensure that responsible working practices are in place?

The draft statement says:

“I have met users who have lost more than the UK’s annual average salary on credit cards during one night of gambling online.”

Are we going to address gambling on credit cards? I see no word on that. It mentions fixed odds betting terminals, for which the maximum stake was set at £2, but let us not forget that the gambling industry was dragged kicking and screaming to the table on that particular one. I hope the same will not be said about harm reduction in years to come.

\[57x-2410\]Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman started his comments with the mandatory levy. He is right, of course, that it will take time to do this. If someone is interested in how quickly they can do things, the sooner they start, the sooner they finish. All of that is true. I said it would take at least a year; it may in fact take nearer to 18 months because any of these changes will need to begin at the start of a tax year.

A mandatory levy would deliver a return of 1% of gross gambling yield. What is being put forward today—except by only five companies, but that represents about half of the commercial gambling industry—is exactly for that: 1% of gross gambling yield. We would not derive any more income from a mandatory levy than we will from this process, but via this process we will derive it more quickly, and that is a real advantage for the problem gamblers whom I know he and I are both very concerned to help.

I do not accept that this is a piecemeal commitment. It is a four-year commitment, which we—all of us; not just the Government—will have the opportunity to monitor. If it is not being met in the way we all expect, we can and will take further action.

The hon. Gentleman is right that the Gambling Commission receives its funding from the industry; that is generally the case with regulators. If we had a mandatory levy, it would still fund the same activities. However, I believe the Gambling Commission is the right body, as the regulator, to be able to give us the assurance, which the Opposition spokesman properly raised, that the money is being spent on the right things, not simply ploughed back into the activities of the five companies.
Jeremy Wright:

The hon. Gentleman knows I take the view that there is more to do in relation to gambling on credit. He knows, too, that the Gambling Commission is in the process of looking at this in detail. I want to see what it concludes, but I believe a lot more can be done on gambling on credit to make sure that those who are particularly vulnerable do not find themselves more vulnerable by gambling on credit.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Opposition spokesman mentioned an estimate of 55,000 children addicted to gambling. Do the Government accept that this terrifically large figure is accurate? If so, what proportion of it is a result of the advent of online gambling and what age verification measures are in place to supply at least part of the solution?

Jeremy Wright: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. It is difficult to be precise about the number of young people in particular who have problems with gambling, as my right hon. Friend will recognise, but it is a fair assumption that online gambling contributes significantly to that problem. As a result, we have already seen improvements in identification and age verification. We need to see further improvements to make sure that the trend decreases.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I have been contacted by the family of a constituent who is addicted to online gambling and is trying to recover. There are some measures, to which the Secretary of State referred, to prevent online gambling, such as the website GamStop, which allows users to put controls in place to restrict their gambling activity. However, it is not compulsory for betting companies to sign up for this, and it is far too easy to bypass the current controls. Will the Secretary of State look at making GamStop mandatory, and will he support tougher controls?

Jeremy Wright: We will certainly look at what more we can do. The five companies we have talked about are signed up to GamStop, and it is important that more accept this as a useful mechanism to help those with problem gambling. It is also right that we look at banks to make sure mechanisms are in place to allow the people who choose to do so to indicate to their bank that they do not wish to spend money in these areas. We have already seen banks such as Monzo and particularly Barclays, which is a large bank, doing exactly this. Other banks are now looking at it, at our urging, because it is important that we have additional safeguards in place.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): While I understand the arguments made by the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) and sympathise with many of them because they are in the spirit of my ten-minute rule Bill, I cautiously welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, because I believe it will deliver money to start proper independent research and analysis of what can and should be done to protect the vulnerable.

With caveats, may I ask my right hon. and learned Friend to confirm: first, when will the voluntary levy start happening; secondly, can it be front-loaded, so that there is a pool of money to do the research as soon as possible; thirdly, who will determine who does the research; and, fourthly, how will those who have not yet volunteered be implored to join the party and to contribute a voluntary levy? Lastly, and slightly separately, what progress has been made on a ban on all gambling adverts during live sports?

Jeremy Wright: Perhaps I may start at the end. My hon. Friend will know that in a few weeks—on 1 August—we expect to see instituted a ban on advertising during the currency of live sporting events before the watershed. Progress is being made, and we are pleased to see it.

I thank and pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the considerable pressure he has continued to apply to the industry. As I mentioned earlier, I believe the credit for this announcement goes not just to those making it, but to the many Members of this House on both sides who have applied consistent pressure on the gambling industry.

My hon. Friend asks when the voluntary levy will begin. As I indicated, one of the advantages of this approach in comparison with that of a mandatory levy is that we will start to see the fruits of it very shortly. By the end of this year, we expect to see additional funding coming through for the targets we wish to see addressed.

Secondly, my hon. Friend asks about front-loading. Of course, we want those who are going to be able to use this money to be able to set the parameters for how it should be used, so we must make sure that demand is met. At the moment, it is not likely that those who would be spending this money could spend £60 million a year. However, we of course want the industry to be receptive to requests for money as and when they are made, and it has indicated that it will be, so we must make sure we meet demand as it grows.

Thirdly, in relation to research funding and who will decide where it should go, as I have indicated, it will be for the industry to propose where this money should be spent, but it can be spent only in areas where the Gambling Commission and indeed others believe it is appropriate expenditure.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Last Friday, the inquest opened into the death of my constituent Jack Ritchie and I spoke to his parents shortly before the statement. He is one of too many young men who have taken their lives as a result of gambling addiction.

The BBC reports that a gambling industry spokesman has said that the welcome but modest—let us admit that it is modest—action today is to protect it from further, tougher action from us such as that on the tobacco industry. The gambling industry is right to draw the comparison with tobacco because it makes billions by creating misery and taking lives. Does the Secretary of State therefore agree that we need to go further? That would include banking the concession on the voluntary levy, but preparing now for a mandatory levy; effective, independent regulation of gambling products; and moving towards the comprehensive ban on advertising and sponsorship that applied to tobacco?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. As he may know, I have met Jack Ritchie’s mother, and I am grateful to her, too, for the considerable work she has done with immense dignity and courage in this field. I reiterate that the credit for the changes is to be
shared widely. It is not simply for those in the House to take; it is for many beyond it, and Jack Ritchie’s parents are foremost among them.

The hon. Gentleman’s points are fair. I will not comment on what people may have said to the BBC. We must stick to the facts of the proposals and what they really mean, which is that we will recover from those five companies—as I have said, they comprise about half the commercial gambling industry—at least the same amount of money as we would if we had a mandatory gambling levy. There are questions about how we can be sure that the money finds its way to the right targets. We have sensibly dealt with those this afternoon and we will need to keep our attention on them. However, the amounts involved are similar if not identical to those that a mandatory levy would recover.

The proposals do not protect the industry from tougher action, and we will need to pursue matters further in a variety of ways—through advertising and other protections. We are not insulating anybody from further action on gambling. The Government will continue to do what we believe it is responsible to do to protect those who are vulnerable. However, it is fair to accept that the proposals are a significant step in the right direction and will produce a significant step up in the funding that gets to those who need it, whose lives have been damaged by problem gambling and who require help now. The change will help us to deliver that assistance.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the statement and the progress that he and the Department have made on this urgent problem, which blights the lives of many people in my constituency. Will he explain the steps that he is taking to ensure that the rules around online gambling keep pace with those for offline gambling?

Jeremy Wright: Yes. My hon. Friend is right that we all need to address the increasing prevalence of online gambling in the mix. She will know that the Department is currently concerned with a variety of so-called online harms, which we are trying to address more successfully than has been done thus far. However, one of the advantages of online gambling is that those companies know more about their clients because it is account-based gambling. Our expectations of them should therefore be higher, and they are.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): It is right that the gambling industry fulfils its responsibilities in tackling addiction, so today’s news is welcome, but I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) that much more needs to be done.

Will the Secretary of State acknowledge the unique position of horse-racing and its relationship with gambling in terms of the levy, sponsorship and live advertising? Does he also agree that millions of people like me enjoy a flutter on the gee-gees, a bet on the football and a visit to the casino or arcade without any difficulties, as an enjoyable pastime?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman is right. It is important to recognise that not all gamblers are problem gamblers and that we must focus our attention on those who are in difficulty. It is also right to recognise that, as I said at the outset, we want the industry to be successful. However, we also want it to be responsible, and I believe that the changes will lead to greater responsibility.

The hon. Gentleman is also right to focus on horse-racing. I know that he is a huge supporter of the industry and does a great deal in this place to raise awareness, which he has done again today. He will recognise that the Government have introduced several measures, including last year’s changes to the levy itself, which brought in substantially more income—about £45 million more. We want to ensure that gambling can continue for those who enjoy it and do it responsibly and that companies take full responsibility for ensuring that any problems are properly addressed.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I welcome today’s announcement, which will lead to the biggest injection ever of funds to help with the treatment of problem gambling. I also welcome the commitment to take further action if required. Will the Secretary of State comment further on how we can use data to help solve the problem of gambling, particularly working with banks, credit card companies and the online sites, perhaps providing for the voluntary allowing of the use of data when people sign up to them?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend is right that we are in danger of missing some of the other important aspects of what has been proposed today. One of the proposals is that companies should share between themselves, with the consent of the individual gambler, information on any warning signs about problem gambling so that action can be taken by any provider of gambling services to which a problem gambler turns after starting with a different operator. It is important that that data is made use of so that people can be helped as soon as they arrive at the second gambling operator. If we can get consent to share that data, that will be a significant step forward.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): First, I associate myself with the Secretary of State’s remarks about the Lionesses. I have enjoyed their performances, with the obvious and I am sure understandable exception of the Scotland match.

I give the statement a small welcome. It goes some way towards addressing the problem, but not nearly far enough, and Liberal Democrats will continue to argue for a compulsory levy. Gambling addiction is a public health problem, with clear links to mental health issues, and it needs a public health response first. The real cuts in public health under the Government are estimated to be between £700 million and £1 billion. Does the Secretary of State believe that today’s commitment will somehow help reverse the damage done by the Government?

Jeremy Wright: First, I acknowledge the hon. Lady’s gracious comments about the Lionesses. I appreciate that she would not have enjoyed their first match, but I hope that she enjoyed the subsequent matches much more.

The hon. Lady is right that we are considering a public health problem. As I said a moment ago, the Government are approaching it as such, and further action will be taken in the NHS plans to deal with problem gambling, for both adults and children. She is also right about the significant overlap with mental health problems, which of course we need to address in parallel. The money we are discussing is to enhance and add to that provision, not to replace it. It is important to say that. It is £100 million that will be diverted to
treatment over four years and I hope that it will add considerably to what can be done for people who suffer from those serious problems.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I invite the Secretary of State to consider a mandatory levy from a slightly different point of view. In the statement, he rightly said that the five companies represent half the British commercial gambling industry. Would it not be fairer, under a mandatory levy, to spread that contribution across the whole industry, bringing everyone on board sooner rather than later, rather than expecting those five to pick up the bill for others, including overseas companies?

Jeremy Wright: The point is that those companies are taking the action voluntarily. I welcome that positive step forward. However, no one in the House has said that that lets anybody else off the hook—quite the reverse: it demonstrates that if those five companies can do it, so can others. It is important that all others across the industry look carefully at the proposals and that we hold them to account for producing a similar commitment. If they are unwilling to do so, I have made it clear that we do not put away the prospect of further action.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): The growing nightmare of online gambling, which is destroying lives and families, has been successfully halted in places across the world, in Germany and elsewhere, by simply banning it in law. May I suggest to the Secretary of State that the problem of online gambling could be solved at a stroke simply by making all gambling cash only?

Jeremy Wright: I think there is a different set of questions in relation to online gambling as an entire concept and gambling on credit. As the hon. Gentleman has heard me say, there is more we can look at specifically in relation to gambling on credit. I think we have to accept that the industry, like all others, is changing. As we live more of our lives online, people wish to exercise their leisure activities more online. I do not think it would be right to suggest that we should prohibit people entirely from gambling online if that is what they wish to do. As has been observed, most gamblers are responsible and able to gamble in a way that does not put them in difficulty. However, for those who do not have that capacity and do get into difficulty, we need to offer help. That help needs to be funded by the industry. That is what is being proposed here. For the rest of the industry that is not prepared to make the same commitment, we need to take further action.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The gambling industry is one that disproportionately preys on communities with the least disposable income and least able to afford the social harms caused. Glasgow, which is home to 26% of Scotland’s most deprived communities, has the highest per capita density of betting shops of any part of the UK outside London. Indeed, there are 2,588 people per betting shop in Glasgow; compared to the richest council area in Scotland where there are 12,000 people per betting shop. There is a clear statistically significant correlation with the impact that is having on poorer communities. In Glasgow, the social harms of gambling addiction alone are estimated to be £35 million a year. That accounts for half the revenue proposed to be generated from the levy. It is certainly inadequate to deal with the extent of the social harm caused. What will the Secretary of State do to redress the £35 million loss and social harm to the city of Glasgow?

Jeremy Wright: The Government need to do a number of things, and I indicated that there are actions we need to take in relation to the health service, but I believe that a substantial amount of the responsibility lies with the gambling industry itself. Again, I stress that this is a very considerable increase in the funding that is being offered. The £100 million is what is specified over those four years for treatment, but the general commitment is to 1% of gross gambling yield—exactly the same commitment that is asked for by those who argue for a mandatory levy. This is an acceptance by the industry that it bears a share of responsibility. I hope the hon. Gentleman will not get the sense from anything I have said that the Government intend to let up the pressure. We do not.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The online gambling problem is significant, but betting shops present a problem on the high street. Will any of the levy go to help local authorities to tidy up the high street not just physically but in terms of crimes committed in the vicinity, such as drug dealing and violent acts, which do break out a lot around betting shops?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the wider issues that occur. She will recognise that the commitment being made here and the conversation around the mandatory levy relates specifically to research, education and treatment. It is focused on those who are already problem gamblers and who need assistance in the treatment sense and in a research sense more broadly. We expect all partners—there are many—to work together to deal with some of the social problems she has identified. I take the view that the gambling industry is one of those partners.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, give a cautious welcome to the Secretary of State’s statement. It is good news, as everyone says, that £100 million over four years has been pledged by gambling firms. However, does the Minister believe that that is not enough? Does he agree that the best way of dealing with this is not through a voluntary levy based on the least that can be gotten away with, but, rather, additional tax legislation on every gambling firm—those that have committed and those that have not—to help offset the cost to the NHS of dealing with gambling addiction?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman notes that the £100 million is specifically in relation to treatment, but more money is being pledged than that. He is right to draw attention to tax. As he will know, tax measures are already in place to derive revenue from the gambling industry. They raise about £3 billion a year at the moment and it is open to any Government to reconsider the tax regime if they think it appropriate to do so. At the moment, however, I believe we should approach this with an open mind. We should look at what the gambling industry contributes and whether that is not just the money that they make the contributions they are offering but that the rest of the industry does so too, so we can funnel that money to where it is most needed.
Points of Order

1.54 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would very much welcome your advice. You will be aware of the considerable issues with the Department for Work and Pensions processing all manner of benefits, including universal credit and employment and support allowance, and the huge impact delays can have on people across the country who are left in extreme poverty as a result. Sadly, yet another of my constituents is affected by what I can only see as incompetence. I wrote to the DWP on 18 April asking when my constituent John Russell could expect an answer to a personal query about his employment and support allowance of several months before. Despite several contacts, he has not yet received a reply. My own intervention has been ignored by the Department for some 13 weeks, even though we received a reply. My own intervention has been ignored by the Department for some 13 weeks, even though we have chased it up. Can you tell me how I might break through this barrier of ignorance and get my constituent the answers he needs?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for giving me notice of it. It is obviously very concerning that it appears that the Department for Work and Pensions has been unresponsive to the concerns he has raised those concerns and they are on the record. I very much hope that those on the Treasury Bench have heard those concerns and will report them back to the DWP as a matter of urgency.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder if you might be able to give me some advice. It has come to my attention that yesterday marked the 80th anniversary of the noble Lord Dubs of Battersea arriving in Britain on the Kindertransport on one of the last trains from Czechoslovakia. I wonder how I might be able to place on the record my admiration for Alf and his contribution to British political and civic life over many years, and to pay tribute to him from his many friends in this place.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order regarding a former Member of this House. I would say that he has very successfully expressed the views of the House and all our admiration for Lord Dubs.

Breast Cancer Screening (Women Under 40)

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

1.57 pm

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to entitle women aged under 40 and with a family history of breast cancer to breast cancer screening services; and for connected purposes.

May I begin by putting on record my thanks to the charity Breast Cancer Now, which has given me such a great amount of support in preparing the Bill? I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) and the all-party group on breast cancer for their support. I thank all cross-party MPs who are backing the Bill. Even the Whip on duty, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), is a two-time survivor of breast cancer. The issue affects so many in this House and I am grateful for such great support for the Bill.

I was moved to introduce the Bill thanks to an incredible young lady called Nicola Morgan-Dingley. Nicola was one of the most inspiring young women I have ever met. She was a healthy 36 year old non-smoking, marathon-running wife and mum when she was diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer, or as she called it on her blog, “the killer boob”. She came to see me not just about her own care, but about the care of all the other young women across the country. She had a passion, a calmness and a sense of spirituality that I have rarely seen in anyone. It was impossible not to want to help her.

I raised Nicola’s campaign with the Prime Minister at Prime Minister’s questions, and Nicola and I went off together to see the Health Secretary about her campaign to ensure that young women get the early screening and early detection that could save their lives. As we sat on the Terrace after that meeting, and Nicola enjoyed a glass of wine and we put the world to rights, I would never have guessed that just two weeks later, at the age of 38, Nicola would lose her battle with cancer. I am here today as a tribute to Nicola, to carry on her campaign with what I am calling Nicola’s law.

The good news is that we are winning the war on cancer—more women are surviving the disease than ever before—but breast cancer remains the leading cause of death in women under 50 in England and Wales, with more than 920 losing their lives to the disease in 2017. Breast cancer is the UK’s most common cancer, with around 55,000 women and 350 men—it does not just affect women—diagnosed each year in the UK, and it is estimated that 5% to 15% of cases are linked to a family history of the disease.

We all know that the sooner a cancer is identified, the sooner treatment can begin and the greater the patient’s chance of surviving, so early detection is surely a vital part of any national strategy to reduce breast cancer deaths. Professor Gareth Evans recently undertook a major UK trial funded by Breast Cancer Now, which provided the strongest evidence yet that women aged 35 to 39 who are at moderate or high risk of developing breast cancer could benefit from annual screening, and that screening those women annually could pick up tumours earlier. The study found that when tumours were picked up through screening, most were smaller.
and less likely to have spread to lymph nodes than those in women who were not screened. Importantly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) has pointed out, such screenings are an opportunity also to screen for ovarian cancer, which is often linked to the same gene.

We know that women with a family history of breast cancer have a higher risk of developing breast cancer themselves and are more likely to get breast cancer at a younger age. The degree of extra risk varies according to whether breast cancer was diagnosed among someone’s first-degree relatives, such as their parents, siblings or children; their second-degree relatives, such as their grandparents, aunts or uncles, or half-siblings; or multiple family members. Breast cancer risk is also inherited from the father’s side of the family. Familial breast cancer tends to be more aggressive than non-familial breast cancer. Prognosis also appears to be partly heritable: women whose mothers died of breast cancer are more likely to die from it, even adjusting for tumour characteristics. We know that women who have breast cancer in their family are more likely to develop it and more likely to develop its most aggressive forms, and we know that detecting breast cancer early gives women the best possible chance of survival.

Based on a thorough assessment of the available evidence, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence—NICE, as we all know it—recommends that women with a confirmed family history of breast cancer should be offered annual mammograms from age 40, and that women at the highest risk may be offered MRI scans from age 30. That one word—“may”—literally means life or death to some women, because not all young women are offered that screening. Despite all the evidence, young women are not getting screened. Not all women with a family history of breast cancer get access to the extra breast screening currently recommended by NICE. Screening can save lives, so why is that happening?

NICE guidelines are not implemented uniformly across the country. We need to tackle that. There is a lack of clarity about the provision of family history clinics. Only some women at the greatest risk receive family history screening though the national breast screening programme. Other women at high risk, and those at moderate risk, may—again, “may”—receive family history screening through local family history services instead. However, some might not receive it at all, and it is those young women that the Bill aims to help.

The inconsistent provision of screening is risking lives. Some young women, because of where they live and the treatments available to them, will have their breast cancer spotted early and treated; some will not. Some will survive; others will not. Imagine having to bury your wife, your daughter or your granddaughter because early screening was not available in their town or area.

In reality, neither I nor the Secretary of State, NICE or the Minister knows the scale of the hole in provision. If the Minister does know, I would be interested to hear it, but everything I am told indicates that there is a lack of national oversight of family history screening for women at all levels of risk, which may result in women not being able to access screening in some areas. We just do not know where or why.

This issue may be exacerbated by the fact that some family history clinics, which assess and support women with a family history of breast cancer, may be at risk of closure. Those clinics are not supported by national funding, and there is lack of clarity about the current governance arrangements for the provision of those services. As a result, some clinical commissioning groups may choose to stop funding family history clinics in their area. I am sure the Minister agrees that that cannot be allowed to happen.

The Bill is intended to strengthen oversight of family history services for women with a family history of breast cancer by introducing a duty on the Secretary of State for Health to ensure the rigorous and transparent implementation of current NICE family history guidelines. The purpose is to ensure that every woman in the country with a family history of breast cancer is able to access services with a proven life-saving benefit, to which they should be entitled regardless of where they live. The Bill would also require NHS England to provide clarity about the current governance arrangements for the provision of services for women with a family history of breast cancer, including the obligations CCGs have for funding family history clinics.

Thanks to Nicola, I have met or corresponded with the people she called her “warriors”. I have been astounded by how they support one another through difficult times, in person, online and in chatrooms, and I was humbled to see so many of them at Nicola’s funeral, still supporting her and one another. They are watching on today, and they want action, so I beg the Minister to support the Bill, to help to deliver Nicola’s law and to help save the lives of thousands of young women in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Andrew Griffiths, Steve Brine, Fiona Bruce, Maria Caulfield, Marion Fellows, Carolyn Harris, Anna Soubry, Craig Tracey and Anne-Marie Trevelyan present the Bill.

Andrew Griffiths accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 413).
Estimates Day

[7th Allotted Day]

Department for Work and Pensions

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2020, for expenditure by the Department for Work and Pensions:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £48,180,879,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 2154 of Session 2017-19.

(2) further resources, not exceeding £362,104,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £49,265,200,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(Jeremy Quin.)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has not selected either of the amendments listed on the Order Paper.

2.8 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing me to lead this debate on the Department for Work and Pensions public spending estimates. In so doing, I shall explain what I think are the purpose and principles of the Department; where I feel that, unfortunately, it is currently failing; and what needs to happen to change that.

Today is about public spending. Most people in the House will know that the Department for Work and Pensions is the largest spending Department of all; it spends around a quarter of the Government’s money.

However, although this is an estimates day debate, we should not focus on the money. The money is interesting really only in so far as it is for something—in so far as we spend it for a purpose and we carry out that purpose in accordance with our principles.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend has probably noticed that there is nothing in the estimates to help the women born in the early 1950s who lost out on their pensions. Does she agree that there will be a round of estimates coming up shortly, and we would like to know from the Minister what the Government are going to do about that, and whether the Department will include it in its estimates to the Chancellor for a future Budget?

Alison McGovern: My hon. Friend makes an effective point—which I will come to—about the position of the WASPI women, born in the 1950s. They dealt with challenges in the labour market that I have never faced. They fought for the changes that my generation benefited from, and at their point of retirement the Government undermined them. I will say why I think that is contrary to the principles on which we operate the welfare state in this country and I thank him for that appropriate intervention.

Before I come to the principles, I shall address the purpose. What is the purpose of all the money spent by the UK’s biggest spending Department? What is it for?

The spending has a simple principle—and Beveridge articulated it in his report, which really commenced the modern welfare state in the UK—and that is to smooth incomes. The idea is that we spend to allow people to take money from the system when their income is low and to pay in when their income is high. It is very simple. If we allow people to smooth their potential for getting wages and income over their lifetimes, on average people will be richer than if they have to cope alone in the hard times. If we allow people to use social insurance to smooth their income, we are all better off. We pay in when we can, we take out when we need; that is how it works. It has a simple purpose. How does the system do that? It operates by some simple principles. It is a huge amount of money, but our welfare state adheres to a straightforward and simple principle—the contributory principle, one that any student of Beveridge will know all about. The idea is that we all pay in when we can and we are all entitled to take out when we need.

Why have I made those points about the simple purpose and principles of the welfare state? I do not think that very much has changed since Beveridge’s time when it comes to the fundamental way that the labour market operates and the risks that people face in their lives that will make them poorer if we do not have an effective welfare state. We are still fighting the same evils that Beveridge identified, and the reasons people might not have enough to get by are fundamentally the same as they were when he wrote his report. The one that we all know about is old age, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) has already mentioned. That is why it is right that, in the 10 years since the crash, the incomes of pensioners in our welfare state have—by and large, with one notable, shameful exception—been protected. We have seen pensions keep pace with earnings and with the general movement of our economy. When the economy is growing, pensioners’ incomes have kept pace. We know that the uprating, the increase in spend on pensioners, has protected them from the possibility of poverty. No one wants to see people who have worked hard all their lives go without and struggle with poverty in their old age.

Of course, the WASPI women are an exception to that. The principle that they have paid in and that they should be able to take out in an equitable way has been undermined for them. For the reasons that have already been mentioned, that is shameful and must be changed.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for the way she is introducing the debate. Does she agree that at a time when the Conservative leadership contenders are splurging billions of pounds in spending commitments, not a single penny is available for the WASPI women and that really shows where their priorities lie?

Alison McGovern: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. The Conservative leadership election feels like the reversal of politics as I had come to know it. I had always expected that Labour would be on the defensive when it came to public spending. I thought that my party would always have to prove that we were the ones who would deal responsibly with the economy, that we would always be on the defensive and the Tories would always be on the attack. But those competing in the Conservative leadership election seem to want to reverse that principle. They seem to want to be accused of splashing the cash. Given that one of the candidates
found nearly £10 billion to be spent on tax cuts. I suggest that the debate should never again be about whether austerity was necessary, but should instead be a simple question of political priorities.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The hon. Lady is making some powerful points, many of which I agree with, and I am also concerned by some of the pledges in the leadership contest about the spending of taxpayers’ money. What does she think about Labour’s election manifesto pledges of £1 trillion of spending?

Alison McGovern: The hon. Gentleman asks about the 2017 manifesto. I simply remind him that before the publication of the manifestos in that election most people expected the Conservative party to get a stonking great majority so that it could push through its version of Brexit based on the quality of their manifesto as opposed to ours. I point the hon. Gentleman to the historical facts, as it did not turn out at all like that.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): To return to the point about the WASPI women, I completely accept that we all want to make sure that people have dignity in retirement, but does the hon. Lady acknowledge that the Government’s figures show that reversing the impact of the decision to raise the state pension age in line with rising life expectancy would cost £181 billion? Where on earth would we find such a sum of money?

Alison McGovern: The hon. Gentleman is a fellow member of the Treasury Committee and I thank him for his intervention. That is an interesting forecast. I do not think that dealing with the injustices would cost anything like as much, but if he wishes to have the discussion, we have many hours on the Committee together and I will happily discuss his spreadsheet any time he wishes.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): Before my hon. Friend gets to that spreadsheet, she is making an important point. The budget has been brought more into balance by the cuts in welfare benefits, which have been concentrated on families with children. In our constituencies, many people have been pushed into hunger and destitution for the first time in their experience, not because they have lost talent or the ability to manage, but because for the first time in a century we are cutting benefits to the very poorest.

Alison McGovern: I thank my right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for that intervention. He brings me to the point that I was just about to make, which was what Beveridge might have thought of what we have done to family benefits. When we have children, life costs more. Beveridge knew that in the 1930s and 1940s, and family benefits were always designed to be a solid part of the modern welfare state that would help our country rebuild after the second world war. That is also because those benefits rely on the contributory principle. How on earth do we expect to get responsible adults who are able to use their talents for the benefit of our country and get to the point in their lives when they can adequately pay back to the welfare state if children’s ability to grow and learn has been undermined at the very point when they needed the welfare state to pay out for them? We take out when we need, and we pay in when we can. That goes for family benefits along with everything else.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech, as I would expect of her. Last week, the Scottish Government introduced a new Scottish child payment which, when delivered in full, will mean an extra £10 a week for more than 400,000 children. The Child Poverty Action Group has described it as a “game changer” for tackling child poverty. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is the sort of proposal that this Government should be implementing for the whole of the United Kingdom, and to which the Labour party should commit itself?

Alison McGovern: The hon. and learned Lady will know that I believe in the pooling and sharing of resources across the United Kingdom. If the Scottish Government have found evidence that there is a way of aiding children that can work, I will be learning the lessons, but I firmly believe that the way the United Kingdom’s welfare state pools and shares resources is the most powerful tool that we have with which to tackle the child poverty that worries me today.

We know that the projections for child poverty over the next few years are a disgrace. We will see it rise to record highs, and if we do not make a decision and do something about it, it could affect more than 5 million children by 2024. I do not know about you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I am not prepared to stand by and see the welfare state that this country has built over many years fail at that level. I am not prepared to see the contributory principle that says that we pay out to people in need so that they can pay in when they can, become fatally undermined by the growing wound in our country that is child poverty.

I should like all Members who are present today to ask themselves a simple question. On the basis of the purpose of the welfare state and the principles by which it operates, is the DWP’s current spending a success? We all know the answer to that question. It stare us in the face when we think about what is going on in our own constituencies, and the people whom we see in our surgeries. It stare us in the face when we walk through the doors of the House of Commons and see the destitution, and when we know that a person died on our own doorstep. It stare us in the face when we hear from the Trussell Trust that last year it handed out 1.6 million food bank parcels.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) made exactly the right point. Do we think that there were 1.6 million incidences of lack of food? Do we think that there were 1.6 million incidences of people being so unable to deal well enough with their lives that they had to turn to food banks and beg for help? Do we think that there were 1.6 million incidences, in our experience of error, or mistake, or confusion? Quite clearly not. What we have seen are 1.6 million incidences of injustice and unfairness.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way yet again; she is being very generous.
One of the main contributions to poverty is poverty wages, as a result of which people have been driven to food banks. A couple of months ago, I visited a food bank in my constituency. Think about it: in a semi-rich city like Coventry, 22,000 people used a food bank last year. Does that not tell us a story?

**Alison McGovern:** My hon. Friend has made his point well. We all know that the DWP is failing because we see it every day, but why is that failure happening? I think it is pretty obvious from the DWP’s policies that it has radically misunderstood poverty. While its aims and objectives in dealing with poverty are all absolutely worthwhile and worthy, they will never get to the root cause of it.

The DWP’s policy paper sets out its next steps for action on poverty. It wants to help through the troubled families programme, and it wants to identify people with complex needs. It talks about addiction, and it talks about education. The problem is that while those are factors in people’s lives that are associated with poverty—of course lower educational achievement is a risk for people who grow up in poverty, and of course addiction is a problem in communities that have less wealth—it is possible to do very well at school and still be poor, and it is possible to be poor and not addicted to anything. It is possible for people to have excellent family relationships, to look after each other and be able to take care of their families, but still to suffer the consequences of low incomes, because the root cause of poverty is not any of those other things; it is not having enough money. What my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South said about poverty wages was right, and that is why the DWP must change course.

**Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech, and no one would question some of the things that she has said, but does she not understand that when people suffer from addiction—for example, those who suffer from heroin addiction and have consequently been unable to work—the reason those people have no money is that they have suffered from heroin addiction.

**Alison McGovern:** Let me try this another way. The people whom the hon. Gentleman has mentioned who are suffering from addiction deserve our sympathy, empathy and solidarity, and they deserve help, but so does the kid at school who is working hard, who has great teachers, but who goes home and sees his parents struggling. The cause of poverty is a simple thing: it is not having enough money. It is possible for the Government to have brilliant programmes in all other spheres and still fail to deal with the wound in our society that means people turning up at food banks and children who are unable not to be hungry during the holidays because they can no longer rely on free school meals.

I simply say to the hon. Gentleman, “Ask yourself this question: if we had dealt with every addiction problem in our country, would that necessarily solve the problem of poverty if wages were still too low and this Government were still hellbent on taking money, year after year after year, out of the welfare state which is there to support the family of that child who is working hard at school?”

What, then, has to change? We have to reassess the contributory principle as it affects families, and we have to decide that in this country we will ensure that families can make ends meet. That is why I, along with a number of other Members and the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown—have set out over the summer to try to establish the principles of a programme that could enable them to make ends meet.

I believe that the programme should look like this. Step one must be to end the policies that are breaking the principle of Beveridge’s welfare state. We know what they are. The two-child limit means that 800,000 families with three or more children who are currently receiving tax credit are at risk. While the Government say that the two-child policy will save them billions of pounds, we know that every child matters—every child counts for something—and that is why that policy cannot be allowed to continue. If it does, we know from all the evidence and the child poverty forecasts that it will drive up poverty for children in this country living in a household with three children or more. If anybody thinks that somehow knowing that the Government are going to punish the third child in a family will help to guide families as to family size, I simply say they have probably missed the fundamentals of reproduction. We do not hold children responsible for the actions of their parents, and our welfare state should not do that.

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Lady is making a very important point extremely well. Does she agree that one of the unbelievable aspects of the two-child cap is that it does not take into account that not everyone who has two children and decides to have a third is on benefits when they make that decision? A family’s circumstances can change overnight through no fault of their own, yet the Government seek to punish them for that.
Alison McGovern: I thank the hon. Lady for making that important point, and that is the entire point of the welfare state: our circumstances can change overnight through no fault of our own. And the idea that the Government have set up this arrangement of the two-child policy because they want to send some sort of political message to people about having children or not is crazy; there is absolutely no evidence that it works.

The second thing that has to change immediately is the benefits freeze for working-age people, specifically families. We know the cost to families of the four-year freeze that people have already lived through. That should come to an end this year, but who knows—who knows what the next Tory Prime Minister will choose to do; who knows if they will still choose to punish families. But we know that the reality is that working-age families have not had that lock that pensioners have had; they have not had that connection between the wages going up for everybody else in society and the money that they have to support them. It is simply neither fair nor effective to have a welfare state that does not help families grow up with enough to get by. We are simply undermining the ability of our next generation to contribute to the welfare state when it is their turn.

Thirdly, we need to reappraise the welfare state and find a balanced approach of universal benefits and targeted benefits. We do not have time to go into the intricacies of the ways in which universal credit has failed, but we know that it has. We know that the sanctions regime has caused destitution, and we know that so many of the ways in which Universal Credit was supposed to make life easier for people have not turned out to work like that in practice, which is why the Government are yet to deliver the Universal Credit roll-out; we know it and they know it. That is why for the future we need a range of benefits, some of which are simpler to claim, like child benefit. Child benefit is easy. Those who have a child are, by and large, apart from the highest earners, entitled to it; it is easy and straightforward, and it would be an excellent way to stop child poverty rising if we were prepared to invest in child benefit while we also still use targeted means-tested benefits to get money to the poorest.

Finally, we need a mix of the work that the DWP does through the welfare state and through cash transfers to deal with poverty with all the other things that we know help families to get along and move forward, whether that is services for early years, nursery school, childcare or skills development, so that people can move on and move up. We know that the problem is not just low pay; it is also families being able to have enough time to build up their skills so that they can move on to the next job and get higher wages. So we need that balanced approach of universal benefits, targeted benefits and a balanced mix of the welfare state and other services that the Government can provide to help families.

But in the end my point here today is really very simple: the DWP has failed in its purpose of helping people balance their incomes throughout their lives simply because it decided that families in the UK would carry the burden of the cuts they wanted to see to the state. It has failed to adhere to that simple Beveridge principle that we pay in when we can and we take out when we need, because if we cannot fund children who really need help and support, how on earth will they grow up to be able to pay? The DWP under this Conservative Government is a failure; it is time that changed.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This is a well-subscribed debate, as is the next one. I do not want to impose a formal time limit at this point, but if colleagues could take eight minutes or less that would be very helpful.

2.35pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern).

In speaking today I want to commend the excellent work of my local work coaches whom I recently met at the Whitehaven Jobcentre Plus office in Copeland. They are doing a tremendous job in helping many hundreds of people in my constituency into work.

I think back to the time when I owned and managed my own children’s day nursery and remember speaking with women who did not want to work for more than 16 hours a week because it would scupper their benefits. The benefits system was a clear disincentive to work, and that has been one of the greatest changes from the introduction of Universal Credit. Under the previous welfare system people could lose over £9 of every £10 they earned, creating no financial incentive whatever to get up in the morning and go to work.

As my business was looking after other people’s children, I heard the experiences of many parents. Under Universal Credit 85% of childcare costs can now be paid regardless of how many hours a parent works, which is a huge increase in support compared with tax credits. Under the previous system it often made no financial sense to work more than 16 hours a week; now, under Universal Credit, work pays.

The recent decision to remove the two-child limit under Universal Credit for those born before 2017 is welcome. When my four daughters were all aged under five I had to combine my full-time employment with taking care of my young girls. As a direct result of this Governments’ intervention a working family with two children can now receive up to £13,000 a year for their childcare costs because we have increased the available support from 70% to 85%.

We must also remember that an extra 15 hours of free childcare has now been available to working parents of three and four-year-olds since September 2017, which is enabling more parents to make work pay. Particularly for women, this makes all the difference; we now have more women in the workplace than ever before—since records began in 1971—which is making a significant difference to families’ take-home pay.

One of the greatest influences on a young person seeking employment themselves is seeing their parents enthusiastically going out to work in the morning and positively speaking about their work when they return home, as I do with my own daughters, their friends and boyfriends. There are 458,000 fewer young people out of work than in 2010, which amounts to a 50% decrease in unemployment, and welfare reform has supported the impressive figure of 1,000 jobs on average being created every day since 2010.
Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady kindly cite the evidence to support her statement that welfare reforms have actually led to the increase in employment, because I have evidence to show that employment has increased in spite of the welfare reforms?

Trudy Harrison: I explained earlier in my speech that previously women in particular were restricting their working hours to 16 hours a week because of the benefit system, and in terms of the evidence the hon. Lady is surely not doubting that the unemployment record is at its lowest since 1971.

Universal Credit is one of the most important reforms the Government are making. I want to see high quality, affordable, flexible childcare in every town and village, and I would like to hear from the Minister what steps he and his Department are taking to make that possible. Certainly the welfare reforms are making it a more achievable goal in my community, and I welcome the Government’s efforts.

2.40 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on her absolutely excellent speech. She set out what social security should be about. It is about the type of society that we want. The key thrust of her message was to ask whether it is acceptable that so many children are living in poverty—one in four currently grow up in poverty, and one in five in persistent poverty—when we are the fifth richest country in the world. Is this the sort of society we want them to grow up in, when, despite being the fifth richest country in the world, we also have the highest child mortality in western Europe?

We know the causal relationship between poverty and early childhood death. Is this acceptable? To my mind, it is not, and I am sure that many people across the Chamber agree with me. That is why I asked the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) for her evidence. We have to look at the evidence. There will also be issues with addiction, but are we seriously saying that all poverty issues relate to addiction? There is no evidence to support that. I shall get back to the point of whether this poverty is acceptable. If it is not, we need to look at mechanisms that will ensure that in the civilised society that we aspire to lead we have the policy measures to ensure that this does not happen.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Is it acceptable to be in a party that has always left office with unemployment higher than when it entered office, or is it acceptable to be in a party that has delivered record levels of in-work poverty and that two thirds of households where at least one parent is working. Does she agree that that is not just a failure by the Government to protect those children but an abject failure on their part to protect the welfare state and prevent a continuing welfare state that works for the people who need it most?

Debbie Abrahams: I could not agree with the hon. Lady more.

I am going to carry on with my questions about what we deem acceptable in our country. Is it acceptable that sick and disabled people are being isolated and excluded across our society? I believe that, in addition to children, it is sick and disabled people who have borne the brunt of this Government’s cuts. That shames us all. Nine out of 10 disabilities and illnesses are acquired. Would we want this for ourselves or for our nearest and dearest? I am sure that the answer is no, so what does that mean for our policies for sick and disabled people? Many of us on both sides of the Chamber do not think that this is acceptable. We need a thriving economy, but the present levels of inequality are stifling the growth that we need—[Interruption.] That is evidence based. I can provide evidence for the fact that inequality is stifling growth in the economy.

We need a social security system that is there for all of us. I would like to see our social security system held in the same esteem that we have for our NHS. It should be there for each and every one of us, providing dignity and security in our retirement and the support we need if we become sick or disabled or if we fall out of work. Let us face it: with the current flexibility in employment, people are going in and out of work, and the system needs to be able to reflect that. It also needs to be able to protect us from poverty, because that is what a civilised society does. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South said, this should be about smoothing out our incomes so that we do not have to be plunged into poverty when we experience extreme events. A decent social security system is a vital weapon for tackling the poverty and inequality that are now rampant across the UK.

We know that, although work and pensions spending has increased since 2010, working-age support has actually been reduced by £30 billion because of the decisions that the Government have made. We also know that those savings are set to increase even further to £38 billion by the end of the forecast period in 2023-24. These figures should include the effect of the measures announced in the 2018 Budget, which included annual spending of £1.9 billion by 2023 on universal credit. Unfortunately, although some people have benefited from universal credit, 3 million people will still be worse off under it. As I mentioned in Treasury questions this morning, 87% of all disabled people will not benefit from those Budget measures and will remain worse off under universal credit, alongside 640,000 self-employed households and 475,000 working lone-parent households.

As my hon. Friend so eloquently put it, we have seen the rise and rise of food banks and an increase in in-work poverty. We know that 4 million sick and disabled people are living in poverty, one in five is 330,000 more than under the last Government. I mentioned the stifling effect that this is having on the economy. The Office for Budget Responsibility’s own model has shown that the independent effect of
austerity has been to stifle economic growth by at least £100 billion in 2018-19, which is the equivalent of £3,600 per household. That is my evidence to the House.

I have mentioned the human toll of these policies. In Work and Pensions questions yesterday, I mentioned Amanda, a lone parent who was pregnant and had significant mental health issues. She had her universal credit claim closed in the final weeks before she was about to deliver her child. She did not know why this had happened, but it was revealed that it was because she had not undertaken an independent review. I am pleased that the Minister said that he would take the matter up, but let us just imagine if this happened to us. How would we feel if we suddenly had our income ripped away from us and we did not know what was happening, just as we were about to have a child? This is simply unacceptable.

We know that, between 2013 and 2018, 60 disabled people a month died after their personal independence payment claims were rejected. Many others have died after being found fit for work. A Government’s first duty is to keep their people safe, and that includes their vulnerable citizens. They are failing to do this. Poverty and inequality are political choices. Many of us have made suggestions on how we can tweak the current social security system, but I believe that we need a radical transformation. As my hon. Friend said, we need a new social contract with the British people, built on the Beveridge principles, to define a 21st century social security system that treats its citizens with dignity and respect and protects them from poverty, destitution and even death.

2.49 pm

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on securing this important debate. It is always good to have the opportunity to debate the vital work of the DWP.

The hon. Lady set us a really good challenge because—I hope I have got this right—she was basically asking, “What is the DWP for?” She articulated well Beveridge’s aspirations in the creation of the welfare state, but in addition to what she said about ensuring the smoothing of income and providing a good safety net for people when they need it and for those who are unable to work, the DWP is also about promoting the health and wellbeing of people in employment. It is that important part of the DWP’s work that I will spend some time discussing today, because it seldom gets debated in the House.

The health of the nation’s workers has never been more important. Modern society and the world of work are changing rapidly, bringing new challenges for our physical and mental health. We all spend at least a third of our lives at work, so employers have an important role to play to help workers stay healthy. Fulfilling and meaningful work can be a huge source of wellbeing and having a supportive employer can make a real difference to someone grappling with a physical or mental health condition. Crucially, four in five UK workers say that support from their employer could help them recover quicker from an illness. Much is being done by employers but, of course, there is so much more that we can all do together.

Recent research conducted by the John Lewis Partnership revealed that, by working together, Government and industry can unlock £38.1 billion for the UK economy by 2025 through fast access to psychological services and physiotherapy for employees grappling with a physical or mental health condition. We know that the main two reasons for people falling out of work is poor mental health or a musculoskeletal condition.

The Working Well coalition is a new and growing group of MPs, charities, employers and think-tanks, and together we are committed to do more to improve the health of the nation’s workers. To achieve that, we all need to play our part. We need businesses to take a leadership role in promoting good physical and mental health at work, and I saw during my time at the DWP what some of the UK’s best employers are doing, supported by the Health and Safety Executive. Business can be a real force for good in society, and we want to do more to support other employers, large and small. We want to galvanise others behind the business case for action and to work in partnership with our public services to promote a healthy society.

The Government have an important enabling role to play to make free occupational health services for workers a non-taxable benefit in kind to promote investment from employers. Currently, such services are subject to employment taxes at an effective rate of 40%. Government and employers need to explore and draw together practical advice on physical and mental health to help employers, building on existing good practice. Many employers want to invest in health and wellbeing, but they just do not know where to start.

The Cornwall and Isles of Scilly local enterprise partnership has started a beacon project, backed by £500,000 of DWP investment. It was launched last September at Cornwall’s GrowthFest, and it aims to provide businesses with tailor-made support to enable them to build inclusive workforces. The Evident Agency is developing a scalable digital project that will deliver advice and ongoing support for businesses, working with the Cornwall growth hub and other partners to provide a single point of contact for employers developing an inclusive work place.

With record employment, many businesses in my constituency and across the country are struggling to recruit. We want to make it easier for businesses both to find the right person and to support existing employees who may have a disability or long-term health condition. In developing a digital solution, Evident Agency has engaged with several local businesses through surveys and face-to-face interviews to explore how businesses respond to mental health and disability in the workplace. It is clear that no two businesses are the same and that a one-size-fits-all approach simply does not work. Navigating businesses through the range of advice and support and following through with ongoing support is key. Developing a peer to peer network will be part of the solution, as will the support that large businesses could give to small businesses in their supply chain.

I welcome the recent announcement made by the Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Work and Pensions of a consultation on new measures to help employers better support people with health conditions in work. Much-needed reforms of statutory sick pay will enable it to reach those on the lowest incomes, to be more flexible, and to offer the support that people need
to help them return safely to work. The Government propose to extend occupational health so that more employers are able to offer the service, and I hope that my suggestions about changing the tax system to incentivise and those changes will be taken into consideration as part of that consultation, because this is the perfect opportunity to spark a revolution in workplace health and wellbeing.

A healthy society underpins a healthy economy, and we hope that this can be the start of a new dynamic partnership between the Government, employers and charities to support the physical and mental health of our 32.7 million workers and, most importantly, to close the employment gap for people with disabilities and health conditions who really want to work and play their full part in society. Surely that is a goal that everyone across the House can unite in achieving.

2.56 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I welcome this opportunity to scrutinise the DWP’s spending, because when I sit in my surgery, week after week, listening to the stories of people living in poverty and struggling to survive while facing a continual battle with the benefits system, I find myself wondering just where nearly a quarter of all Government spending is going. It is certainly not reaching the people who need it most in my constituency. People have had overpayments, underpayments, long initial waiting periods, inaccessible and complex online forms that lead to uncompleted claims, a lack of support with claims, and cruel disability benefits tests, with fines consistently being overturned at appeal.

We have had plenty of debates about universal credit, and it is not working. The five-week wait for initial payment is driving people into poverty, debt and rent arrears, forcing them to turn to food banks to survive. We have already heard about the number of people using food banks. In my constituency, like everywhere else in the country, the numbers are going up year on year at an alarming rate. Despite the Government’s claim that nobody will be worse off under universal credit, we now know, thanks to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, that 1.9 million adults will be at least £1,000 worse off.

While the Office for Budget Responsibility’s report at the start the year upheld the Government claim that 1 million ESA households will, on average, receive an extra £110 a month, it also showed that exactly the same number of ESA households will lose, on average, £217 a month. It is no wonder, therefore, that the UN special rapporteur, Professor Philip Alston, accused Ministers of window dressing to minimise the political fallout. That is both damming and shaming.

I have spoken on many occasions about the cruel, unfair disability benefits tests that my constituents have to go through, and for what? Record numbers of people are winning appeals against the Department, and it just looks like the whole process is a stick to beat people with. As we have heard, more than 70% of personal independence payment and employment and support allowance appeals will find in favour of the claimant. One of my constituents was assessed five times in eight years of being on ESA, and despite being found fit for work each time, they won every time on appeal. How flawed must the assessment process be to be so consistently wrong? How can the cost of defending five separate appeals be justified when the decision is the same each time?

More than 16,000 appeals have overturned a PIP decision in the first three months of this year, and nearly three quarters of the 22,000 that went through a tribunal also ruled against the DWP. Waiting times for a PIP appeal are coming up to a year in my constituency—nearly a year in which some of the most vulnerable people in our society are denied the financial support that they need. Things can get worse, because if they have a Motability vehicle, they can lose that as well. I met someone last week who clearly could not get to her job on public transport, but she now faces losing her car due to a PIP assessment. I have little doubt that she will win her appeal, but what consolation will that be if she loses her job in the meantime?

Alison McGovern: Does my hon. Friend agree that this poor decision making fatally undermines the relationship between the citizen and the state, and that it must make his constituents wonder what kind of country we live in?

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for her intervention. I do sometimes wonder what kind of country we live in when vulnerable people feel the cards are so stacked against them that it is not even worth their while to appeal. Those are the people who come to see me. I do not know what happens to the people who are so beaten down by the system that they just give up, which I feel is the unintended consequence—or possibly the intended consequence—of this policy time after time.

We know that the cost of successful PIP appeals was £27 million last year. ESA is not included in that figure, but 74% of those claims were successful. Let us not forget the figures I uncovered towards the end of last year, which show that the Department is not even turning up to four in five appeal hearings. We know what would happen if my constituents did not turn up to four in five appointments with the DWP: they would be sanctioned straightaway.

I also hear from parents whose children are not eligible for free school meals because their household income is just a little too high, and they are struggling to provide their children with a school lunch because they cannot afford it. Many of these families are struggling to make ends meet.

We now come across parents who are eligible for help but who are not getting it due to the complicated application process and the long waiting times. I have constituents who, in the period before the first universal credit payment is made, are desperate for support but are told that they are not eligible for free school meals. Surely we can do this better and provide eligibility for free school meals when the universal credit application is made, rather than waiting until the first payment comes through.

Briefly, on access to benefits for people at the end of life, the current special rules for terminal illness—SRTI—exclude many people with terminal illnesses. I am meeting the Minister next week to discuss this, and I hope we have a constructive conversation, but I raise it now so
that people are aware of some of the difficulties and of the money and time being wasted on inappropriate and unnecessary assessments.

Only 45% of people with motor neurone disease are claiming personal independence payment under SRTI. The majority of people in that situation are still using the standard claims route, which is inappropriate for their situation. They are required to fill in a long form, attend a face-to-face assessment and then wait weeks before the benefits are received.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for his speech. Is he aware of Social Security Scotland’s plans to ensure that all medical evidence is available to decision makers at the application stage, so that a correct decision can be taken without the need for often demeaning, demoralising and horrible assessment processes such as the one he describes? Will he support my call for the UK Government to follow Scotland’s lead?

Justin Madders: The hon. Gentleman makes a helpful suggestion. Certainly those who have, by definition, a very short time to get these matters sorted due to terminal illness should have as much of the process done at an early stage to avoid such difficulties.

It is highly insensitive that people who have been diagnosed with what can be a devastating condition that will end their life, possibly within 12 months, have to face this extra hoop-jumping when they should be focusing on spending what time they have left with their loved ones.

The majority of people with motor neurone disease are awarded the enhanced rate of PIP anyway, so we need to make it easier for them to claim through SRTI instead of the standard route, which many are currently going down. There are a number of helpful suggestions that we can discuss with the Minister next week.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) spoke passionately and eloquently about the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign. She rightly drew attention to the scandal, which will not go away. The WASPI women are there, and they are growing in number. She is right that, while the Tory leadership candidates continue to spaff cash up the wall, people who have been diagnosed with what can be a devastating condition that will end their life, possibly within 12 months, have to face this extra hoop-jumping when they should be focusing on spending what time they have left with their loved ones.

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Mr Clarke: I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), to the Front Bench. He has done important work on all the issues surrounding bereaved parents over the past few weeks, and I think everyone on both sides of the House welcomes the Government’s new position.

Over the two years I have been an MP, I have seen at first hand the hard work, considerable commitment and personal dedication put in by the staff at Loftus jobcentre. I have seen it in the context of the redundancies at the Boulby potash mine in my constituency, which were caused by the move from mining potash to mining polyhalite. The way in which the emergency response team moved, and the work it did to support the workforce into productive and fulfilling jobs was impressive.

That speaks well for the professionalism of the men and women in our jobcentres, many of whom are sometimes unfairly miscast as people who either do not know or do not care about the lives of the people they help—that is certainly not my experience. I do not recognise the Opposition’s characterisation of so much of the front-facing work of the DWP. I tend to find that, if anything, the jobcentre workforce are unbelievably adept, graceful and kind.

Alison McGovern: To be clear, not one thing that I or any Opposition Member said criticised the work of the people on the frontline for the DWP. It is the Conservative party’s policies relating to the DWP that are at issue.

Mr Clarke: I would not ascribe it to the hon. Lady’s speech, but I have heard speeches in this place from Labour Members that have come very close to blurring the line between the policy and the people. There is sometimes a real determination to make people afraid of their experience of programmes such as universal credit by stoking up concerns, rather than pointing out the progress on rolling out this fundamentally important reform, which originally enjoyed the Opposition’s support—mainly because it is the right thing to do.

The hon. Lady rightly referred to the Beveridge principle of a welfare state that acts as a strong safety net to help those in need when the chips are down. That is not what we had under the last Labour Government, when the cost of welfare benefits rose by some £84 billion—an enormous sum of money. Welfare has to be fair to the taxpayer, as well as to recipients. This is an important issue. The balance was lost, and the public knew it was lost.

That was one reason, among many, why we won the 2010 general election. There was a widespread perception that the welfare system had strayed from its moorings and was no longer necessarily about helping people into work, or helping them to stay in work longer. For too many, it allowed a lifestyle based on the trap of dependency—my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) referred to that trap. For too many people, the logical incentive created by the system was not to work, or not to work more hours. There was nothing kind or moral about that. It was, in fact,
Alison McGovern: The hon. Gentleman is being characteristically generous with his time. Will he answer a simple question? How does the two-child policy provide an incentive to work when children, by definition, cannot work?

Mr Clarke: Child benefit is, obviously, a sensitive issue, but the point is that a family not in the welfare system, perhaps just above the entitlement level for welfare support, has to make rational choices in their life. All families have to make rational choices in their life about the size of the family they can afford. Lots of people find it wrong that the system would allow people to have any number of children, whereas those people not in the system have to make budgetary choices. That is not a principle I am uncomfortable defending.

Let us go to the wider point, as we need to go back to first principles on this. I do not doubt the sincere differences we have and Labour Members’ concerns, but they have to justify the fact that under their Government 1.4 million people spent most of 2000 to 2010 trapped on out-of-work benefits, with some receiving more than the average wage. Some 50,000 households were allowed to claim benefits worth more than £26,000 a year. I represent a low-wage constituency in the north of England and I simply cannot justify a situation whereby the logical thing was for people to stay earning that amount of benefits rather than to be in work. That has profound and adverse social consequences.

Debbie Abrahams: I think what we are trying to do with this debate is look at where we are now. The hon. Gentleman is right, and we did not get everything wrong, but what we need to do is look at the system now. It is clearly not fit for purpose. The way he was talking made it sound as though he also had concerns about the number of children, and the number of sick and disabled people, living in poverty. I am sure he was not suggesting that all the sick and disabled people who require support are shirkers or scroungers, and that there is nothing wrong with them. So what do we do now?

Mr Clarke: The hon. Lady is absolutely right; of course, there are lots of people who, for reasons that are totally out of their control, need our support and compassion. No Conservative Member would argue with that. I would argue that we get more money for compassion. No Conservative Member would argue totally out of their control, need our support and course, there are lots of people who, for reasons that are considerable social policy success that has been represented by helping the equivalent of the entire population of Wales, more than 3 million people, move into work during this Government’s time in office. That is a really important shift and we do not want to see this go backwards because we have changed the incentives in the system.

That is one reason I was so profoundly opposed to the amendments tabled by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) in this debate. I do not think it was appropriate for this debate and these estimates to be drawn into the context of the Brexit debate. That was profoundly unwelcome. No matter which side of the House someone sits on, we have to try to keep certain aspects of the debate separate. It will be interesting to hear from the shadow Front Bench what the Labour party’s position would have been had the amendment been accepted and what it would be were a future such attempt to be made. It is important to put on the record that there are some aspects of this debate that are simply more important than the issue of the UK’s membership of the European Union—or not. In truth, the two things are fundamentally discrete.

3.14 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am glad to be speaking for the Scottish National party in this debate, because it is an important issue on which I have campaigned for some time, particularly in relation to the two-child limit. I will discuss that in my speech.

It is perfectly clear that the welfare state is no longer a safety net for those who need it. It is a labyrinthine maze of bureaucracy, traps and loopholes to cheat people out of ever feeling safe or supported. The safety net is full of holes. This Chancellor, like the one before him—and, no doubt, the one to follow—has attempted to balance the books on the back of sick, disabled and vulnerable people. Even by the UK Government’s own flawed criteria, they have abjectly failed. The IFS has said that the Chancellor’s plan of running a budget surplus by the mid-2020s is no longer a sensible proposition. Public spending was as high in 2018 as it was in 2008, but what have we got to show for it? We have a rise in child poverty, in homelessness, and in food bank usage.

The fifth richest country in the world, that is a shameful situation. The two-child policy alone is expected to push thousands of families into poverty by the end of this Parliament. The Child Poverty Action Group has said that if we were to intentionally design a policy to put children into poverty, we could not do much better than that one.

The report “All Kids Count: the impact of the two-child policy” was issued last week by the Church of England, CPAG, Women’s Aid, Turn2us and the Refugee Council, with support also from the Interlink Foundation, representing the Orthodox Jewish Community. It paints a stark picture: of families forced into poverty, debt and borrowing money from friends and family. I have to say that the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) is absolutely incorrect in so many of his assertions on this policy, because it will affect families in so many different ways and it absolutely traps them in a situation where they cannot work their way out of poverty. I commend this report to him—because it has modelled this, I recommend that he read all of its details, because it makes it absolutely clear that families cannot compensate for the two-child poverty through work.
The report gives the example of a single parent with three children working 16 hours a week at the national living wage—the pretend “living wage”—and says that she “cannot ever compensate for the loss of a child element by increasing her hours, if she incurs childcare costs from doing so (because these are never covered in full by universal credit). Only if she can access free childcare (e.g. by using help from family members in addition to the free entitlement for 2–4 year-olds), can she compensate for the loss, but she would still have to more than double her hours from 16 to 40 per week.”

This is also true for families where there is a couple and for others: nobody can work their way out of the poverty caused by this policy.

The findings from a survey done on the two-child limit by those who are claiming are stark—the impact on those families is dreadful and in some cases it results in family breakdown. That ought to concern the Tories, who seem to like to maintain the family in all circumstances. I will read out some of the quotes. One read:

“I’ve recently split with my long-term partner and father of my four children. When I had my children, I did not intend to be a single parent— and now that I am, I feel like I’m being penalised by the government.”

Another read:

“My partner became ill and unable to work due to disability and I’m now at home having to care for him and our four children. Me and my partner are literally not eating at all during the day to feed the children.”

I would like to see the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland try to justify why that is fair, because it is absolutely not.

The report shows 95% of families who responded reporting that the two-child limit has affected their ability to pay for basic living costs, with 88% saying it had affected their ability to pay for food, 88% saying it had affected their ability to pay for clothing, 71% saying it had affected their ability to pay for gas and electric—and the list goes on. This is absolutely catastrophic for these families and they cannot do anything to get out of the situation.

Alison McGovern: I thank the hon. Lady for bringing that report to the House. Does she not agree that, contrary to what the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland said, life is full of unforeseen and unintended occurrences and the welfare state is simply there to help us out with all of them?

Alison Thewliss: None of the families in this report could really have predicted their circumstances when they had their children, and this has been acknowledged by the Government, because they said that if the child was born after the cut-off date in April 2017, it would be unfair to bring this in. They have acknowledged that it is unfair for some families but not for all families, but if they acknowledge it is unfair for some, they should just scrap this brutal policy for all and for ever.

Despite all this, families are trying to cut back. They are trying their best to get by. One parent said:

“We try our best to make sure the children “are well fed and pick up the leftovers if they leave anything, or just toast.”

So families—parents—are living on just toast, at best. What kind of society is this that the Minister presides over? Families are not able to pay their bills and are going into arrears—into debt—which means they risk going into homelessness and losing the roof over their head. They are relying on other members of the family to try to support them. One woman said:

“At 36 years old you shouldn’t have to rely on your mum and dad”

to feed the children. People are going into debt because they are not able to pay for things because there is no spare money. They are going into debt on credit cards and with the other types of lenders. Families are so far away from being able to pay for these things that it puts tremendous financial strain on them.

The two-child limit also has an impact on other members of the family. Other children feel as though they are losing out because of their baby brother or sister. That is really quite sad. It gives me a lot of pain to think that children feel as though they are losing their ability to go out and have fun, to live their lives, to go swimming or to do anything else they want to do, because their parents were unfortunate enough to have a third child. That is absolutely appalling, and it affects families’ mental health and wellbeing, as I have said.

The two-child limit has lots of other impacts. There is good evidence from the survey—which should concern all Members, regardless of their opinions on the policy—that families are choosing to abort healthy babies because they are worried about how the two-child limit is going to affect them. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) shakes her head on the Front Bench, but there is evidence. She should read the report and do something about it.

There are also issues for women who have come through refuges—through domestic abuse—and who have to use the rape clause to claim for a third child. Nobody should have to fill in a form to prove that they were raped, just to put food on the table. That is unacceptable, and the Government’s policy is despicable. Last year, 190 women were forced to fill out the form. The figures are not yet out, so I do not know how many women are affected this year, but my bet is that it will be more.

The impact of the rape clause is such that those 190 women are not even all the women who are likely to be eligible for support. There is in the report a good and heartbreakingly powerful case study about a woman called Sabrina. The name has been changed, but it says Sabrina in the report so that is the name I shall use. It says:

“Sabrina had been experiencing abuse at the hands of her husband for almost a decade when she and her two young children came to a Women’s Aid member refuge in England. Whilst in the refuge, Sabrina discovered that she was pregnant...Sabrina wept at the news—tears of anxiety and worry about how she was going to cope financially when she eventually moved out of the refuge. Sabrina knew that, because of the two-child limit, she would struggle to bring a third baby into the world. She couldn’t bear the thought of having to tell the government how the child was conceived—out of abuse and fear—in order to get the money she was entitled to. Soon, she packed her family’s bag with the few belongings they had and returned to the home she had shared with her abuser, utterly defeated.”

That is not a situation that this Government should be putting women in. They should be helping women out of abusive relationships, not sending them straight back to their abusers for fear of losing out. I do not want to
happened to make the process better; it should not exist at all. There should be a universal support system for everybody, and that is why it is such a fundamentally important issue.

Although I know that others wish to speak, I could go on all afternoon about the injustices of the two-child policy, because it also affects religious minorities who cannot or will not use contraception or abortion, and it affects refugee families, who come here, wait a long time to be processed, and then find that they are not able to get the entitlements that they had hoped to get to support themselves and their families. The impact of the policy is devastating, and it disproportionately affects families who are already in work. The Minister should look at the report, look at the evidence and scrap the two-child policy, and the rape clause that stands part of it, immediately.

3.23 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is an honour to have the opportunity to talk in this important estimates day debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on introducing the debate.

Record and rising employment is the central fact of the Government’s economic record. It is sometimes easy to brush over the fact that we now have the highest rate of employment in this country than at any time since the early 1970s. That is not only important on an economic level, although obviously it has wonderful economic benefits for the country, but extremely important on a social level and a personal level, because of the way it benefits families and communities and gives people opportunity and optimism that they otherwise might not have.

For four years before I came to this place, it was very much my privilege to serve as the director of policy at the Centre for Social Justice, which is a think-tank that looks at the root causes of poverty in the UK. That background is what lies behind my exchange with the hon. Member for Wirral South earlier. One can of course say that the root cause of poverty is people not having enough money. It is true that poverty is people not having enough money, but it is unquestionably the case that the reason why some people do not have any money is that they do not have a job in order to earn money, and that the reason why some people—not everybody at all—are unemployed is that something has gone badly wrong in their life, and that thing needs to be corrected with the help of public services, with the support of their family and with their own personal determination. That must always be an absolutely essential part of any welfare policy, which is why it is so important that the significant changes that have been introduced in the Department for Work and Pensions have been coupled to the work of the troubled families programme in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. It is by helping people to overcome some of the root causes of poverty that we can help more people to move into the workplace and so help to support themselves and their families.

There is a group of people who are lucky enough and fortunate enough to come from stable homes, to get a decent education and not to suffer from addiction or any such problems, who still find it difficult to make ends meet, which is why it is extraordinarily important that any Government have an economic policy that generates jobs and drives up wages. The Government have been extraordinarily successful, without parallel, in the creation of jobs. Life has undoubtedly been harder in the generation of higher wages, but it feels like in recent months—over the past 15 months, I think—we have turned a corner on that score and, for the first time since the financial crisis in 2008, we are starting to see wages rise above inflation. Ultimately, that is excellent news for people who are moving into the jobs market and for people who are starting off on low salaries.

It must be remembered that none of that success was predicted by commentators before the 2010 general election. I remember in 2009 listening to a Bank of England economist forecast that the incoming Chancellor of the Exchequer would have to deal with unemployment of more than 5 million. In 2011, he repeated that the policies of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition would unquestionably lead to record unemployment and a massive social security problem. That simply did not happen, because of the business-friendly policies that the Government adopted, which increased investment and business growth and saw employment rise in very many parts of the country.

It was a pleasure to sit and listen to the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke). I do not believe it can be an accident or a coincidence that his constituency has not traditionally had a Conservative MP, yet after seven years of Conservative employment growth in his area, it elected a Conservative. After seven years, following a major economic meltdown under the previous Labour Government, the Conservatives delivered the job growth in his area that Labour had been incapable of doing for the 13 years that it was in power. We see it not just in Middlesbrough, but in a whole range of seats from Mansfield to Stoke-on-Trent. This new era of Conservative representation in parts of the midlands and the north is a result of this policy, which has helped people to find jobs and improve their lives and the lives of their families. This has been termed the British jobs miracle, because unemployment is now at about 3.8% in the UK, compared with 7.5% in the euro area.

Neil Gray: I do not doubt that properly paid work is the best route out of poverty, but when will the hon. Gentleman’s so-called jobs miracle extend to children living in poverty? How can he explain what is currently going on when we see that two thirds of all children living in poverty do so in a working household?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman raises a very good point, but, as I have already said, we had a long period of employment, but with little or no wage increases. We have now started to come out of that period. What he will see is that, if wages and wage growth are maintained in the months and years ahead—as I have no doubt that they will be—we will start to see the number of young people in poverty go down. We will see that their parents have more money because they are in work and their wages are rising above inflation. I am sure that he would accept that point.

Neil Gray: Will the hon. Gentleman not accept that, while we wait, children remain in poverty? What are his Government doing? They are continuing to cut universal
credit, which is supposed to help move these families away from poverty. Why is this continuing to happen? Why do they have to wait all this time for the never-never of jam tomorrow?

Alex Burghart: I do not believe that it is correct to say that the Government are taking money out of universal credit. I am sure the hon. Gentleman remembers the previous Budget when a considerable amount of additional money was put into universal credit. I think that he is, perhaps, slightly out of date on that score.

Alison McGovern: The hon. Gentleman has obviously missed the fact that working age benefits have been frozen for four years. That is a real terms cut. Will he just explain to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who talked about a single parent with three children who simply cannot put any more hours a day into her working life, how, if benefits stay frozen, people are supposed to see their incomes rise and their children lifted out of poverty?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Lady makes a very good point about the benefits freeze. That is something to which I intend to return at the end of my remarks. It is unquestionably the case that the benefits freeze has hit people—and hit some people very hard. She is aware of why the benefits freeze was needed: it was needed because of the disastrous condition in which her party left this country’s finances when it left office in 2010.

The DWP is playing its role in helping people back to work and helping them to find, sustain and progress in work. If Members talk to work coaches across the country, they will find that those coaches now have the tools and a service at their disposal to help them to form a working relationship with the people they are seeking to help. They understand that people who come into the jobcentre are, effectively, in work to find work. The agreement of claimant commitments between the claimant and the jobcentre creates an environment in which both the work coaches and the people with whom they are working can get results. No one who has spoken to work coaches across the country can doubt in any way that this has been substantial improvement.

Universal credit, as it is rolled out and improved, is helping to make work pay. It has overcome the terrible problems of the 16-hour cut-off that was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison). It has helped to overcome these crazy marginal tax rates that popped up at different points in the system. Obviously, it is being rolled out in a test and learn environment. As it is tested, so DWP has learned, which means that a range of improvements have been made.

As a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, under the chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who is no longer in his place, I was particularly pleased that we managed to work with the Government to scrap the seven waiting days, to ensure that people received their money sooner, to see advances of up to 100% on full monthly payments to claimants, and to develop the landlord portal to make it much easier for housing benefit to be sent to landlords and so on and so forth. These are important changes, but I have no doubt that there are still additional beneficial changes to be made. There is further to go—much further to go.

The hon. Member for Wirral South mentioned the benefit freeze. I very much hope that, in the comprehensive spending review at the end of this year, the benefits freeze is ended and the headroom that the Chancellor has built up is put to good use.

3.34 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): It gives me great pleasure to speak in this debate; I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) for bringing it to the House and for beginning so powerfully.

I want to speak about not just the amount of money in the system, but the impact of our benefits system on a whole range of people including disabled people, people who have children, pensioners and people who are unable to work, because it seems to them that they are being punished for being poor and for being unable to work from the very start of making an application for benefits. For example, the personal independence payment form is 33 pages long and includes very cryptic questions. People know that they are supposed to answer those questions in certain ways, but they just do not have the guidance on how to do so.

People have to claim for universal credit online, which means they need to have computer skills, a computer and access to broadband to make a claim and to manage that claim on an ongoing basis—to retain control over their finances and their benefits. We have seen that a majority of people need support to make their universal credit claim and to be supported throughout the process. And it is not just an online claim form, but effectively a 10-stage process whereby the claimant has to make a phone call, complete a claim form online, go along to a jobcentre, provide 14 bits of documentation and evidence, return to sign their work conditionality agreement, and log on to their journal on a mobile phone or portable device. That is a huge amount of bureaucracy for anyone who has to undergo—much less somebody who is not used to IT systems and who, in an area such as mine, has to spend £7 each way to get a bus to the jobcentre and has to meet those costs upfront before they can even start claiming them back.

Someone applying for the personal independence payment needs to go for an assessment, and we have heard so much about those assessments, particularly those of us who are members of the Work and Pensions Committee. I heard from a group of women who were survivors of sexual abuse, who were assessed on how that abuse continued to affect them years later. They found the whole process absolutely terrifying, as they had to attend cold, informal assessment centres that were often in a tower block in the middle of a city, but away from public transport routes.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): In Northern Ireland, we are seeing the roll-out of the horror story that the hon. Lady has mentioned. Statistics published in February this year show that there have been 193,000 applications for PIP. 32% of which were turned down. The resulting appeal from 50,000 turned-down applications has cost us £5 million to process. It is a disgrace.
Ruth George: I agree; it is a disgrace, and not just when it comes to the number of applications being turned down.

Over a year ago, the Government signed up to the assessments being recorded so that their quality could be improved, but we have seen no progress in that regard. People in my constituency want to see a video recording of their assessment because they are so terrified after previous experiences. For example, people who are suicidal have been asked why they did not go ahead with committing suicide. They are now terrified of attending another assessment for disability benefits and are desperate for their assessment to be recorded. However, in order to have the assessment recorded, people have to phone up three days in advance and get specific recording equipment that can produce two recordings at the same time. These pieces of equipment are rare nowadays, as cassette tapes are required to produce such recordings. This is the current guidance from the DWP. People have to source that equipment in order to have their assessments recorded, well over a year on from the Government’s commitment that they would ensure that that was the case in every assessment where people wished for it.

Not only do people have to undergo these cold, terrifying and impersonal assessments where they are concerned that they are being marked down—the Minister appears to disagree—but I have heard from women who say they have been curled up on the floor crying at having to remember their sexual abuse, with the assessor not even looking at them but simply repeating the question. So I am sorry, but I do not accept that those assessments are personal and that they take people’s circumstances into account, from the accounts I have been given that are so distressing to hear.

The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) is right to say that 32% of PIP applications are turned down. That is actually better than in my part of the country, where 46% of applications from those moving on from DLA have been turned down. Some of these people go on to mandatory reconsideration. We used to have 80% targets for the refusal of mandatory reconsideration. I would love to hear from the Minister what the current rate of refusal is. With regard to the tribunals, although 74% of people who undergo them are successful, they take 48 weeks to take place—over a year on from the start of the process.

People are absolutely terrified, all the way through, of losing their benefits. In too many cases, they are having to go to the jobcentre and claim universal credit if they cannot access their employment and support allowance any more, and then being deemed fit for work. Doctors have been written to and told that they cannot sign people who are sick off work any more—that the DWP will not accept their professional medical judgment because its assessors have deemed people fit for work. One of my constituents who was going through the process of appeal was forced back into work, and, on the first day back, suffered a heart attack and died. My constituent and his wife and family cannot get that life back, but we can seek to improve this system that does so much damage to so many people.

Even if people on benefits end up being successful in getting through a tribunal, the amount of benefit that they are on is reduced. Under universal credit, they have to wait at least five weeks in order to get their first proper payment. Yes, they can get an advance of that payment, but they have to weigh it up—do they want to spend the next 12 months in debt because they are having that advance payment deducted from their already low amount of universal credit, or do they try to muddle through? People end up getting into debt with family and friends or with loan sharks and online loan organisations. We have heard that 3 million households are still worse off under universal credit. Despite that, local housing allowance is meeting only 3% of all market rents in many areas, including some in my own constituency, so people are seeing a reduction in their benefit. They are having to make up their rent because local housing allowance does not meet it, and over half of universal credit claimants are having deductions made from them as well.

It is no wonder that people end up in poverty. Some of my constituents end up with just £20 a week to pay all their bills. As if that is not enough, people on universal credit are being hit more and more with civil penalties of £50 for being late in supplying information or late for an appointment. Answers to parliamentary questions that I tabled showed that nearly £400,000 of such penalties has been passed on to debt collectors by the DWP in the past year. These people are already very poor. They are already suffering from having a penalty imposed on them, and then they are having to pay debt collectors the £135 fee that they charge on top of trying to seek the £50 fee. How is this being fair to people who are poor? How is this supporting people back into work? It is no wonder that we have seen the number of people visiting food banks rising, homelessness rising, and in-work poverty rising.

I could say much more as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on universal credit: time and again, we hear about the problems with the system from fantastic advisers who, day in day out, try to support people. In many cases, those advisers—Citizens Advice, Derbyshire welfare rights—have to come to us as constituency MPs to try to sort out problems that they are not empowered to sort out on people’s behalf.

I am sorry to say that my advice agents across Derbyshire are having to come to me to see whether I can help constituents in other parts of the county whose MPs refuse to help them. It is not right that we should be getting to the point where MPs—on the other side of the House, I am afraid: every one of those requests has come from Conservative constituencies—are not prepared to listen to and support their constituents, who need such support to be built into the system.

People feel absolutely powerless. No wonder we have seen a huge rise in debt and mental health difficulties, especially among young people growing up in poverty and in families struggling against this system. Please let us change not just the amount of money that goes into the system, but the whole way in which people are treated. They must be supported and empowered to live fulfilling lives.

3.46 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to be the last, I think, of the Back-Bench speakers today on the important issue of the spending of the Department for Work and Pensions and its estimates. That vital Department takes a quarter of the £800 billion-odd spent each year on public services. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on securing this excellent debate.
I spent a happy year sitting behind Ministers PPS-ing at the DWP. I was really passionate about working there, because it is a Department that can really make a difference; it has a huge spend and a vast range of levers to really help people and make a difference. Alternatively, if things go wrong, we see where people are hindered.

In his excellent speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) referred to a number of Conservative Members elected in 2017 to seats that might previously have been described as the Labour heartlands. I want to add North East Derbyshire, a seat we won in 2017, to the list. I stood for that seat in 2010 against Natasha Engel—a former occupant of the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and an excellent MP. I spent two and a half years there. I remember how toxic the benefits culture there had become: an issue that set neighbour against neighbour.

People were concerned that they were working hard while they saw other people who they thought were not putting in the shifts. At times, that was unpleasant and unfair: it is very difficult to tell who is capable of work and who is not, and neighbours are not necessarily able to make the distinction. But I was troubled by the situation and by the statistics showing that, in 2010, 1.4 million people had been on long-term benefits for nine years and 2.6 million had been on them for five years. Clearly, that was a difficulty.

The big challenge for any Government elected in 2010, whether Labour or Conservative, was to work out how to get people capable of work off benefits and give them the tools, access and ability to step into work, thus reducing the benefits bill and focusing funds on those who really could not work. It was about helping and empowering those who could work to get into and rise up the jobs market.

I think my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar is right about electoral success. Fast forward to now, and we see that the approach has gone down incredibly well with voters—not only those who saw people on benefits who perhaps should not have been, but those people themselves, who wanted the help and were given the encouragement.

Debbie Abrahams rose—

Huw Merriman: I will give way only once, as we are short of time.

Debbie Abrahams: The hon. Gentleman continues to make the assertion that welfare reforms have driven the increase in employment. There is no evidence to support that: the National Audit Office, for example, disputes it.

On the issue of working as the route out of poverty, I should say that, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, four out of five people in low-income work will still be in such work 10 years later. It is an absolute myth that work is a progression. That does not mean that we should not do stuff about that issue—of course we should.

Huw Merriman: Well, we can argue about statistics, but try this one. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady wants to throw one at me, but then will not let me respond with one, which I find slightly dictatorial. Some 2.2 million people were unemployed when we took office in 2010; that figure is now 1.4 million. I can give her the number of those who have clearly moved off unemployment benefit into work. We can argue about this all the way through—

Alison McGovern: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Huw Merriman: I am not going to take any more interventions because, to be fair, those making them have had a lot of time to speak, and I am not going to get much of a chance.

We have seen people moving into work, and that has been a huge success. From listening to Opposition Members, one would think that the benefits system was completely rosy. As I have said, not only were too many people on benefits—trapped on benefits—but if we look at the tax credits system and the attacks on universal credit, we can see that universal credit has been rolled out in a slow, progressive manner, and we have changed it as we have gone along, while tax credits, which were rolled out in one big bang, were overpaid by over £7 billion, and over £2 billion had to be clawed back from those who were actually the poorest. I do not want to take too many lectures on how to introduce a successful benefits system, because we have seen how things have failed before. What has most impressed me about the Department is that it has learned from the failings over the years and has tried to do things better.

I am absolutely passionate about universal credit, because I have spent time with my jobcentre and seen the enthusiasm that the work coaches have for it. When we go into a jobcentre now it is not like going into some cold, austere office where people are too scared to go in and get any help. It feels almost like a recruitment centre to help people. There are help points and people who are passionate about helping people into work.

I am really proud of this Government’s record. I believe that every Government should be judged on what they have done in helping people into work. As I have said before, on every occasion the Labour party has left office, it has done so with unemployment higher than when it entered, which has got to be considered a failure. The Conservative party has been able to secure 3.6 million extra jobs. We have also increased the living wage, taken people out of tax and incentivised them. We have tried to focus on people who need help the most. It is said that all these jobs are low-paid, but 70% of them are highly skilled. It is said that wages are not going up, but for the 15th month in succession wages are going up by more than inflation. The proportion of jobs that are low-paid stands at its lowest level for 20 years as a result of the national living wage. Yes, there is more to do, but let us not knock the record that we have delivered.

I am going to make one suggestion, and I am echoing a point made by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who talked about the Motor Neurone Disease Association. He and I played football against that organisation, and I found it the most extraordinary moment. It was incredibly touching to play alongside them, and I then met that team. The organisation makes the very good point, which is also made by the Marie Curie cancer organisation, that it cannot be right that we have to test those with terminal illnesses for their disability benefit. They are reliant on a
doctor saying that they will die within six months, but GPs are not comfortable saying that. The challenge for us as a Government is really to listen, and to look at how much such a change would cost. We know those people are going to be able to claim benefits in the main, so it is only a delay while they have to wait. However, they do not have time to wait, and I would like our Government to look at that. It is not just about those in that period of six months, but also those who have managed to survive their terminal illness three years and then have to be retested.

While I am very proud of the Government for what they have done in putting people into work and in targeting support, with almost an extra 1 million disabled people in work as well—we have record levels—we still have individual policy areas that we need to fix and on which we should do better. We must never rest on our laurels.

3.53 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). May I again point him to the Scottish Social Security Agency and the way we in Scotland propose to treat people with a terminal illness? I think he will find that quite illuminating, and it has suggestions for this Government.

It is a pleasure to speak for the SNP in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on securing it. There have been a number of interesting speeches, not least that of the hon. Lady herself. She set out very well a strong defence of the welfare state. She rightly contrasted how pensioners, other than the WASPI women, have rightly been protected, while others have not. I will develop that point later in my speech. She also mentioned the fact that austerity is a choice, and she was right to draw attention to the 1.6 million food parcels handed out by the Trussell Trust as a stark reminder of the impoverishing failure of austerity. Best of all was her stout and clear argument that lack of income is the driving force behind poverty.

The hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) was right to welcome the Government’s cancelling the expansion of the two-child limit, but I question why she does not expect that policy to be scrapped.

I always enjoy listening to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) in these debates. She rightly asked why we do not hold the social security system in the UK in the same high esteem as the NHS. We should all ponder that, as should some in the fourth estate.

The hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) made a thoughtful speech, but I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) made the best speech today. It was brilliant and rightly contradicted the Tory rhetoric on the two-child limit, highlighting last week’s report by the Child Poverty Action Group, the Church of England and others. I know it gives her no pleasure—it certainly gives me no pleasure—to say that the report proves that the warnings we gave at the time were correct. No mother—no parent—should have to choose between poverty and an abortion, but sadly that is the stark choice that faces some because of the two-child limit.

The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) is simply wrong about universal credit. The last Budget made up for just half the cuts that the 2015 Budget inflicted on universal credit.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) was right to highlight the non-financial problems with universal credit and other benefits. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) was right to point to the DWP’s influence. Policy drives poverty—we should remember that.

Sadly, so much of the debate has been characterised by raking over decade-old ground rather than addressing the issues that we face today, and I wish that some Members had spent more of our time on the latter. The estimate for DWP spending is still driven by the policies of austerity that have ravaged the Department since 2010. The estimate may have risen by 3%, but, as the Library briefing makes clear, that is largely down to the Department’s accepting greater responsibility for spending that was previously made by other Departments—for example, taking tax credits from HMRC.

Most people who rely on social security do not see any rise in their weekly family budgets. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) made that point well when he said that 1.9 million people were worse off by £1,000 under universal credit according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies. Family incomes have been slashed, thanks to the austerity agenda that the Tory-Liberal coalition led and the Tories continued after 2015.

Even the modest rises in the state pension leave the UK state pension as one of the most miserly in the world. Thousands of people in Scotland and across the UK have been hit by the benefits freeze, the two-child cap, and cuts to disability benefit and universal credit, leading to a rise in food bank use and in-work poverty. That is why we want the UK Government to think again about their budget for the DWP. It is also why SNP Members will vote against the estimate. We do not do so to deny the funding to the Department; we are using the vote as the only blunt instrument we have to protest about the way in which the Department is funded and the way in which the estimates process is scrutinised. In Holyrood, Members can amend the Budget, but that is sadly not the case here.

The Budget allocation will not allow the Department to remove the two-child cap or the benefits freeze, to fix universal credit, or to mitigate the hardship suffered by women born in the 1950s because the state pension age increased without adequate notice or lead-in time.

What is the real world result of the Government’s spending cuts to the Department? It is increased poverty and food bank use. The Trussell Trust, the largest food bank network in the UK, has reported steep rises in demand for its services year on year. In this year’s report, it points to increased food bank use among working families. That should be a stark warning to us all.

The Secretary of State was the first in her role to acknowledge the long-stated link between social security cuts and increased food bank use, but the Government have done little to put the money where it is needed and stop the cuts that hurt the most, such as the benefits freeze and the two-child cap. The investment in universal credit at the last Budget did not even cover the cuts that
One way of sorting it could be to use the assessment period for the advance payment of UC proper. If there is an acceptance that people need an advance at the start of universal credit, why say that that money has to be paid back? People cannot be expected to live off fresh air and they should not be expected to prolong indebtedness or financial hardship either. Advance the first payment of universal credit and stop the cycle of hardship. I have already mentioned the two-child cap and the benefit freeze, which, I think we are starting to realise, needs to get sorted. Taken with the five-week wait, fixing them would go a long way to stop the projected rise in poverty.

In terms of treating people with dignity and respect, there is an urgent need to sort out the disability assessment and to ensure there is a “do no harm” approach. Ministers will be aware of the work being done in Scotland to set up the new Scottish social security agency, which is soon to take responsibility for personal independence payments. One of the things we have confirmed we will do is to ensure all medical information about the applicant is available at the application stage, so as to avoid the need for the face-to-face assessments that so many disabled people find demeaning and irrelevant. It is hoped that by doing so we will cut the staggering appeal rights currently seen in the UK system, as we will get the decision right first time. The current Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), once said from the Back Benches that he was sympathetic to that idea. I hope he might be influential in the Department now in looking to follow Scotland’s lead in this area.

The pensions landscape still needs to be properly mapped out. I have repeatedly raised the issues faced by the 1950s-born women. I still believe that UK Ministers have an obligation to act, but we continue to be stonewalled. One issue picked up this morning, in a roundtable that my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) and I had with pension stakeholders, was lost pension assets.

The Association of British Insurers and the Pensions Policy Institute found that relatively recently and found that there are 1.6 million lost pension pots, averaging £13,000 each. In total, about £20 billion is unclaimed. Astonishingly, those figures are for defined-contribution schemes alone. Obviously, defined-benefit schemes are harder to analyse, but the total is expected to be far in excess of the £20 billion unclaimed from DC schemes.

What I find most frustrating is that, although the industry has been trying hard to return those assets to their owners, the UK Government have not been terribly helpful in providing the necessary information to allow it to do so. I hope that changes. Phoenix, one of the contributors to our meeting this morning, spent two years researching lost pension pots and managed to reunite people with £13 million from more than 2,300 pots. Clearly, the UK Government need to look at what they can do to help the industry, as we are talking about substantial amounts of money.

We await publication of the pensions Bill. I hope there is serious cross-party work to advance key issues such as the pensions dashboard and our idea for an independent pensions commission.
Sadly, this debate has shown that although there is general consensus on the pensions scene, there is very little in other areas of social security—there are some exceptions—that we agree on across the House. However, the facts speak for themselves. When we invest in families and ensure they receive proper support, poverty drops. Poverty is policy driven, and right now UK policy is impoverishing. That is why we cannot support these estimates this evening.

4.6 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on opening this vital debate and thank the many Members who have contributed.

Sadly, there are far too many things that Members could have chosen to focus on when considering the spending approach of the Department for Work and Pensions. Certainly, there is no shortage of examples of delivery failure, catastrophic underfunding and policy approaches that hit the most vulnerable the hardest, including 1950s-born women and citizens who are terminally ill. However, as Members highlighted, there is one area in which many of the Department’s failures, come together and one group who all too often suffer the consequences of multiple cuts and changes in policy: children.

It shames us as a society that the Government have allowed children to bear the brunt in such a shocking manner. We therefore welcome this opportunity to scrutinise Department for Work and Pensions spending, and we welcome my hon. Friend’s choice of subject. When the future of some of our most vulnerable children is at stake, it is absolutely right that we should hold the Government to account for their poor decisions.

Shockingly, by 2022, the Department’s spending on social security will be £36 billion less per year than it was in 2010. Social security has become a vehicle for cuts—a political choice that saw 1.6 million emergency food parcels given out last year alone, 577,000 of them to children, and that has seen this Government dragged through the courts on several occasions. For example, 210,000 people who were underpaid employment and support allowance will now rightly receive the £920 million they are owed.

Consequently, as we have heard, the number of children living in poverty has increased by half a million to 4.1 million. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South said, that figure is likely to rise to more than 5 million. In-work poverty is rising faster than employment. Absolute child poverty has also increased over the past year, showing the negative impact of low pay, universal credit, the five-week wait, the four-year freeze and the £920 million they are owed.

In just three weeks’ time, we are likely to have one change at least. The leader of the Conservatives, and therefore the Prime Minister, will be someone different. Perhaps the Cabinet Minister responsible for the Department we are scrutinising today will be different too. However, given we have already had six of them in the past three years, that would be less remarkable. If the Government had shown the same willingness to change direction as they have shown to change Ministers, we might be in a different place. But it is not the

the necessary vigour, success or compassion. When they have applied new policies, they have failed. There have been persistent problems with the personal independence payment, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), with more than 70% of appeals against decisions to remove PIP being successful, at considerable cost to the public purse and, more importantly, with detriment to the life chances and wellbeing of people. The many thousands of families who budget down to the nearest £1 every week to make sure that they can feed and clothe their children and provide a roof over their heads could certainly teach the two candidates rutting to be the next Prime Minister a thing or two about how to prioritise and manage budgets effectively.

Of course, there are many families for whom all the budgeting and prioritising in the world is still not enough to cover the costs of the Government’s draconian cuts to social security. They are victims of the Government’s insistence on continuing to plough on with universal credit and the freeze on working-age benefits, when all the evidence shows that those cuts are causing severe hardship and poverty. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South has highlighted, poverty is poverty, and food poverty is not separate from it, but a symptom of it—a symptom of low income. It cannot be divorced from the overall effect of Government policy, or wished away by Government-supporting MPs, who think a selfie at a food bank will solve the problems or absolve the Government of their responsibility as the architects of austerity Britain.

We have heard much of the evidence today. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) mentioned a case in which a pregnant woman had universal credit denied to her—I think the phrase my hon. Friend used was “ripped away”—in her time of need. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) said that social security should be a safety net, but it is a net that is full of holes. She highlighted the immorality of the two-child limit. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) spoke about the insensitive assessments applied to the most vulnerable in our society.

Such stories are the real indicator of how we should view the Department and the Government’s record on poverty and their approach to social security. They are committed to the continuation of failing policies, and they would rather trumpet a jobs miracle that in reality, for many people in real communities, is nothing but a mirage; the reality is that most children in poverty live in working households. The Government’s approach has ensured that, for thousands of people, work is not a route out of poverty, given poverty wages and insecure work. That is a damning indictment of their record and of our current economic system. It needs to change.

In just three weeks’ time, we are likely to have one change at least. The leader of the Conservatives, and therefore the Prime Minister, will be someone different. Perhaps the Cabinet Minister responsible for the Department we are scrutinising today will be different too. However, given we have already had six of them in the past three years, that would be less remarkable. If the Government had shown the same willingness to change direction as they have shown to change Ministers, we might be in a different place. But it is not the
changing of names around the Cabinet table that will make a difference, or even as some in the media reported yesterday, the scrapping of the Department. It is the changing of policy, the changing of attitude, and the changing of approach that will make a difference.

I ask the Minister to leave a legacy, and heed the clarion call from organisations such as the Child Poverty Action Group and the many voices in the Chamber today. Will the Minister commit himself to ending the five-week wait for universal credit, removing the two-child limit and the benefit cap, scrapping the benefit freeze, paying up-front childcare costs, and putting a stop to punitive sanctions and work capability assessments? Or, better still, let us have a general election and let the people decide.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): It is a pleasure to respond to a vital discussion of how the Department for Work and Pensions supports the 22 million people who rely on our services.

We have heard a huge number of valuable contributions, including those of the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern)—whom I congratulate on opening the debate—and my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George), and my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). Later in my speech, I will respond to some of the key points that have been raised.

I have been in my post for three months, and over that time my key focus has been on supporting the most vulnerable in our society. No one in the Government wants to see poverty rising, and, while the latest “Households below average income” statistics, from 2017-18, do not reflect the £1.7 billion-a-year cash boost for our welfare system that was announced in the 2017-18 Budget, the Secretary of State and I recognise that there is a boost for our welfare system that was announced in the

As we get closer to the spending review discussions, my ministerial colleagues and I are reviewing our bids, in collaboration with other Departments, to ensure that those who can work do work, and that those who cannot are supported. I can confirm that there are no plans to extend, or maintain, the benefit freeze after March 2020.

Alex Burghart: I thank the Minister for the commitments that he has just made. Will he also tell us what more the Government can do to ensure that vulnerable claimants can have access to universal credit?

Will Quince: My hon. Friend has made a very good point. We know that about 20% of people seek help when claiming universal credit. That is why we introduced the Help to Claim service, working with Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland. However, I am acutely aware that a number of vulnerable groups in my portfolio—care leavers, prison leavers, survivors of domestic abuse, and those who are homeless or sleeping rough—need extra support, and the Secretary of State and I are carefully considering a number of further options ahead of potential spending review bids.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Minister also confirm that it is now always worthwhile to go to work and that people are better off in work, contrary to what we have just heard?

Will Quince: My right hon. Friend is right. By removing the cliff edges, universal credit ensures that work always pays. That was not the case under the previous legacy system.

DWP Ministers always listen and act on feedback. That is why we recently announced that we will end three-year sanctions, initiate programmes to investigate how we can help those in work to progress, work with the Social Metrics Commission on a measurement of poverty, and no longer regularly review those on PIP who have reached state pension age. In addition, I continue to work closely with charities, stakeholders and Members on both sides of the House, using real-life experiences to shape improvements in the Department’s work.

We have worked with the real experts, the stakeholders, including Refuge and Women’s Aid, which have backed training for our work coaches to help victims of domestic abuse so they can better identify, refer and support those in need.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Will Quince: With respect, I will not give way to Members who have not been present for any of the contributions to the debate.

In terms of supporting victims of domestic abuse, we want staff to be able to better identify, refer and support those in need.

We worked with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on the commitment to end rough sleeping through the homelessness and rough sleeping strategy and the Ministry of Justice to ensure prison leavers have access to welfare support from day
The Minister is clearly not giving way.

Neil Gray: I thank the Minister for giving way and will pass on the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). Will he give separate payments to women who have suffered domestic violence?

Will Quince: As the hon. Gentleman knows, split payments are available. I know the Scottish Government are looking at split payments by default, and that is an area I am looking at very closely indeed. It comes with huge complexities, as indeed the Scottish Government recognise, and we are working very closely with them. The Secretary of State has done a huge amount of work in this area— we would expect nothing less from a former Home Secretary who has done an awful lot of work around domestic abuse. So this is an area that I am looking at very carefully; I am conscious of it and am very happy to commit to continue to work with the Scottish Government to try to find a solution to what is a very complex issue.

Supporting the most vulnerable in society is at the very heart of our compassionate Conservative Government and my Department does exactly that.

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Minister give way?

Will Quince: Last year we paid 20 million citizens—more than half of all adults in this country—a huge range of social security entitlements and benefits, from state pension and cold weather payments to universal credit and disability benefits. In total the Department spends £190 billion a year—spending that is equivalent to the GDP of Portugal.

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Minister give way?

Will Quince: Through our welfare reforms and our reforms to make work pay we have got spending under control while ensuring that we do not trap people on welfare. Under Labour, 1.4 million people spent most of the last decade trapped on out-of-work benefits, with some receiving more than the average wage. Some 50,000 households were allowed to claim benefits worth over £500 a week or more than £26,000 a year, higher than the average wage at the time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order.

Will Quince: We are creating a welfare system in which it pays to work, with universal credit simplifying the complex legacy benefit system that thwarted opportunities to work through punitive tax rates and a cliff edge for those wanting to do more work and that mired people in debt. We are establishing jobcentres that help people into work, not just to sign on—jobcentres where one-to-one personalised support is provided to a claimant from their work coach, offering advice and access to services to help the vulnerable, and where staff create links with businesses to make it their personal mission to help people not into just a job, but into the right job.

This is not to speak of the huge wider support that this Government offer. Our welfare reforms are assisting the incredible employment statistics we see month on month. The recent labour market figures show the importance of helping people into work, and this Government have created more than 3.6 million more jobs since 2010, helping people out of poverty and creating aspiration and a huge sense of purpose for millions. The employment rate is at a record high, while the unemployment rate has halved since 2010 and has not been lower since the 1970s. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle rightly said, no Labour Government have ever left office with unemployment lower than when they started, meaning that more people were denied the security of a regular wage. From May to July 1997 to March to May 2010, the unemployment level increased from 2.1 million to 2.5 million. There are now almost 1 million fewer workless households, giving more than 600,000 more children a role model in their home who is in work. The number of children living in workless households increased under Labour, meaning that fewer children were living in a financially stable household with a working role model.

Alison McGovern rose—

Will Quince: Labour failed to help people into work so that they could provide for their families, with workless households increasing between 1997 and 2010.

Ruth George rose—

Will Quince: The number of young people who are unemployed has almost halved since 2010. Female unemployment is at a record high, and wages are growing at their joint fastest rate in a decade. These are the reasons why our labour market is outperforming many—

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Call me old fashioned, but I thought the purpose of the Minister coming to the Dispatch Box was to reply to the debate. He has now been on his feet for 10 minutes, and all he is doing is reading out his civil service brief. This is becoming a habit among Ministers. He said that he was going to refer to Members in the debate, and I think he should start to do that—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I would have stopped the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) a few seconds earlier, but the House must forgive me for being unable to speak volubly today. He knows that this is not a point of order, and that it is up to the Minister to answer the debate however he wishes to do so. The Minister is perfectly in order.
Will Quince: I have taken numerous interventions already, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I stress that the point of a debate is actually being here to take part in it. These are the reasons that our labour market is outperforming those of many other developed countries. More people have moved into work in the UK since 2010 than in France, Spain, Ireland, the Netherlands, Austria and Norway combined.

Neil Gray rose—

Will Quince: We are at record levels of employment and, once fully rolled out, universal credit will support another 200,000 people into work and help those already in work to increase hours. But we do not want people to have just any job; we want them to have good jobs where they are able to progress, and universal credit will enable this while providing an economic benefit of £8 billion a year to our economy and saving the Exchequer more than £3 billion annually.

But this is not “job done”. I know as well as anyone the importance of supporting people into work, particularly among vulnerable groups. That is why we have worked hard to create a safety net that not only supports people when they fall on hard times but gives them a hand up. That is vital. We are spending more than £55 billion this year to support disabled people and those with health conditions. That is more than any Labour Government did. Disability benefit spending will be higher in every year to 2023 than it was in 2010. Under universal credit, disabled claimants who cannot work will receive an average of £100 more each month than under the legacy system. So we are supporting those who have worked their whole lives and paid into our social security, and who now deserve to enjoy their retirement. We created the triple lock on state pensions, which has increased the amount of the basic state pension to almost £1,600 more than it was in 2010. We are further protecting the poorest pensioners through pension credit. This means that in total we spend more than £120 billion on benefits for pensioners in this country. As a result, pensioner poverty is now close to historic lows, which is where we want to keep it.

Debbie Abrahams rose—

Will Quince: I will come to the points made by the hon. Lady.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth raised several points. The Government are spending £55 billion a year on benefits to support sick and disabled people. In 2019-20, our spending on main disability benefits is £9 billion higher than in 2010, and main disability benefits are exempt from the benefits freeze. On universal credit, as I have pointed out already, around 1 million disabled households will receive an average of around £100 more a month.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth, who is no longer in her place, and she will know that we are working with employers through our Disability Confident scheme, giving them the tools and advice to support staff with a disability or long-term health condition. Over 12,000 employers have now signed up. The Minister for Dispal. People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), will pick up her suggestions. I thank her for the work she did when she was in the Department.

The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) made an intervention in relation to the Scottish child payment. I understand that the Scottish Government have laid out their plans to introduce an additional £10 a week for eligible children in Scotland, and I should say that we welcome the overall commitment to tackle poverty, but we note the challenge and look forward to understanding the impact of the payment in detail. We will continue to work with the Scottish Government on the impact and introduction of that payment.

Turning to the remarks from the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), the pensions dashboard is a digital interface that will allow individuals to see their pension savings online in one place to assist with their retirement planning, and I welcome the cross-party collaboration on that. On the pensions Bill, we intend to bring forward legislation when parliamentary time allows.

We are a Government determined to help the most vulnerable, to support them into work, to support them to stay in work, and to support them when they cannot work. We will continue to do that through all the support that the Department offers, and we will continue to assess and adjust that support by listening, learning and improving. I have met and visited several stakeholders, valuing and taking on their expert views, so we are always listening to colleagues, stakeholders and, most importantly, our constituents, whom we are here to serve and support.
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

Motion made, and Question proposed.

That for the year ending with 31 March 2020, for expenditure by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—

(1) further resources, not exceeding £13,222,573,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 2154 of Session 2017–19,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £5,087,100,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £9,295,168,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—[Wendy Morton.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has not selected either of the amendments.

4.33 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I start by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate on this incredibly important matter. I thank the hon. Members for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) and for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) for supporting the application, along with all the members of the Public Accounts Committee. I also thank the hon. Members for Redcar (Anna Turley) and for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), who submitted similar applications that have been lumped in with this debate. I also give my thanks in advance to everyone who wants to speak today; I will be as quick as I possibly can.

Local government spending is a story of unsustainability and inequality. According to the Local Government Association, which is holding its conference as we speak, funding to local government and business rates have fallen by £4.1 billion since 2015. Councils have far less spending power, but here is the rub: our local councils are having to deal with a big growth in demand for key services. Taking into account the decrease in Government grants, subsidised a bit by the increase in council tax, our councils have lost nearly a third of their spending power over the last nine years, and key services are suffering.

We all know what that means, at its heart, for the most vulnerable in our communities. Since 2010 the number of homeless households has risen by 33%, the number of looked-after children is up by nearly 11% and the number of people aged 65 and over in need of care has increased by 14%. It is great that we are living longer, but central Government have not grasped the nettle.

The combination of with higher national insurance contributions, the apprenticeship levy and the national living wage means that councils are at breaking point. Given the major stresses on children’s services and adult social care, I will focus on those today, but there are many others, and I look forward to other Members making contributions about their local area.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): For childcare and other local authority services, central Government have shifted funding away from a grant system and on to business rates. Shopkeepers, in particular, are now finding it difficult to carry on their business. Central Government have also failed to deliver on social council housing, which is an indictment.

Layla Moran: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. In fact, spending on services has decreased by 19.2% in real terms, which is not sustainable.

In my local area, Vale of White Horse District Council is a good example. We won the council from the Conservatives in the last round of local elections, and now we have sight of the finances. I am sure this is not unique in the country, but there is not enough money to fund the basic statutory services that the council is expected to deliver. The council is therefore eating into its reserves at an alarming rate. Coupled with that, an outsourcing agreement that was meant to save the council £50 million, and in fact has saved nothing, is projected to cost the taxpayer money. We are in a dire situation in the Vale.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The situation in the hon. Lady’s area is mirrored in Harrow, where the council has lost over 97% of its revenue support grant since 2010 and is really struggling. Is it not therefore particularly sad that neither of the two Conservative candidates for the premiership are talking about these issues at their hustings?

Layla Moran: I hope today’s debate will be a clarion cull to them and others about the importance of local government in delivering key services. The resilience of local councils across the country is a focus of the National Audit Office’s work, and it has real cause for concern. The message I have received from my friends at today’s LGA conference is twofold. First, we must remember that councils are multi-million pound companies, yet they do not know where their funding is coming from past next year. How on earth are they expected to plan without any sense of the medium term, let alone the long term?

Secondly, if we are to shift the burden from central Government to local government, income generation needs to be made easier. Across the country, I am not aware of a single council that has successfully used the referendum mechanism to raise council tax. This is not working. We need another way to make sure councils are properly funded.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Between 2011 and 2015, according to the NAO, 25% of the central Government grant to councils was cut. Does the hon. Lady regret the role of the Liberal Democrat coalition Government in such a heavy level of cuts?

Layla Moran: When I was a candidate, I, too, fought against these cuts, particularly those to children’s services. As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am a teacher, and I was seeing the effect the cuts would have. Interestingly, the data show that some of that was fat that could be trimmed off: [Interruption.] Let me finish. [Interruption.] Just look at the transcripts from the Select Committees on Housing, Communities and Local Government. In 2012-13, there was an increase in efficiency, but I will concede that after that point the cuts should have
stopped. The point of today’s debate is to move forwards. Having been elected in 2017, I hope the hon. Gentleman will join me in looking forwards and not backwards.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am moving on. I am not going to give way.

Mr Betts: The hon. Lady just referred to the Select Committee.

Layla Moran: I will come back to the hon. Gentleman in just a second.

Let me move on to adult social care, because it is really important. The Chancellor’s extra £750 million for social care in 2019-20 falls drastically short, given that the funding gap for adult social care is expected to reach £3.6 billion by 2025, according to the Local Government Association. This is a vital government service and central Government responsibility is shared between two Departments. I have many questions for the Minister, but one is: where on earth is the adult social care Green Paper? The situation is no longer sustainable. The adult social care sector in England accounted for 1.34 million jobs in 2016-17, yet, according to the National Audit Office, it has been 10 years since a national workforce strategy has been published. Furthermore, 43% of those aged 80 or over in England in 2016 needed help with activities for daily living, yet only 20% actually received the help they need. Demand is increasing and less is being provided—and to fewer people.

Mr Betts rose—

Layla Moran: And of course I happily give way to the Chair of the Select Committee.

Mr Betts: I am not sure the hon. Lady will be quite so happy when she hears what I have to say about the matter. Again, this is typical of the Lib Dems, is it not? We see collective memory loss about what happened between 2010 and 2015, and them now washing their hands. Does she accept that the biggest cuts in real terms per year in adult social care happened between 2010 and 2015, and she and her colleagues in the Lib Dems bear equal responsibility for that?

Layla Moran: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. As I say, I am looking forwards.

On adult social care, the Liberal Democrats are proposing—I would be curious to know whether Labour is planning the same—a penny in the pound on income tax to add to the social care budget, in order to sort out the short-term funding issues. That has to be just a short-term solution. The longer-term solution is not this tit-for-tat political to-ing and fro-ing; it has to be a cross-party effort to find a long-term settlement that will last for decades, not years.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I entirely agree with the hon. Lady on this. The Select Committees on Health and Social Care and on Housing, Communities and Local Government issued a joint report on the future funding of social care. One of its recommendations was a social care premium—an insurance based model like the German model. Would her party engage with that, on a cross-party basis, involving Conservative Members and Members on those Benches?

Layla Moran: I absolutely agree with that. Those calls were led by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who has been working on this issue on a cross-party basis. We have to do this together or we are not going to do it at all.

I now come to children’s services, an issue that, as a former teacher, is very close to my heart. Councils are overspending on these services, too—they did so by £872 million in 2017-18. The Public Accounts Committee has reported that 91% of authorities overspent. We are talking about young vulnerable children here. Something odd is happening, because although the number of children in the population has gone up, increasing by 7% since 2010, the number of child protection assessments has increased by 77%, on average, across the country. Worryingly, however, the figures are really different depending on the area of the country, suggesting that best practice is not being spread. For example, Camden Council has decreased the number of children that it has in looked-after care but other parts of the country have increased this by more than 90%. What are the Government doing to ensure that what some councils are clearly doing right is being spread? Meanwhile, 42% of all local councils are rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted—but that means 58% are not. That is atrocious. We need to make sure that councils are held to account. My understanding is that Ofsted is so overstretched that it has for the moment suspended the rating of local councils. Will the Minister clarify whether that is true?

The final thing I wish to talk about is prevention. I serve on the Public Accounts Committee, and my colleagues and I are interested in value for money for the taxpayer. I am deeply concerned that the changes to children’s centres and youth services are not delivering value for money. In fact, worse than that, they are failing the young people of our country. The decrease in the number of Sure Start centres in Oxfordshire has meant that we cannot reach the same number of families as we did previously.

Meanwhile, the head of Ofsted said in her annual report:

“The evidence suggests that these cuts to youth and other services are a false economy, simply leading to greater pressures elsewhere.”

The Minister will know that in 2015 the Government axed the Audit Commission. Who is looking after the money? When something is cut in one Department, what effect is it going to have elsewhere? I am told that the responsibility is now in the purview of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but it is not transparent. In the reports that the Public Accounts Committee has seen, it was not obvious that everyone knows what is going on. That is a key ask of the Minister: who is looking after the money? From what we have seen, not enough people are.

The lack of someone looking after the money has an effect on things such as the schools system. Schools have now become a repository for every other issue that has happened in local government, and we see the same
with our police. I am sure many Members know of similar issues to those that I see in respect of special educational needs and disability funding: there just is not enough money adequately to support the children who need education, health and care plans. Why, when schools are already under funding pressure, are they being asked to provide the first £6,000 towards any plan? Surely it would make more sense that if a child has a need, that need is fulfilled.

Similarly, when are we going to see the Government address inequalities in the system, such as those relating to young carers? They are required in statutory legislation to undergo an assessment of what they need, but there is no legislation that follows through on that and says that they have to be provided with the things they have been assessed as needing. Who is dealing with those kinds of inequalities?

**Gareth Thomas:** One pressure that the hon. Lady has not mentioned is homelessness. Although we on the Opposition Benches will not be surprised by the Government’s lack of additional revenue to tackle homelessness, does she not think it particularly odd that the Conservative party, which claims to be the party of the armed forces, is doing nothing about the scale of rough sleeping among veterans?

**Layla Moran:** As I said at the beginning of the debate, we have seen a rise in homelessness. It has been a particular focus of mine on the Public Accounts Committee, and the hon. Gentleman might be aware of my campaign to scrap the Vagrancy Act 1824. We need to make sure that the fact that we are a compassionate nation is reflected in all parts of policy, I could not agree with his point more. As he rightly pointed out, there are many things that I have not touched on, but I am sure other Members will. This has just been a quick canter around the finances in the estimates.

I hope that the Public Accounts Committee’s reports on local government spending and sustainability are bedside reading for all Ministers, because they make recommendations that I sincerely hope Ministers will take seriously. When the Minister responds to the debate, please can we have answers on the following? First, where is the spending review? How on earth can we expect councils to plan for the medium and long term when they do not even know where next year’s money is going to come from? Secondly, where is the fairer funding review? The Government have moved the burden of taxation from central Government to local government, but the underlying inequity in the system still exists. Thirdly, linked to that, where is the business rates review? The Government have moved the burden of taxation from central Government to local government, but the underlying inequity in the system still exists. Finally, a refrain that I hope and am sure others will continue: where is the social care Green Paper?

We need all four together before we can achieve genuine value for money in what local councils deliver. Anything else is a false economy. All of us see the knock-on effects of these Whitehall spending decisions in our postbags. We also see the desperation of people who come to us because they feel that their local councils have failed them. However, half the time, it is not local councils that have failed them; it is central Government. Local government is vital. It is the coalface—it is where real policy meets real people. I hope that today’s debate will be a clarion call. Local government may not always be sexy, but it is certainly significant. I thank all colleagues for being here and the Backbench Business Committee for enabling us to have today’s debate.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. There is quite a lot of time for the debate this afternoon, but, as the House can see, a great many people wish to speak. I hope that we can manage without a formal time limit, because the debate flows better without one. We can do so if hon. Members are courteous enough to speak for around eight minutes. If Members do that, everyone will have a fair and equal chance to contribute. If not, we will have a time limit.

4.51 pm

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con):** I am grateful for the opportunity to catch your eye in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), who is a highly valued member of the Public Accounts Committee, of which I have the honour to be deputy Chair. It is clear from her speech that she is extremely knowledgeable about this area, particularly about education, on which she is the Liberal Democrat spokesman.

I also pay tribute to other Members who have helped to secure this really important debate. The reason it is so important is that local authorities are by far the largest devolved form of government in England. They deliver a range of vital services, such as education, planning and social services. The money devoted to local government, and therefore to the effectiveness of these services, is vital to the people of this country, which is why, for the first time in 27 years in this place, I wanted to speak in an estimates debate, but particularly in this one on the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

It is a disaster for the people covered by a local authority area when it runs out of money and centrally appointed commissioners are brought in to oversee the finances, as we have seen in Northamptonshire County Council. We need to look very carefully at the role of section 15 officers, who have issued more than 114 notices of loss of financial control since 2010-11. We particularly need to encourage the Government to be intrusive in their inspection of local audits, because it is possible to spot when a local authority is beginning to get into trouble far sooner than was the case with Northamptonshire, thereby possibly avoiding bringing in the local commissioners.

As the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon said, the finances of local government are fairly parlous at the moment—resources fell by 34% in real terms between 2010-11 and 2017-18. Paragraph 12 on page 9 of the National Audit Office report states tellingly that overspending and the use of resources were not fully financially sustainable over the medium term. I encourage my colleagues on the Front Bench to look very carefully at this whole matter.

Local government is now facing a funding gap of £3.1 billion by 2019-20, which is estimated to rise to a staggering £8 billion by 2024-25, according to the NAO.
Local government spending is being stretched significantly as we face the demand for services way outstretching available funding. This year, for example, Gloucestershire County Council has had to raise its council tax in every district to make £21 million of savings to deal with the financial pressure. To simply keep up with the county’s demand for services, council tax payers now need to provide nearly £295 million.

Children’s social services are a particular worry in the county and across many education authorities. It is the No. 1 financial pressure on Gloucestershire’s 2019-20 budget, as the authority will spend an additional £16.3 million on the most vulnerable children and young people in the county. Ofsted made a monitoring visit to Gloucestershire’s children’s social services in April—its sixth monitoring visit since our local authority was judged to be inadequate in March 2017. It is promising to see that progress has been made. However, that progress was deemed to be slow, and we cannot continue to fail to provide good enough social services for our most vulnerable children and young people.

Throughout the country, 42% of children’s social services are rated good and we spend some £8.8 billion on them, but 91% of local authorities have overspent in this area and we need to understand why. We had the education debate yesterday, and although there is a problem is with distribution. That is the case for my local authority, and I suspect that some of my colleagues on both sides of the House who are in the f40 group would agree that the distribution of money is critical. For example, an authority such as Hackney is getting £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion in 2019-2020—the problem is with distribution. That is the case for my local authority, and I suspect that some of my colleagues on both sides of the House who are in the f40 group would agree that the distribution of money is critical. For example, an authority such as Hackney is getting £6,500 per secondary place, yet some schools in Gloucestershire are below the fair funding amount of £4,800 per secondary place.

Layla Moran: I apologise for intervening, as I have already spoken for a long time. I am a vice-chair of the f40 group. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the current calls from the f40 are about not just distribution but quantum? The “Together for Education” event that took place across the way in Westminster on the weekend before last called for an extra £2.2 billion a year in the education budget, because the f40 group recognises that we can redistribute all we want but the quantum also needs to rise.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I accept what the hon. Lady says. The problem is that it is about not only the money that schools get, but the costs that central Government keep imposing on schools—pensions, the apprenticeship levy or other expenditures. The costs keep going up, so the amount that schools have to spend is squeezed every year.

The Government need to do two things. First, they need to consider the quantum, as the hon. Lady has said. Secondly, when they impose an additional tax or an additional cost on a school, they need to consider very carefully how that school’s budget is being squeezed. We want to give our children the fairest possible start in life, and allocating adequate resources to education is almost the most important thing a Government can do, which is why I feel so strongly about this issue.

I also feel strongly about children’s special needs. The amount that Gloucestershire is spending in this regard is going up and up. I am grateful to the Government for providing an additional £1.35 million this year and next to deal with the problem, but they need to understand the causes of the increased demand in special needs, and education, health and care plans. The Government probably need to ring-fence this budget so that we do not get into the situation that we did this year, whereby Gloucestershire County Council was going to top-slice its general schools budget by up to 0.5% to deal with the problem. It is currently entitled to do so, but that is not fair on schoolchildren in general, which is why the Government need to ring-fence this budget.

Local enterprise partnerships—where local authorities contribute a significant amount of money, certainly some of the expertise and some of the governance—are rather variable, as we discovered from the NAO report. Some work extremely well; some work far less well. Some are governed extremely well; some are governed less well. There is geographical overlap in some, but not in others. If the Government wish to deliver their industrial strategy to the best possible degree, they need to look at the whole matter of LEPs quite carefully.

The fire and rescue service in Gloucestershire is currently run by the council, but there is considerable pressure from the Home Office to transfer it to the police and crime commissioner. We have already had one inquiry and the proposal was rejected, yet the police and crime commissioner still wishes to overturn the decision. I say to my colleagues on the Front Bench that a considerable amount of resource and effort is being wasted by continually bickering over this matter. The fire and rescue service, I say loud and clear, is well run in Gloucestershire. The county council supports it, as do, I think, most Conservative colleagues—certainly, I support it very strongly. It should remain where it is.

We need to get local government funding functioning properly. This is a really serious problem. The Government wish to move to a new form of funding—the core rate support grant—in local government in 2021. That means that there are vital decisions that they need to make quite quickly. The proposal is that councils should keep three quarters of the revenue, down from 90% originally, but fundamental decisions on how this will work are coming very late in the day. No council should be under financial pressure, because of the tier splits, to move to 75% retention. We need to decide what the distribution system should be. If Westminster Council, for example, keeps 75% of its rate support, it will be awash with money, whereas a council in the north that keeps 75% will be in severe shortage. The councils need to know.

As the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon says, it is only fair that the funding system for councils both for next year and the year after are made very clear fairly soon.

The other side of the coin is that the Government have a target for building 300,000 more homes each year. Councils will be able to do that only if they are properly incentivised by the council tax system. They need to be able to work out what that system is going to be. As part of the local government finance reorganisation, what will the incentives be for councils that want to expand their council tax base, as with the incentives to expand their business rate base? Again, the Government
need to make some decisions on this. They need to tell us whether the new homes bonus will remain, and in what form, to give councils that incentive.

This is a huge field. I think I have cantered over some of the main areas, and others will do the same.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I remind the House that I have been told that there is an informal eight-minute limit. If we can stick to that, we will help everybody.

5.2 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I thank the Library and the National Audit Office for the briefings we have had, as usual. Laraine Manley, the director of place at Sheffield City Council, has given me some information about housing as well.

The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has produced a number of reports over the years covering many of these areas. The whole remit of the Committee is unique in Government in that while the Ministry has limited budgets of its own to deal with certain specific issues, it has oversight of local government as a whole, including spending by other Government Departments. The Ministry is supposed to act as a glue that brings all that together. However, there are concerns, as highlighted by Amyas Morse when he commented that there are no evidence-based efforts in Government to reconcile the funding to local needs. That is really quite a dramatic statement to make. In other words, Government do not have a clue what local government should be spending. That is not a direct comment about the Minister on the Front Bench or his colleague; it is a comment about Governments over the years. There has not been oversight of local government or an assessment of what it needs. All we get is, every so often, a divvying up of the money that is available between different councils, or the new burdens rule where something new is added and a council will get a bit more to pay for it—a bit more out of the system.

The figures are there. We have seen a 50% cut in Government grant to local councils since 2010, the biggest local government cuts to any service—not denied, I think, by Ministers—and a 30% cut in spending power. The pressures on social care, both for adults and children, continue to rise. The Government’s response to our report on children’s services is out today, and I think they have accepted a lot of the problems that exist. There will be a lot more work to do on this. As care has taken a bigger slice of a smaller cake, all the other important services such as parks—which we have done a report on—highways and buses, libraries, environmental services and refuse collection are getting cut even more, by between 30% and 60%. I am really worried, as I have said before, that we are seeing a hollowing out of local democracy where, in the end, councils just become the messenger boys and girls doing what the Chancellor and the Secretary of State want on a very narrow range of statutory services. That is a real worry, and we should all take account of it.

In the end, councils can only do their best. They have done marvellously well with efficiency savings: we are now making real cuts to real services that are affecting real people. Yes, council tax has been put up in many cases, but that is a regressive tax. On business rates, in the end local authorities have virtually no discretion at all anyway.

There is massive uncertainty now. We may possibly have the four-year spending review—nobody is quite sure whether it will happen; I do not really think the Minister even is. The other day, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury seemed to indicate that it was not going to happen. As Gary Porter said the other day at the Local Government Association conference, local government is in a state of complete uncertainty—it has no idea at all what is going to happen from next year. Are we going to have a spending review for four years or for one year, because the four-year one will be postponed? If we have the one-year review, we cannot do the fair funding review because there will not be enough time for it to work through.

What is happening with the 75% business rate retention? Can that be done at the same time as all the other changes or will that be too much for local authorities to absorb? The Minister accepted at the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee evidence session the other day that the business rate retention scheme is probably the most complicated part of a very complicated system. Can this all be brought together and made sense of? I have not yet mentioned the shared prosperity fund, which is somewhere out there, to be considered at some point. All those things give massive uncertainty to councils and councillors providing important services to the people who matter at the end of the day. Councillors are uncertain and so are the communities out there about what they are going to get as a result of the changes.

As the LGA and the Institute for Fiscal Studies have said, what is really worrying is the prospect that 90 councils will simply run out of money during the next spending review unless more is provided. Council treasurers are saying that; that is the situation. Councillors have done terribly well, but they cannot carry on using reserves as they are having to now.

I turn to the issue of housing, which represents the other part of the money spent directly by the Department. Everyone wants to see us meet the ambitious target of building 300,000 new homes in this country. My personal view is that that cannot be delivered unless about half are provided by the public sector—councils and housing associations; historically, the private sector has never consistently gone above 150,000. If we are going to do that, it is not enough to say that we have lifted the housing revenue account cap and councils can start to build. I hope that they can, but Laraine Manley, director of place at Sheffield City Council, has spelt out the situation there.

We have a really ambitious council in Sheffield, including Councillor Paul Wood, the new cabinet member, and Councillor Sophie Wilson, who is down today to celebrate 100 years of council housing. Both want to build council houses, but the issue is not just the borrowing but the revenue to support the borrowing. That also matters. The revenue comes from rents. One of the most damaging things the Government did was to restrict rent increases on local authority and housing association homes in the last spending review. Sheffield City Council estimates that that took a startling £800 million out of its long-term business plan—money that would have gone into supporting new house building and important maintenance of existing
homes. That figure is staggering. Although the rent increase in the next round will be the consumer prices index plus 1%, that will not be sufficient to build back the loss that has already occurred. At some point, the Government will have to consider greater freedom for councils and housing associations to raise rents to fund new building in the future.

Apparently, about 70% of the costs for building new homes will come from existing rents in the housing stock; the rest will come either from grants from Homes England or from receipts, although apparently receipts and grants cannot be used for the same home. The Government may also want to have a look at that—and, again, address the issue of why more right-to-buy receipts cannot go to councils to support house building in future.

Those are big issues, and the Select Committee will shortly do an inquiry into social house building and how we can ensure that the homes needed are actually built. That will be interesting.

Finally, I will mention the other big issue that we have to mention today: cladding on not just high-rise buildings, but high-risk buildings. The Government have so far put aside £400 million to take ACM cladding off social housing and £200 million for so-called firebreak in the private sector. I have to say that the social housing figure is not likely to be enough, and the private sector figure certainly will not be enough. More money will have to be found to get that cladding off and make those homes safe. The Government are now doing a review of 1,600 more properties with non-ACM cladding that may be just as dangerous. If it is as dangerous, it is going to have to come off, as the Minister for Housing has already said. If it has to come off, the Government will have to find the same money as they are doing for ACM cladding. If we add the ACM cladding budget of up to £1 billion to another £1 billion for other types of cladding, we are at over £2 billion. That does not even deal with the issue of materials that are not in those categories but are not of limited combustibility.

Under the changes the Government have made, they are insisting that those materials will not go on new buildings, yet they are saying that materials not safe to go on new buildings can still be left on existing buildings and that they will not help to remove them. I think there is a very big additional bill coming down the road, and when we see the estimates for the Department in one or two years’ time, they may well be very different.

5.11 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), and it has been a pleasure to serve on the Select Committee under his guidance for the last four years. I agree with many of the points he made, particularly the last stuff on cladding. We know that is a much bigger issue than is currently accepted, and we need to deal with it. It is interesting that he talks about local authorities not having rents capped when it is Labour party policy to cap rents in the private sector. I am not sure that is a very balanced approach.

I agree with many of the points the hon. Gentleman made about the spending challenges for local authorities. Clearly, there are huge spending challenges for local authorities and also for the national Government. It is my belief that we will have to address this stuff in a very different way. This is not a party political point, but Governments of all persuasions have balanced the books in this country only seven times—they have done so in only seven years—over the past 53 years. We cannot simply keep spending more than we are getting in, otherwise we end up with the £2 trillion debt, which is where we are.

I regret some of the spending pledges in our leadership contest at the moment, because we have got to run this country much more prudently. We have to be able to balance the books on an ongoing basis, and certainly to do so within a cycle. We have some massive challenges ahead that we will all have to accept: the cost of healthcare that we are going to provide; the cost of pensions that we are going to have to provide; and the costs of social care. As things are at the moment, all this is going to land on the taxpayer. It does not seem feasible that that situation can continue, particularly in the area of social care. We know there is a funding gap for local authorities of about £3 billion, which will rise to about £8 billion within five years, according to the LGA.

The Minister is doing a brilliant job in trying to get extra funds, and also in making sure that the funds are spread fairly across the country. The current funding formula is certainly not fair. My local authority has about 50% less spending power compared with some London authorities, for example. We need a fair settlement—one that is fair to everybody—but this has to be a rising tide that lifts all boats. If we do not put extra money into the system, we cannot provide a fairer funding system, as my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) said about school funding, and we cannot have some people losing out when everybody’s budgets are tight. We are going to have to find some more money for local authorities from somewhere if we are properly to address the fairer funding issue. The biggest issues for my local authority, North Yorkshire County Council, are those involving children’s services and social care, which is what I primarily want to talk about. The difficulty with social care is that it has virtually zero correlation with the method of funding local authorities today or in the future. Moving to a system of business retention—the Minister knows I have reservations about such a system—means a finite amount of money for local authorities at a time when there is huge and rising demand for social care. There is no correlation between those two things. Local authority funding will be unsustainable. Either we find a new way of doing this, or local authorities will provide many fewer services in future.

The Select Committee considered social care twice. The first time, we went to Germany to look at the system there and then we conducted a joint inquiry with the Health and Social Care Committee. We settled on several recommendations, one of which constitutes the right solution, which is sustainable, scalable and simple. It is the German system that was adopted in 1995. Before then, the German system was funded by local authorities. I am sure that they recognised that that was not sustainable, so they moved to a system of social insurance. Everybody pays a small amount—just over 1% of people’s salaries, and the employer pays 1% of earnings—into a private insurance system. The insurance companies...
are not for profit—nobody makes any money out of the system. The levies are settled nationally, and the system also covers people with learning difficulties and disabilities. The system is simple and sustainable. Everybody pays a small amount so that nobody has to pay everything. That is the fairest part.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am glad that my hon. Friend is talking about social insurance. I and many others have been arguing that the continental system of social insurance, particularly for funding health services, is probably the way forward. As our population ages, getting public support to pay for those services through general taxation becomes increasingly unsustainable. Personalising social insurance creates more support.

Kevin Hollinrake: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. However, I believe that healthcare is different. Social care should be funded differently because everybody has a personal responsibility to provide for themselves in the future. Of course, people do not put money aside for many reasons. The system must be mandatory—that is the key—so that everybody puts some money aside even when times are tough. There is a threshold for people on low incomes, but the system means that people properly prepare for the future.

One of the biggest benefits comes when people are assessed as needing care. They can take the services of a charitable provider or the local authority, or decide to take the money. People who decide to take the money on a monthly basis can pay it to a relative or loved one to look after them. Another big benefit is therefore social cohesion. The system is about family looking after family, just as we used to do. We do not do that as much now. The system is good for society and for community. We saw that huge benefit when we went to Germany.

We have cross-party support for the idea. Both Select Committees—20-odd of us—reached that conclusion. It was one of the recommendations of our report, so we should work cross-party on it. There have been commissions on social care in the past, but when they report, the question is whether the recommendations are possible politically. If we put together our own parliamentary commission and reach cross-party consensus, I believe that we could deliver the recommendation.

The system has to be mandatory because there will not be an insurance market for it otherwise. That was the problem with the Dilnot recommendation. The scheme was not mandatory and therefore no insurance market developed on the back of it, so there was nothing available for social insurance. It is a great opportunity, which will cut the link between a potential huge future cost for local authorities, and our ageing population and the increased number of people with learning disabilities. Obviously, local authorities will have a huge part to play in directing services, but they will also be able to provide the other services that are critical for local people.

I am keen to work cross-party on the matter. I know that the Local Government Minister has regarded the proposal positively in the past and I am keen for the Department to give it a positive recommendation in the forthcoming Green Paper.
In Surrey, which I would argue is a little bit more affluent than County Durham, it is £2,004. If we were brought up to even the England average, County Durham would get an additional £44 million.

This is about not only the savage effects of austerity on local government, but the pork barrel way in which the Government have distributed the money, clearly favouring areas that have supported the Conservative party and its coalition partners in the past, and punishing northern councils. In addition to the cuts that have taken place already, we have the public health funding formula, on which I led a Westminster Hall debate a few weeks ago. How can it be right that County Durham will lose £19 million a year—35% of its budget—while Surrey County Council increases its public health budget by £14 million a year?

Those funding decisions are clearly designed to support certain areas. [Interruption.] The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) chunter from a sedentary position, but the facts are there in black and white. It has been a deliberate policy of this Government since—[Interruption.] Oh, he has got tired and gone off for a sleep. Clearly, as my hon. Friend, the Member for Sheffield South East said, we need not only to look at fairer funding for local government but to ask what we need it to do. Like him, I feel that we will end up in a situation where the people we were elected to serve suffer and councils throughout the country become unsustainable.

5.27 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). I normally agree with him on so many things, but since he touched on the Conservative party leadership contest, let me say that there is a hustings for Conservative councillors taking place at this very moment at the Local Government Association conference. Of course, they are at the forefront of public service and our local communities, and they are proud Conservatives in the role they play in local government. I had better declare an interest: I am married to a Conservative councillor, so I will double down and reiterate that point.

I think all Members would agree that local government stands at the forefront of the delivery of so many services across our country, and that so many of our constituents depend on those services. I think it is fair to say, on the basis of the comments we have heard, that we all know there are challenges with that across our constituencies. It is appropriate that we should debate local government and the MHCLG estimates on the day that the Local Government Association holds its conference in Bournemouth, because councils are responsible for the delivery of so many vital services in our communities. I want to touch on a number of them, including housing, adult social care and supporting children with special needs, with reference to the challenges of growing demand.

Much of this has been mentioned already, but I would like to give some examples from Essex, where we also have funding pressures. It is not a policy of discrimination, if I may say so in reply to the points made by the right hon. Member for North Durham. Despite facing a tight squeeze on the funds they receive from central Government—a squeeze that started before 2010—local authorities have worked hard, and we should pay tribute to all councils, whatever their composition, because they have all worked hard to balance their books.

We know that efficiencies have been made. We know that local authorities have been innovative: services have been shared, procurement strategies changed, and some services reduced or changed. But rising demand has put councils at a tipping point where they now need some increases in resource from central Government, certainly about medium-term settlements and more flexibility over the powers they have and the ways they can generate income.

In the amazing and incredible county of Essex, the county council has delivered £311 million of savings over the last four years, a significant sum, and it is working to make a further £176 million of savings by 2021-22. The reason for those savings is to ensure that resources are naturally focused on investing in adult social care and the council’s outstanding children’s services. It received an outstanding Ofsted score, and I am very proud of the council for its sheer determination and the work it has done to receive that score. But the savings target is a stretch, because there is little left to cut. There is little more that the council can slice off because demand on services is growing at a startling rate. For adult services, we see a growing number of service users who use services for longer and have more complex needs. Over the next decade, the number of residents in Essex aged over 80 will rise by 60% and the number of those aged over 90 will double. There are also growing numbers of adults with learning disabilities who we want to support as much as possible. That is the right and compassionate thing to do, and we want to provide fairness and opportunities in doing so.

We must see the Government do more to give councils such as Essex the resources to meet these needs. We also need to see the Government recognise that our councils need more resources to support children’s services and those with special needs and disabilities. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) also mentioned in her opening remarks, and that touches on education, health and care plans too. While councils’ budgets have been squeezed, they have had to provide for more services and new responsibilities, and it is right that we all recognise that.

The introduction and roll-out of education, health and care plans has caused a 35% increase across the county in the number of pupils covered by EHCPs in the four years between 2013-14 and 2017-18. It is right
that we recognise the impact that is having on budgets for supporting children with special educational needs, because it has not been met by the high needs funding block.

Councils now face the challenge of carrying deficits and they do not know what the Government will do to address that. In Essex, the deficit is now £15 million and it is set to double. Across the country, it could hit £1.6 billion by 2020-21. That challenge needs to be addressed. We have all heard about funding reforms and we have all participated in many debates and presented the issues to Ministers, stressing that those matters will have to be addressed through the comprehensive funding review and fair funding review, when they come. Those reviews must deliver genuine reform. We cannot tinker around the edges any more.

The process must include addressing the regional inequalities that other hon. Members have mentioned in funding for councils such as Essex. Despite the growing levels of demand on services, Essex is underfunded compared to many other areas. In Essex, the funding level is £271 per person per year for services, whereas the figure elsewhere is much higher, doubling to £563 per person in parts of London. As a result of those pressures, the council is looking at making very difficult decisions just to close the £176 million funding gap.

At the moment, the council is consulting on proposals to change library services, which could lead to seven of the eight libraries in the Witham constituency closing if community management proposals do not come forward. I should add that that is not the sole answer when it comes to addressing library services. The total budget for libraries is about £13 million, and, while there may be some merit in looking at ways in which to bring more community management and involvement into our libraries and modernise services, the potential impact on our communities is significant. I do not think anyone in the House can dispute that, especially given that reductions in the libraries budget will make barely a dent in the £176 million savings target.

No one will be surprised to learn that I have met many residents throughout my constituency who are campaigning passionately to save our libraries, including those in Wickham Bishops, Kelvedon and COggeshall. They want those vital services and facilities to remain open. I hope that the Government will reflect on what they can do in the long term to continue to safeguard the community lifelines about which so many of us feel so strongly.

The issue of planning and development is highly controversial in many parts of the country, but it is incredibly controversial from an Essex perspective. We want to see communities, not housing estates, being built. In Essex, and especially in my part of Essex, we know that the building of new homes is absolutely right because it gives families more security, including financial security, but we are aware of the challenges that local authorities face in respect of the five-year land supply.

My communities are open-minded about development, but they are frustrated by a lack of infrastructure and a lack of support. We must be radical in our use of, for instance, the new homes bonus to support more infrastructure, and change the way in which we support local government funding across the country.

5.36 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel). Being married to a councillor, she will appreciate most acutely the tough decisions that councillors must make. Let me begin my speech by thanking councillors of all political parties for their work. Looking around the Chamber this afternoon, I see many Members who I know have served as councillors, in senior leadership roles or as back-benchers. I believe that one of them is still serving as a local authority member today. No councillor stands for election to deal with a five-year budget forecast. They do so for good reason, to help the local communities. We should always remember that, regardless of the decisions that they are forced to make.

That leads me neatly to the main points that I want to make. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) began by talking about the overall global figures that are affecting local government finances. The speeches that we have heard from Members on both sides of the House today have shown that every Member, everywhere, has a series of problems that can be attributed to the way in which the local authority is either run or funded. I agree with the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) that when this is fixed, a rising tide will lift all those problems. Sadly, however, that rising tide will simply drown some of them, either because they cannot keep pace or because they are already enmeshed in problems that no amount of additional funding will solve.

What we need to think about—and I offer this as a radical suggestion which I hope the Government will consider—is moving away from the idea that we fund councils, fund the police service and fund clinical commissioning groups, and adopt a place-based approach to the way in which money goes into a community. One of the things that we do very well on the Public Accounts Committee is following the taxpayer pound. We have noticed continually that consequential impacts of a decision by a clinical commissioning group will drive up the costs of a service in a local authority. The decision by a police commissioner to close a police station—as is happening in Stoke-on-Trent—pushes up the incidence of antisocial behaviour. It will then be said that it is the council’s responsibility. Littering because of the lack of a recycling service will become detritus, with bricks left on streets. It becomes vandalism.

So many things happen not because of local authority funding, but because of the way in which we fund our entire public service. If the Government and, I hope, our own Front-Benchers—who I can see are listening—would seriously consider that place-based funding, we could eradicate some of the problems without necessarily having to throw lots of money at them. I know that that will not be easy, but if we are serious about a sustainable long-term public sector, we are going to have to be honest about it.

The same goes for our social care funding arrangements. The National Audit Office report shows that 80% of social care budgets are overspent. I am pretty sure that if the Ministers at the Dispatch Box were to design a system today for funding adult social care, they would not say, “Let’s take the figure of how we funded it in the 1970s and its total value across an entire geographical area determined by a review in the 1970s and say that..."
incremental increases of 2% every year is the best way to fund adult social care.” It is the way that we do it, but it is not the way we would design. If we are genuinely serious about tackling the funding issues in local government, we are going to have to look at the way in which we fund these things long-term and not simply tinker at the edges hoping to massage the figures so that marginal constituencies in one part of the country are better off at the expense of safer constituencies for Opposition parties elsewhere, which is what we talk about in fair funding formulas if we are being brutally honest.

**Mr Betts:** My hon. Friend is making an interesting point about Total Place and how we should approach things, and we had some evidence on that in our recent Select Committee inquiry into local government funding. Does he accept however, that in order to hold that all together we need some local accountability, so we ought to be looking at how we devolve some of those powers to local government, and with it a better system of funding, as my hon. Friend has rightly said?

**Gareth Snell:** I thank my hon. Friend for that and for presciently leading on to my next point, which is about how devolution settlements work and the myriad different settlements that we have, across England predominantly, with city deals, local enterprise partnership arrangements or mayoral combined authorities. That means there are lots of arrangements we can look at to find best practice and then share it. There are examples of mayoral authorities dealing with their housing crisis in clever ways which traditional two-tier local authority areas have neither the capacity in their staff base to do, to be candid, nor perhaps the demand in their local areas for.

If we are to have that accountability structure, there needs to be a greater role for the Department, whatever it might be called. Civil servants from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government were asked a very simple question at a recent appearance before the Public Accounts Committee: “You say local authority funding is sustainable; what is the matrix by which you make that assessment?” The civil servants were very good at answering some questions, but were unable to give us an exact demonstration of how they make that decision. The NAO disagreed with them on a fact-based, evidence-based assessment, yet when that question was put by numerous members of the Committee, some more vociferously than others, they were unable to give us a clear explanation of how they make those sorts of determinations. If we are going to be serious about the way in which local government is funded, there has to be strong overview and oversight by Departments, but we also need to trust local government.

Local government has been given a series of new responsibilities. I was a councillor and I know that local authorities welcome new responsibilities because it allows them to flex their muscles and do things in an imaginative and innovative way. However, they are restricted in how they are able to deliver them—they find themselves straitjacketed—and they suddenly find themselves carrying unnecessary burdens in order to deliver something that they know they could do better if they were allowed to. They do not make a hash of it but they end up not reaching their full potential.
becoming a somewhat blunt tool in other parts, particularly around housing. We see the emphasis on house building, particularly in the midlands and the north, which I welcome. I welcome the 217,000 houses that were built last year and the 35,000 housing starts in the first quarter. We can also see the huge pipeline of planning permissions that has built up to an average of 350,000 a year over the past few years.

The policies are obviously working, but we have to ask ourselves whether they are becoming a slightly blunt tool. Areas in the midlands and the north are being asked to take large swathes of housing, but if we look at the best proxy for housing, which is house prices over the past 10 years or so, we see that there has been either no increase in house prices or a real-terms house price drop. I would like us to consider moving the national planning policy framework towards a more regional approach. We obviously have a problem in the south-east and around London, and it is absolutely appropriate that we should address that, but in other areas we might need to think again.

I shall move on to fracking, as I do on a semi-regular basis in this place. The reason that I bring it up regularly is that I do not think everyone in this place really understands the consequences of our fracking policy and where it might end up. If we do not understand it now, we run the risk of facing some very large bills in the future, along with the significant impact on many communities including mine, where we have a fracking application in Marsh Lane at the top of my constituency. No one in Government has ever been clear on what the purpose of fracking is.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): One of the problems that I have considered when thinking about fracking is that if we do it at scale, the impact on the environment and the countryside will be huge, but if we do not do it at scale, the benefit will be so small as to make it not worth pursuing.

Lee Rowley: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I will move on from this subject quickly, having made my points. I hope that those on the Treasury Bench will consider my points about fracking, decommissioning costs and the NPPF.

There is an awful lot of discussion about the distribution of money, and I recognise that Derbyshire County Council, which is ably led by Barry Lewis, and North East Derbyshire District Council, which is now Conservative-led for the first time in 40 years, are now having to grapple with many of the issues talked about in this debate. I accept that there is a real debate about distribution, but there is also a debate about the overall funding envelope for local government.

As a member of the Public Accounts Committee—there are many esteemed colleagues in the Chamber who are or have been members of the Committee—I know that it is charged with looking at value for money in the public sector, and we regularly see millions or billions of pounds not being spent effectively or efficiently or not securing the correct outcomes. If we lose that from the debates around topics such as this, we lose a key part of what we should be doing as Members of Parliament. We should be discussing not only how much we spend, but what we spend, where we spend it and what the outcomes are. That focus on outcomes has been lost in political discourse since at least 2017, if not before, and I hope it returns not just to this debate, but to wider British politics as a whole.

Kevin Hollinrake: I do not want to upset Mr Deputy Speaker, but this is a very relevant issue, because fracking is part of local planning policy. Can I invite both my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) and my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake)—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can I help by saying that I still make the decisions? I do not want this to descend into a debate purely about fracking. It can be referred to in passing, of course, and I recognise the planning implications, but I do not want to get into a full-blown debate on fracking. I will still make the decisions.

Lee Rowley: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I will move on from this subject quickly, having made my points. I hope that those on the Treasury Bench will consider my points about fracking, decommissioning costs and the NPPF.

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5.52 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I want to focus my remarks on housing. However, before getting on to that topic, I want to make a few other points, starting with the financing of local government as a whole, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) described so well. We need to take a serious look at how we fund local authorities and at the demands we place on them. We know that the business rate system is broken, which harms businesses and means that we are not getting the local economic growth that we need to see business thrive. We are also seeing more and more online businesses, which also has serious
consequences as well. We must review the business rates and council tax systems and seek a much fairer system of funding local authorities.

We also need to determine what local authorities are there to do. Over my short time in this place, more and more of that determination is being done at Westminster, but then powers have been taken away and councils have not been given the necessary resources. In effect, we have seen risk shifted on to local authorities, but they have not been given the resources to address their needs. That cannot be the right way forward, so we need a review ahead of the comprehensive spending review, because how can we have a spending review if we do not know what we are spending or how are we going to fund it? Time is short, and I say to the Minister we need to get a move on because local authorities are struggling.

We can see that in how services are being cut in our areas, and we have heard about the severe impacts on local communities from right across the Chamber today.

I also urge the Minister to look at youth services. We do not have a statutory youth service, and that is having a massive knock-on impact on all sorts of other services. A place-based approach is important so that we can understand how to move prevention up local authority agendas. I urge the Minister to examine how we can fund a youth service, because we know that prevention makes such a difference and, ultimately, is cheaper than having to address the effects of things going wrong.

I also urge the Minister to look at the high-needs education budget within a wider scope, as we need to get this right. Local authorities are having to provide that resource, but my local authority is in deficit as a result—£760,000 last year, and a predicted £1.3 million this year and £1.9 million next year. This is about funding services for the most vulnerable people in our communities, our young people, to ensure they have the best chances in life. I therefore urge the Minister to ensure it is properly funded come the comprehensive spending review.

I am sure all hon. Members are frustrated that the Government have promised us so many times that they will address social care. After Dilnot in 2011, we were promised a Bill in 2012, but it never emerged. Seemingly on an annual cycle, we are promised Green Papers, White Papers and all sorts. We have to remember these are just discussion documents, not action plans, yet nothing has emerged. We have a real social care crisis.

I disagree with the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on how we should approach social care, because I believe we need a much more therapeutic approach. The relationship with the health service is therefore important, and funding social care and providing security, particularly for older and vulnerable people, needs to be a priority for this Administration. We cannot wait.

I asked a question the other day, and we now know we will not have the Green Paper before the summer, which means we are just kicking the can further down the road. Of course, older people are struggling to fund their social care needs at the most vulnerable time in their life. That just cannot be right, so I urge the Minister to ensure social care is properly funded. Personally, I would prefer to see a more universal approach to social care, and I believe that joining it up with the national health service would be the best way to deliver it.

I return to housing through the prism of what is happening in York Central. It is fair enough that the Government have an ambition to build 300,000 housing units, not that it will be easy to deliver, but frankly their target is of no use whatsoever if those units will be second homes and assets for investors, not homes in which people can afford to live. It is a shame that the Minister is not listening, because this is crucial to the development and growth of our city.

The reality is that the housing being built at York Central will not be affordable to the residents of York. We have a housing crisis in our city because, over the years, successive councils have not built the houses our city needs. As a result, people who are desperate for a home are constantly coming to my surgery, and all I ever get back from the council—a Lib Dem administration—is a letter saying, “We do not have enough houses.” Yet, time and time again, the council passes planning applications to build luxury apartments worth £300,000 to £500,000, which nobody in my city can afford as it is 11 to 19 times the average wage.

We will therefore see all these housing units being ticked off on a chart, which the Government can quote and say, “Look at how many houses we have built.” But they are not homes in which people can afford to live, so they will move into the private rented sector or they will be assets or weekend homes. They are not the homes we need.

The imbalances we have in York are having a massive impact on our care sector, because care workers and people working in the NHS cannot afford to live in our city. We have more than 500 vacancies, which is skewing the whole economy in the private sector and the public sector. It is simply a broken system, and it has to be addressed.

The local authority has paid £10 million up front into the York Central site, with potentially another £35 million of borrowing, which the council will not see, but from which developers will benefit. This will therefore have a massive negative impact on people living in York. I understand the housing infrastructure fund was important for unlocking the site, because it is a rail-locked site, but what are we unlocking it for? The reality is that the plans were predicated on the local authority being able to generate resource from the enterprise zone, which is fair enough in itself, but when the size of the enterprise zone is reduced by a third, it is not going to be able to get its revenue from business rates, which was predicted at £133 million. Therefore, the income will be reduced, which means that the return to the local authority will be reduced and the maths simply does not work for anyone but the developers, who are clearly laughing at the Government’s decision to press ahead with this.

Ultimately, local authority money has been put into this site and will not be seen again by the people of our city. That cannot be right, so we have to look at how local authority money works together with other revenue streams to bring benefit to local people. Putting local needs at the heart of this is really important. Why is it so important for our city? I have already mentioned that this housing is unaffordable, but the impact of this is a reduction in the opportunity for the local authority to grow the economic base of our city. As a result, less
 urge the Minister to look at these funding streams once again. 

6.1 pm

**Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con):** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate; we are discussing integral parts of policy for the key regeneration of towns such as Fenton and Longton in my constituency. Both towns have high streets and markets that rely on increased footfall to secure their future. That means unlocking derelict brownfield sites around our towns for more housing that residents need, attracting new businesses into empty units, and improving facilities and the sense of destination for visitors.

Retail sales have been falling and high street stores have been closing. First, from out-of-town retail parks, and now from online retailing, our town centre are increasingly feeling the squeeze. Online now makes up just under 20% of retail sales, according to the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics. That percentage will likely continue to increase, and the high street needs to adapt if we are not to lose these important centres. It must be helped to adapt by the policies of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Last week *The Daily Telegraph* reported that one in three shops that close in the current market will not reopen as shops in the future. It is clear that our town centres can no longer be so dependent on retail to survive as they once were. It is essential that we attract new and innovative uses; we need to see more people living in our town centres and a range of different businesses moving in to fill empty spaces. It would be fantastic to see these properties, many of which make up the rich and historic fabric of our towns, brought back to life. There is a high demand for small and medium-sized business units, and there is no reason why these properties could not be converted, especially for new start-up businesses and footloose digital businesses. We must incentivise property owners to convert their premises to alternative uses, and remove the barriers and restrictions that currently exist. Our use-based planning system needs to be aware of these trends and be flexible in response, not getting too bogged down in restrictive use categories that threaten the future of our high streets. Why should we not relax class uses on all our empty town centre properties? The perfect plan cannot be the enemy of the demanded good. That also includes flexibility for temporary and pop-up ventures.

We also must see the investment that is so vital for the future of our town centres. In a property market such as that of Stoke-on-Trent, with many Victorian town centre properties in a poor state of repair, owners may find themselves investing more in converting and renovating than the property is actually worth. This is where it is essential that our bid to the future high streets fund for Longton is successful. Prior to the announcement of this fund, I lobbied Ministers in Her Majesty’s Treasury to create just such a fund, directed at our town centres. Our bid for Longton must receive some of this funding, and I urge Ministers to throw their weight behind it. Without future high streets funding, many properties in the town centre are likely to continue to remain derelict and the town centre will continue to decline.

It is also extremely important that we see stronger towns funding directed at towns such as Longton and Fenton and across my constituency. These are parts of the country and communities that have previously felt left behind but that have huge potential to blossom, with the right support. These towns must be given the chance to thrive again, and to be the beating hearts they once were. Perhaps they will no longer be the bastions of retail they once were, but there are so many other exciting possibilities. That might mean more pop-up art installations or performances, fringe festivals, or have-a-go activity weekends. For example, this weekend the iconic Gladstone Pottery Museum in my constituency will host the ninth annual Longton beer festival, which is certainly an event that I look forward to participating in.

Longton’s visitor economy used to be sufficiently robust to support three hotels in the town centre, but unfortunately that is no longer the case. So much is still unique and different about our town centres, and if that was lost it would leave our communities much worse off and damaged. That is why the Longton heritage action zone is so important, to preserve what is historically unique and to make best use for the future. Increasing the footfall in our town centres and recharging our tourism economy is a key aim of the heritage action zone that Stoke-on-Trent City Council is taking forward with Historic England. The council is refurbishing the old town hall as a local service centre, and the fantastic Victorian market hall is also receiving investment, including new public toilet facilities.

We also see private investment coming into Longton, with a number of new retailers having set up recently, and the Exchange shopping precinct has invested in the refurbishment of the main retail complex, which will help to bring much-needed increased footfall into the town centre. We must continue to build on such successes.

The old town hall in Fenton is being brought back into use, thanks to the owner, Justin Meath Baker. A whole range of new businesses are moving in, and the local centre is due to relocate there soon. In addition, planning permission has recently been granted for a £17 million mixed community housing development right in the centre of the town, alongside the £8 million new build scheme that is already under construction for sheltered housing. Like many cities, Stoke-on-Trent is attractive to people who increasingly value town-centre urban living, and we have, of course, six historic market towns to choose from.

Although period properties are attractive for residential use and create a real sense of place by saving historic architecture, the upfront cost of converting historical buildings to residential use, or of modernising much of the Victorian terrace stock, has often unfortunately proven too costly. In low-value markets, sales for more than the property value can often be realised. The wider context of a ‘high-supply, low-demand Victorian’ economic downturn has undermined confidence in the market for building specific types of new housing more suited to the 21st century. There can be an imbalance: we see high
demand for certain types of housing locally that currently is not being met by the local market. For example, Stoke-on-Trent is probably the only city in the UK of its size that does not really have a strong, functional private rented sector apartment market. We need more developers to take the risk, because we do have the demand for flexible styles of living, what with two universities and one of the largest hospitals in the country.

The council has been doing some excellent work to disrupt the market, to tempt new types of housing development into the city and get brownfield sites developed. When developers do progress sites, those sites now under development have seen high rates of sale, with properties on new build sites throughout the city selling much quicker than was initially expected. We must do more to help to meet the growing demands, and especially to see the redevelopment of the brownfield sites in and around our towns that suffer from the additional costs of previous industrial use. There is no justification for demand to be suppressed. We must give the market the confidence to invest in housing products such as PRS and executive homes, which investors would not always be willing to do in markets such as Stoke-on-Trent.

In 2015, Stoke-on-Trent City Council secured housing zone status, making it one of 20 pioneering authorities outside London. As a result, the council has worked with developers to activate schemes on stalled sites to deliver new homes. Not only is this enhancing the local housing offer, but it is boosting confidence by testing and proving the market for such homes. I would like to see much more dedicated funding available for a broader range of developers who are dedicated to bringing empty retail space into residential use. That is a significant measure to help to de-risk development. I very much welcome the testing and proving the market for such homes. I would like to see much more dedicated funding available for a broader range of developers who are dedicated to bringing empty retail space into residential use. There is no justification for demand to be suppressed. We must give the market the confidence to invest in housing products such as PRS and executive homes, which investors would not always be willing to do in markets such as Stoke-on-Trent.

I thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), who is currently not in her place, for securing such an important debate. I am obviously delighted to support her as I, too, put in to speak in the debate.

Clearly, local government faces huge challenges. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said, the cuts faced by MHCLG have been far greater than those faced by any other Department. It is our local authorities that have borne the brunt of austerity as, of course, have our communities with the cuts to so many of their services—whether it be the hostels provided for those coming out of prison or the Army or those who are victims of domestic abuse. Certainly, we have seen significant cuts in Warwickshire. We have seen cuts to children’s services; closure of children’s centres; cuts to waste and recycling; cuts to fire and rescue services; cuts to our libraries—and the list goes on.

I want to concentrate the rest of my remarks on social housing. As chair of the Parliamentary Campaign for Council Housing, I have been pressing for more social rented housing since I arrived in Parliament. It is well understood that we are facing a housing emergency: 277,000 people are homeless; 1.1 million households are on waiting lists; and young families spend three times more on housing costs than they did 50 years ago. Just 6,000 social rented homes were built last year. Warwick District Council, which more or less overlaps my constituency, has built just 586 social rented properties in the past four years, despite the fact that 2,000 people were on the waiting list.

I have been making my case ever since I arrived in this place, and I regard housing as the No. 1 priority for all of us in this House. We must fix this housing crisis. Shelter reports that 3.1 million homes need to be built in the next 20 years to meet the demand of those at the sharp end of housing need, particularly the younger trapped renters and the older renters, too. Back in the 1950s, in response to Churchill’s challenge, Macmillan, as Housing Minister, built 200,000 council homes. Meeting the housing need will happen only with significant investment in social rented council housing.

It is social housing that is desperately needed. Since 1980, house building in this country has been distorted by various policies, which have resulted in an average of just 25,000 social homes being built a year, compared with 125,000 during the post-war period. That is a loss of 100,000 units per year—4 million in total. The question that I want to put to the Minister is simple: how best can we use that £8.5 billion allocated to new homes, which investors would not always be willing to do in markets such as Stoke-on-Trent.

I want to concentrate the rest of my remarks on social housing. As chair of the Parliamentary Campaign for Council Housing, I have been pressing for more social rented housing since I arrived in Parliament. It is well understood that we are facing a housing emergency: 277,000 people are homeless; 1.1 million households are on waiting lists; and young families spend three times more on housing costs than they did 50 years ago. Just 6,000 social rented homes were built last year. Warwick District Council, which more or less overlaps my constituency, has built just 586 social rented properties in the past four years, despite the fact that 2,000 people were on the waiting list.

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This year, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government estimates that it will spend £3.9 billion on affordable homes—although that is often a misnomer. As well as home ownership options such as part-buy, there will also be social rented housing. To put this into context, back in 1953, in one year alone, the then Conservative Government invested £11.35 billion at today’s prices. Clearly, we are not doing enough. From speaking to Members across the House, I have learned that there is widespread support for increasing the budget. Where we differ is the

6.10 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton). I am conscious of the points that he made, particularly on social housing and on how Stoke is taking on the same challenges that face so many of us.
proportion that should be spent on social housing, and there is real clear blue water between us on how that should be funded.

This call for a massive increase in social rented housing is echoed by Shelter. In its report produced by the Social Housing Commission, it concluded that there was a need for 3.1 million homes over a 20-year period, equating to 155,000 homes a year, of which I believe 100,000 at least should be council houses. I proposed that to the House on 13 June, and it was supported. This number is not pie in the sky; it was supported by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) and, indeed, by Baroness Warsi. The only way councils will hit these kinds of numbers is through grant funding direct to councils, ring-fenced for building social rented housing. London Economics estimates that £10.7 billion is needed per year—less in real terms than the figure that was being spent in 1953.

It would be easy to think that the lifting of the local authority borrowing cap will be sufficient to provide the funding needed, but it will not. Don’t get me wrong—the lifting of the cap is very welcome, although long overdue. However, it is estimated to result in only £3.4 billion of investment in building council homes over the next four years. What is fundamentally wrong with the provision of housing is that too much money is being spent on the wrong schemes. The Help to Buy scheme falls within the remit of MHCLG. In my view, this scheme is totally the wrong priority and is simply being used to maintain inflated house prices and the bloated profits of house builders and developers.

This year, the Help to Buy scheme will once more account for the largest share of housing spend at £4.1 billion. The National Audit Office reports that two thirds of this—£2.7 billion—is in effect being used to subsidise homebuyers who could have bought a home without it, and one in 25 of those homebuyers had household incomes of over £100,000. Surely it would be better to use the £4.1 billion to build 40,000 social rented homes instead. Beyond MHCLG, there is of course the massive £21 billion being used on housing benefit annually. Again, surely this budget would be better utilised building social rented housing and realising those assets, rather than fuelling the private rental sector at the taxpayers’ expense.

Mr Betts: I have quite a lot of sympathy with my hon. Friend’s point about the Help to Buy scheme, particularly with regard to the NAO report. Does he agree that, whatever different views there might be, the Government should at least do an evaluation of the Help to Buy scheme before they embark on a further phase of it?

Matt Western: My hon. Friend always makes an important point, and his knowledge of the sector is unsurpassed. He is absolutely right that we should suspend the scheme and think about how the budget should be used urgently to kick-start a social rented programme.

I say all this because of the pressing and urgent crisis of homelessness and rough sleeping. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) gave us an example of what this crisis looks like across our communities, as our housing markets are distorted by developers. Lord Porter put it very well when he said that a good home provides a good chance of good health, good education and good lives. The reality is that, without good homes, we are seeing a huge increase in social and health-related issues, all of which add to the already great burdens faced by our local services and thus our local authorities.

Local government faces huge challenges indeed: the rising costs and numbers related to children’s services; the crisis that is the unsustainable pressure brought by adult social care; the closure of hostels; the cuts to welfare services; and the closure of children’s centres, libraries and fire stations. But I would assert that the desperate need for social rented housing is at the core of so many of the problems we face. To that end, I urge the Minister to reconsider the allocation of budgets, to slash the support for and suspend Help to Buy, to lay claim to the housing benefit budget and to use that money to kick-start the industrial-scale social housing that our society desperately needs.

6.18 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a great opportunity to speak in this important debate, and a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western). Local government is at the heart of what we all do as constituency MPs. We are all put on these Benches to stand up for our local communities, and that has certainly been at the centrepiece of all my campaigns and everything I have done since I have been lucky enough to represent the wonderful new town of Redditch.

The context of this debate has been articulated clearly by many Members: spending had to be constrained, for all sorts of reasons, by an incoming Government in 2010. That seems like a long time ago, but in financial terms it is really a very short period. Difficult decisions had to be made. Local and county councils have been at the forefront of some of those decisions with the priorities that had to be set. Some of them have done an extremely good job under very difficult circumstances. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) pointed out that we must always think about efficiency and how we are spending hard-working taxpayers’ money. I pay tribute to the work that has been done in Redditch to that end. I will therefore focus on the needs of Redditch and what we are doing in the local area, and then touch on adult social care.

I have been proud to work, together with my colleagues, on a campaign that we call Unlock Redditch, which is about releasing the potential of our town. It is a new town that faces challenges similar to those in other communities up and down the country. I very much thank our local council officers and the wonderful team of colleagues led by Councillor Matt Dormer, who has been successful in bucking the national trend in election results for the last three elections in a row. We have made gains on our local district council, which is doing an absolutely immense job in championing the needs of our area. In recent times, plans have been put forward to build over 600 new council homes, mostly bungalows. This is the first council house building programme in Redditch since 1998. Account has been taken of the needs of some of the most vulnerable groups in society. A new policy has been brought in to exempt care leavers...
from council tax. We are working very hard on our future high streets fund bid. We are also bidding for heritage action zones funding. I see the Minister is taking notes. We really want this bid to be successful.

Although we are a new town, we are built around a historic core. We have a beautiful church in our town centre surrounded by a lovely green. It is an attractive place for people to come to, but, like most areas, it needs just a little bit of TLC. That would really boost our town’s chances of being at the forefront as a tourism destination for leisure and shopping, helping to lure people away from the charms of inner-city Birmingham and Solihull—because, after all, who wants to go there when they could go to the Kingfisher shopping centre in Redditch? Of course, you are very welcome yourself, Mr Deputy Speaker. I know you have many friends in Redditch, and they would be pleased to see you there. We have also been successful in implementing grants from the LEP. We want to see our train station redeveloped and the line derailed so that we can much more easily travel into Birmingham for leisure and for work.

I want to say a little bit about adult social care. It is common knowledge that the pressures on adult social care are causing immense difficulties, and it is no different in Worcestershire. Our county council is spending some £187.7 million on the social care budget generally, a large proportion of which is on adult social care. When I came into this role—I have been an MP for only two years—I remember having my first meetings with Worcestershire County Council and being told that the county used to have so-called £1 million families who, due to a combination of needs, needed £1 million-worth of support. There were a few of those families, and of course that placed pressure on services. Now we are seeing more so-called £10 million families. Need is always rising, and these families are the most vulnerable. They have a complex picture of needs; taken together, that place pressure on the county. Such a family must have the support that we all want them to have, but it becomes much more difficult to meet the ever rising level of demand.

We have often attempted as politicians to answer the conundrum of doing more on social care. Frankly, that was an absolute disaster in the 2017 election—I think we can all be honest about that. We tried to come up with policies to tackle the issue, as we needed to do, but the heat and light of an election was absolutely the wrong time to do it. It became a political football and a toxic issue. It was utterly the wrong way to do it. We must get together across the Benches—I think there is an appetite for that—to look at things such as the German model, advocated by my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant). I have learned a lot from my hon. Friend. We have to think about how to harness the wealth locked up in people’s homes and how we contribute as a society to making this the best country in the world at taking care of elderly people.

I am sure you will be aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, that my private Member’s Bill that suggests that there should be a new homes ombudsman—better redress for home buyers. Someone buying a new house for a couple of hundred thousand pounds who finds there are problems with it has fewer rights than if they had bought an electric kettle. My all-party group recommended that and, quick as anything—12 months later, almost exactly to the day—the Government launched a consultation on that very topic. I could have saved them the trouble; they could simply read the APPG’s excellent report and we could just get on with it. If all goes really badly for me in future, maybe I can apply for the ombudsman job instead.

It is important for us to think about safety. There is a lot of talk post-Grenfell about ACM materials, but the excellent Nathaniel Barker from Inside Housing did a report recently highlighting that in March last year 44 councils had fire doors that were non-compliant or possibly non-compliant. Twelve months later, half those councils have not changed a single door. How often do we walk in and out of buildings and see that compartmentalisation has been affected because somebody has put through central heating or wiring and affected the integrity of the building? Fire doors might be propped open or their intumescent strip is faulty in some way. Let us not just focus on ACM materials, but also on the relatively simple stuff that we all see every day. Let us make sure that fire doors in all buildings are compliant. That was an excellent report from Nathaniel.

The Government could also do something a little more simple on improving safety: they could endorse my private Member’s Bill that suggests that there should be carbon monoxide detectors in all new builds and privately or socially rented homes, so that we can protect people.

However, I wanted to spend most of my speech haggling with the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western). I agree that Help to Buy is not as effective as it could be, but I disagree about the natural heir to the scheme. In my humble opinion, shared ownership is the future. If we replaced Help to Buy, an extra 15,000 houses could be generated in demand for shared ownership. If someone wants to buy a £230,000 property unaided, they need to be earning about £47,000 a year. If they are buying it through Help to Buy, they need to be earning about £38,000 a year.
However, if they buy it through 25% of shared ownership, they could be earning as little as £21,000 a year. For people in my constituency, where the average income is about £27,000 a year and the average property price is £127,000, shared ownership is the future. It is a great way of getting people on to the property ladder. They can access it with relatively low incomes and a relatively low deposit, and it is the best way to establish a home-owning democracy.

That was a whistle-stop tour, Mr Deputy Speaker, but thank you for your time.

6.30 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): We have had a thorough and full debate, and I think quite a thoughtful debate from those on both sides of the House. I add my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for choosing the topic of Housing, Communities and Local Government for this estimates day debate.

I thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for the way in which she opened the debate. She set out a very real concern that is felt across all parties in this House about the impact of a decade of constraints on local government and the effect that that is now having on our public services. However, it would be remiss of me not to say that she and the Liberal Democrats displayed a little bit of collective amnesia, because they were in government between 2010 and 2015. It does seem that “Sorry” is the hardest word. In her defence, she said that she campaigned against these cuts as a candidate, but her Ministers slashed and burned many of the services she referred to. The crisis in local government today, the crisis in adult social care today and the crisis in children’s services today have their roots in the coalition years, and the Minister for local government was a Liberal Democrat—he is now Lord Stunell of Hazel Grove—although he occasionally got locked in the Opposition Lobby in votes, which is perhaps why he was very quickly moved.

I want to pay tribute to the other contributions: from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who is the Chair of the Select Committee and brings so much knowledge to these debates; from my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western); and from the Conservatives, the hon. Members for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), the right hon. Member for Witton (Priti Patel), and the hon. Members for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) and for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes).

I want to echo the right hon. Member for Witton, who mentioned that she is married to a councillor. It would be extremely remiss of me not to mention that I, too, am married to a councillor—Councillor Allison Gwynne—on Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council. I am incredibly proud that both my councils have, since May, had a female leader. The councils are very ably led by two incredible Labour women. Councillor Brenda Warrington, the leader of Tameside, has been joined by Councillor Elise Wilson, the new leader of Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council. They are both doing great work. I also want to thank all our dedicated council staff and councillors of all political persuasions and none for the incredible work that they do in making sure our communities are looked after. While they have continued to work hard and to lobby for the resources they need to do their job, they know—and we know actually—just how hard that job has become over the last few years. The debate has put out the message in various ways, but it is the same on both sides of the House: increasing concern about the growing crisis in local government funding and the huge cost pressures, particularly in children and adult services.

The consequence of the cost pressures in those people-based services is that the place-based services—the neighbourhood services—are squeezed. The conundrum for local councillors is that most people think that their council is there to deliver the place-based services. They are the things that they see: bins being emptied, streets being swept, parks being maintained, libraries being open and youth centres existing. Those services are squeezed to pay for the pressures in children and adult services.

I will rattle off a few figures: 763 youth centres and more than 700 libraries have closed, and Sure Start has been cut in half, since 2010. Yet local government is the beating heart of our communities. Our councils keep our streets cleaner and safer, protect the most vulnerable in society and maintain our green spaces. When we inevitably grow older, we hope that our councils will be there to provide the services to give us dignity in old age.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central said, we should work towards Total Place. The previous Labour Government were keen on developing the notion that all public bodies, across the public sector, should work towards the same strategy and outcomes, and ensure that there are proper joined-up, people-based services. Our councils are the lynchpin of providing cohesive, joined-up public services, whether housing, police and crime prevention, leisure services, youth services or public health, which widens into the national health service.

Kevin Hollinrake: I understand that the hon. Gentleman’s preference was not for making cuts to local authorities over the past few years, and he makes a good case for that. However, faced with the challenge in 2010 of balancing the books against a backdrop of £153 billion annual deficit, where would he have made the cuts?

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Gentleman should realise that we are almost a decade into austerity and local government has taken the biggest hit of any Department. There is a reason for that. It is easy to pass the blame from Whitehall to town and county halls throughout the country. The Conservative Government have hung the hon. Gentleman’s councils out to dry.

Kevin Hollinrake rose—

Andrew Gwynne: I will not give way just now.

In the past decade, local government in England has lost 60% out of every pound that the previous Labour Government invested in our communities, in local services, in the glue that binds our communities together. The estimates debated today will sadly offer no relief to
local government. The only major change from last year in the funds for local government is for business rates relief. Although it is welcome that the Government are compensating local government for that policy, it is necessary only because the Government have refused to undertake a fundamental review of business rates for which many have called. I am proud to say that the next Labour Government will conduct such a review.

Although the Minister can speak today about increases in local authorities’ spending power in this year’s settlement, it is all smoke and mirrors. Any increases are possible only if all councils increase their council tax by the maximum possible, which would mean eye-watering, inflation-busting tax increases for ordinary households. Council tax now equates to 7% of the income of a low-income family, compared to just 1% for a high-income family. That is not only unfair, but economically incoherent. The poorest areas, those that need the most resources to cope with the growing demands on children’s services and adult services, will never be able to raise the money they need. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham made the point that far less is possible in those areas than in the more well-off areas of the country.

I do not make that point to argue that we should be robbing some areas to fund others, but the fact is that all councils are now struggling and I would guess that that is not lost on the Minister. I hope that he will now be interested in solutions to the problem, because there is a growing chorus of concern from those on the Government Benches behind him. We are seeing a reverse redistribution of funding: a shift away from spending on local services that is based on need and deprivation.

Let me just remind the Minister that, while the Tories have in some cases actually seen spending increases, nine out of the 10 areas that have seen the largest cuts are Labour controlled: Hackney, £1,406 less per household in spending power between 2010-11 and 2019-20; Newham, £1,301; Tower Hamlets, £1,264; Knowsley, £1,057; and Southwark £1,014. Those are eye-watering numbers. Then we look at the other end of the scale: Maidstone, a £678 drop; Tewkesbury, £5.31; Vale of White Horse, £4.12; Tonbridge and Malling, a £4.18 increase; Stratford-on-Avon, a £7.45 per household increase; Uttlesford, a £7.66 increase; Horsham, a £15.68 increase; Wokingham, a £39.31 increase; and the Isles of Scilly, a £336.78 increase. That just is not fair. Not one council that has seen an increase in spending power from 2010-11 to 2019-20 is a Labour council.

What was in this year’s funding settlement? Unfortunately, I am not able to speak today about what the funding situation will look like next year because nobody knows—no one on the Opposition Benches, no one in local government, not even the Minister. Councils would normally have started their budget setting planning process, but they remain completely in the dark about how much funding they will have next year. The Government’s intention was to implement a fair funding review and to increase the percentage of business rates retained locally from 1% to 4% by 2020, but the Tory leadership contest has thrown that plan up in the air. As the Chief Secretary to the Treasury told the Lords Economic Affairs Committee earlier this month:

“The plan was to launch the spending review just before the summer recess...I would suggest that’s unlikely given the current timetable of the Conservative leadership election.”

If that is not the case, I recommend that the Minister use this opportunity to set the record straight. I know that everyone in local government would welcome clarity. We need that certainty. Is there going to be a spending review? Is it going to be for four years? Is it going to be for one year? The Minister needs to give clarity.

What we do know from a survey published today by the Local Government Association is that one in three councils is worried that it will be unable to provide the statutory services by the end of this Parliament. That would include services such as: preventing homelessness; ensuring that vulnerable children are safe; ensuring quality of life for all adults; and dignity in old age. We know from the same survey that year-on-year cuts and an unprecedented rise in demand for these services have resulted in one in five councils being concerned that it will not be able to balance the books this year.

In closing, I would like to repeat the words of the Conservative Lord Porter, who said earlier this month: “If the Government think the policy going forward is to spend all your reserves, and then we will find some new money...after you have spent all your reserves,” the Secretary of State is going to have to “explain to the public why those people died because the money was not available... It is always about understanding the cost of everything and the value of nothing.”

Never has a truer word been said. That is the reality, and I genuinely hope that the Minister, whom I respect greatly, will get a grip on his two leadership want-to-bes and insist that they start to fix the decade of neglect and cuts that our communities and local government have endured.

6.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a great pleasure to conclude this debate, which I agree with the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on opening it and thank the Backbench Business Committee for securing time for us to discuss a subject that is close to my heart. She can rest assured that the latest report of the Public Accounts Committee on local government sustainability is bedtime reading for me; I have it with me at all times. I thank all hon. Members who contributed to the debate.

We are all here because we value and recognise the invaluable work conducted by councils up and down the country. I join all hon. Members on both sides of the House in paying tribute to our hard-working councillors, and I thank them for everything they do for our local communities. Let me also take this opportunity, on the first day of the Local Government Association conference, to thank the noble Lord Porter for his tenure as chairman of the LGA. He is a genuine giant in the world of local government, he has been a strong champion for the sector, he is respected across the spectrum, and I know he will be sorely missed.

Shortly after I became local government Minister, Lord Porter’s successor, Councillor Jamieson—whom I wish every success too—handed me a document that
A recurring theme in the debate—it was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon, and the Chair of the Select Committee—was governance. They were right to raise that issue. Like me, the hon. Lady was not here during the coalition Government, but they decided to abolish the Audit Commission and replace it with a more decentralised framework for oversight and accountability. The Secretary of State confirmed at the LGA today that the Department plans to enhance its role in oversight and leadership of the local authority governance system. His aim is to be able to spot problems more easily and sooner, to support councils and to protect our residents. The Secretary of State is committed to outlining to the Public Accounts Committee by the end of the year the specific steps that he will take in that regard. I know that that is something that many hon. Members have raised today and I hope they will be reassured by that. In conjunction with that work, the Secretary of State has committed to a review of the local audit framework. Again, he will report soon to the Public Accounts Committee on how that should be achieved.

My first theme is economic growth. The money that funds our public services has to come from somewhere, and the only sustainable way to generate those funds is to drive economic growth. Councils play a critical role in that, incentivised and supported by central Government. Our business rates retention scheme means that every authority in England stands to reap the rewards of increased growth in business rates income and will be able to use those rewards to invest in their local economy and community. Through business rates retention, councils now have access to nearly £2.5 billion in additional funds, on top of their core spending power, to fund local services.

Our successful 75% business rates retention pilots were incredibly popular, and 14 pilots are now in operation, benefiting over 100 different local authorities. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) reminded us of the importance of all councillors embarking on a journey of efficiency to ensure that their taxpayers’ money is spent incredibly well. Where we can find those efficiencies, we absolutely should.

The Government are championing authorities that are putting digital innovation at the heart of their service delivery and transformation and efficiency programmes. That has the potential to be hugely significant, which is why our new digital declaration is so important, and that ambition is backed by a £7.5 million local digital innovation fund. That is funding projects that have the potential to save money and transform services on the ground. The programme is also providing digital leadership training for hundreds of senior councillors and officers up and down the country, building the local government leaders of tomorrow.

I turn next to councils’ crucial role in helping the most vulnerable in society, and again the Government’s record is strong. We fully back councils that are on the frontline in helping those in need, supporting children, the disabled and the elderly.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): My hon. Friend has referred to the role of councils in protecting the vulnerable. Does he also recognise that since health-visiting services were passed...
to them, the number of health visitors has fallen by more than 2,000 nationally—which is not helping young people to get a good start in life—and addiction services have been massively reduced, which means that deaths from alcohol and morbidity from alcohol-related diseases are on the rise? Will he please undertake to review the basis of the commissioning of those services and consider returning them to the NHS, where they belong?

Rishi Sunak: I am not sure I agree with my hon. Friend that it would be right for public health responsibility to be returned to the NHS. Local government does not believe that it is right, and since local government has taken on ownership of public health, all the outcomes that I have seen have improved and been delivered more effectively. The Secretary of State recently commented on that. I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s broader point, and of course it is important for delivery to be carried out well, but I think that the track record is in local government’s favour thus far.

Mr Betts: I take a different point of view. When public health was the responsibility of the NHS, the money was kept within the NHS budget, and increased each year in line with NHS funding. Since the transfer to local government, the funds have been cut substantially in real terms. Let us return public health funding to a level at which local government will really deliver.

Rishi Sunak: I think we are talking about two different issues. One is the issue of who is responsible for delivering public health, and I am strongly in favour of local government’s continuing responsibility. As for the budget, the Chairman of the Select Committee will know that it is ring-fenced. As that is rolled into business rates retention, it is of course right for there to be a proper governance and assurance mechanism.

The most recent Budget provided £650 million in new funding to help councils respond to pressure on both children’s and adults’ social care, and we have heard much about that today. It comes on top of the billions of pounds of extra funding in previous Budgets for adult social care, and it is starting to make an enormous difference on the ground. The number of delayed transfers of care has fallen by 50% since the peak, and 93% of councils agree that joined-up working with the NHS through the Better Care Fund is improving outcomes.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) set a good challenge for Governments to follow when he spoke of place-based funding. The improved Better Care fund is just one aspect, but we should clearly aim to do more in that direction, pooling budgets locally among different agencies when it makes sense. Manchester is the most evolved model in that regard, and I have enjoyed getting to know the team there and seeing the results that its work is having.

My hon. Friends the Members for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) and for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) talked about the importance of a long-term solution. That is not my remit, but I hope that the Secretary of State is giving good consideration to the joint work of the two Select Committees on a social insurance model. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) reminded us that prevention is better than cure, and I fully agree with her.

I am very proud of the work that our Department has done in leading the highly successful troubled families programme, which has supported more than 400,000 families through an innovative early intervention model utilising a key worker and a whole-family approach. The results have been excellent. Children have been saved from going into care, people are coming off benefits and going into work, and crime and antisocial behaviour have been reduced. Ultimately, families are becoming stronger. It is a privilege to meet the people who are executing the programme on the ground, and those visits are some of the most humbling that I make. I know that that programme, and those workers, are making an enormous difference to the lives of some of our most vulnerable citizens.

Finally, let me touch on the work of councils in supporting strong communities. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch about that. The Government see it as a critical task, and we are helping councils to build cohesive, safe and local communities up and down the country—places that we are proud to call home. We have provided additional funds to enable councils to build cohesion in areas on which migration has had a particular impact.

We have worked with my hon. Friends the Members for Redditch and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) to come up with various support schemes for the high streets, which are now worth more than £1.5 billion. We have helped councils to make improvements to local roads—the essential arteries of our community life—with a £420 million fund to deal with potholes. We have provided new money for parks and green spaces, which has brought about the creation of more than 200 “pocket parks”. Those little havens of greenery make all the difference to the community, especially in the more deprived areas.

Just those few examples demonstrate the breadth and depth of our commitment to helping local government to build vibrant and cohesive communities in the places that they serve. Whether they are driving economic growth, caring for the most vulnerable in society or building stronger communities, local councils across the country do an amazing job. That is what makes it such a privilege for me to have this role, and to champion local government in Whitehall and in Westminster. Local government deserves our backing, local government is getting our backing, and I commend the estimates to the House.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54)

7 pm

The Speaker put the deferred Questions (Standing Order No. 54).

ESTIMATES 2019-20

DEPARTMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Resolved.

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2020, for expenditure by the Department for International Development—
Resolved,
That, for the year ending with 31 March 2020, for expenditure by the Department for Education—

(1) further resources, not exceeding £35,024,055,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 2154 of Session 2017-19,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £48,180,879,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £49,265,200,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION

Question put,
That, for the year ending with 31 March 2020, for expenditure by the Department for Work and Pensions—

(1) further resources, not exceeding £48,180,879,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 2154 of Session 2017-19,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £362,104,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £3,631,122,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 2154 of Session 2017-19.

Resolved,
For the year ending with 31 March 2020, for expenditure—

(1) further resources, not exceeding £3,631,122,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 2154 of Session 2017-19,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £1,923,101,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £48,195,607,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS

The House divided: Ayes 276, Noes 45.
Division No. 425] [7.1 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella (Proxy vote cast by Mr Steve Baker)

Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dudbridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fyah, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Mr Nasrul
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
James, Margot

Davide, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Leithwa, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Little, Engilayda, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Macknag, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLaughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mr Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morriss, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike

[1167 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2 JULY 2019 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 1168]
Resolved,

That for the year ending with 31 March 2020, for expenditure by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—

(1) further resources, not exceeding £13,222,573,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 2154 of Session 2017–19,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £5,087,100,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £9,295,168,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

The Speaker then put the Question on the outstanding Estimate (Standing Order No. 55).

MAIN ESTIMATES 2019-20

Question put,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2020—

(1) further resources, not exceeding £201,202,413,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 2154, HC 2173, HC 2180, HC 2181, HC 2182 and HC 2183 of Session 2017–19,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £24,106,601,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £171,642,347,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament. —[Rishi Sunak.]
Glen and Robert Jenrick bring in the Bill. of the Exchequer, Elizabeth Truss, Jesse Norman, John Resolutions relating to Main Estimates 2019-20; Ordered, That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Question accordingly agreed to.

**NOES**

Bardell, Hannah Black, Mhairi Blackford, Iain Blackman, Kirsty Brock, Deidre Brown, Alan Cable, Sir Vince Cameron, Dr Lisa Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair Chapman, Douglas Cherry, Joanna Cowan, Ronnie Crawley, Angela Day, Martyn Docherty-Hughes, Martin Edwards, Jonathan Farron, Tim Gethins, Stephen Gibson, Patricia Grady, Patrick Grant, Peter Gray, Neil Hobhouse, Wera Hosie, Stewart Robinson, Gavin Robinson, Mary Rosindell, Andrew Ross, Douglas Rowley, Lee Rudd, rh Amber Rutley, David Sandbach, Antoinette Scully, Patsy Seely, Mr Bob Selous, Andrew Shannon, Jim Shapps, rh Grant Sharma, Alok Shelbrooke, Alec Simpson, David Skidmore, Chris Smith, Chloe (Proxy vote cast by Jo Churchill)

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

- Zahawi, Nadhim
- Wright, rh Jeremy
- Tugendhat, Tom
- Vaz, Mr Shailesh
- Villiers, rh Theresa
- Walker, Mr Charles
- Walker, Mr Robin
- Wallace, rh Mr Ben
- Watling, Giles
- Whately, Helen
- Wheeler, Mrs Heather
- Whittaker, Craig
- Whittingdale, rh Mr John
- Wragg, Mr William
- Williamson, rh Gavin
- Wood, Mike
- Wragg, Mr William
- Wright, rh Jeremy
- Zahiaw, Nadhim

**Tellers for the Noes:**

- Jardine, Christine
- Lake, Ben
- Lamb, rh Norman
- Law, Chris
- Lucas, Caroline
- MacNeil, Angus Brendan
- Mc Nally, John
- McDonald, Stuart C.
- Monaghan, Carol
- Moran, Layla
- Newlands, Gavin
- O’Hara, Brendan
- Saville Roberts, rh Liz
- Sheppard, Tommy
- Stephens, Chris
- Thewliss, Alison
- Whitford, Dr Philippa
- Williams, Hywel
- Wishart, Pete

- Jardine, Christine
- Lake, Ben
- Lamb, rh Norman
- Law, Chris
- Lucas, Caroline
- MacNeil, Angus Brendan
- Mc Nally, John
- McDonald, Stuart C.
- Monaghan, Carol
- Moran, Layla
- Newlands, Gavin
- O’Hara, Brendan
- Saville Roberts, rh Liz
- Sheppard, Tommy
- Stephens, Chris
- Thewliss, Alison
- Whitford, Dr Philippa
- Williams, Hywel
- Wishart, Pete
SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (MAIN ESTIMATES)
(No.3) BILL

Presentation and First Reading

Jesse Norman accordingly presented a Bill to authorise the use of resources for the year ending 31 March 2020; to authorise both the issue of sums out of the Consolidated Fund and the application of income for that year; and to appropriate the supply authorised for that year by this Act and by the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2019.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 414).

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2014 (Consequential Modification) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 16 May, be approved.—[Mike Freer.]

Question agreed to.

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that I have certified that the regulations apply exclusively to England. The motion could have been subject to double majority voting: the whole House and those representing constituencies in England.

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

COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE LEVY

That the draft Community Infrastructure Levy (Amendment) (England) (No. 2) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 4 June, be approved.—[Mike Freer.]

Question agreed to.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am intrigued by the double majority that was required on a voice vote. I wonder whether your ears are so skilfully attuned now that you can distinguish the Ayes and Noes between Members representing seats north and south of the border.

Mr Speaker: I did not think that an abnormal level of skill was required. It was evident to me that the motion had been agreed to. The question of whether an abnormal level of skill would have been available to me is hypothetical and it would be immodest of me to answer the question in the affirmative. As I treat of the matter as hypothetical and am not required to answer, and as I note from the beaming countenance of the hon. Gentleman that he is teasing me, I take it in the spirit in which he has done so and proceed to the petition in the name of Mr John Howell. 7.32 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I present a petition that has been signed by 406 residents of the village of Woodcote in my constituency and by surrounding villages that feed into the school of Langtree. The purpose of the petition is to try to remove once and for all issues over school funding. This is a similar petition to the one that I submitted in connection with Henley itself a little while ago.

The petition states that the petition of the residents of Woodcote, Oxfordshire, of friends of Langtree School and of those from surrounding villages declares that a funding review is needed in relation to Langtree school; further that this school funding review should address how funding increases will be made in relation to schools in the Henley constituency in real terms beyond the amounts already being spent on schools and how to eliminate the gap between the best and lowest funded schools in the constituency; further that there must be a review of areas of inflationary pressures and situations where schools provide additional services such as social care, or deal with criminal behaviour to examine the real costs of providing education; further that there must be an assessment into the extent and access to capital funding; further that the Basic Entitlement must form an appropriate percentage of the National Funding Formula used locally; further that the Department and Treasury must ensure that small primary schools in the constituency remain integral to their communities.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[ The petition of residents of Woodcote and friends of Langtree School, Declares that a funding review is needed in relation to schools in the Henley constituency; further that this school funding review should address how funding increases will be made in relation to schools in the Henley constituency in real terms beyond the amounts already being spent on schools and how to eliminate the gap between the best and lowest funded schools in the constituency; further that there must be a review of areas of inflationary pressures and situations where schools provide additional services such as social care, or deal with criminal behaviour to examine the real costs of providing education; further that there must be an assessment into the extent and access to capital funding; further that the Basic Entitlement must form an appropriate percentage of the National Funding Formula used locally; further that the Department and Treasury must ensure that small primary schools in the constituency remain integral to their communities.]

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to ask the Department of Education and the Treasury to conduct a review of school funding in Henley that addresses the issues stated above, in advance of the Comprehensive Spending Review; and further requests that the findings of this review are communicated to the House of Commons. And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002483]
Unemployment and Autism

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

7.35 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I thank the National Autistic Society and the local group Autism Take 5 for their help in preparing for this debate.

Of those who have been fortunate enough to have received a diagnosis, there are 540,000 people with autism spectrum conditions. Some 433,000 are aged 18-plus, and 107,000 children are currently diagnosed with ASCs UK-wide. Research by the Centre for the Economics of Mental Health sheds light on the impact on the UK economy through lost productivity. This Government emphasise the need for people to move into paid employment and for higher rates of economic activity, but the autistic population is standing out as they are experiencing social and employment exclusion more than any other group. The cost of this is £27.5 billion spent annually supporting people with ASCs, and a 36% loss in employment in that group.

The World Health Organisation reports a substantial increase in people being diagnosed with autism spectrum conditions. Therefore, we must consider the large number of teenagers now approaching working age. This is significant because people with ASCs experience symptoms that are considered barriers to employment.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this subject to the House for consideration. Every one of us in this House and those outside are concerned about it. Does the hon. Lady agree that support and understanding are the key to employment of people with autism, and that the option of free training—something different, and something proactive and positive for people with autism and their employers—should be available to private employers who wish to learn how to get the best from their staff, and ensure that their working environment is safe and secure for all workers?

Marion Fellows: I feel privileged that the hon. Gentleman has intervened in my Adjournment debate, and I could not agree with him more. I will come to his point later in my speech.

Following a survey commissioned by the National Autistic Society, the London School of Economics advises that only 16% of adults with ASCs are in full-time employment, despite 77% of them wanting to work. These figures have remained static since 2007 and are considerably lower than the employment figure for people belonging to other disability categories, which currently sits at 47%. Therefore, those with autism spectrum conditions are disproportionately unemployed.

We know that employment contributes to our identity and quality of life. Equally, we are only too aware that unemployment has significant individual and societal costs. As a result of these barriers, most people with ASCs who are fortunate enough to gain employment will experience mal-employment, and will most likely be placed in jobs that are a poor job fit for their skillset. This is commonly because the job does not align with individual interests, talents, specific skills or intelligence levels. It is common sense that the better the job fit, the more likely people are to succeed. By not addressing this, individuals with ASCs will experience high levels of job turnover, resulting in disjointed employment histories that limit their potential for continuous employment; we know that when applying for jobs, our work history can either facilitate or block our access to being invited for an interview.

Every adult—with or without a disability—that has the right to enjoy employment, and should be able to choose their career without restriction, to work in positive conditions and to be protected against unemployment.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the major concerns for many people relates to workplace assessments and their effectiveness, or ineffectiveness, whether for those with autism or other disabilities? Does she agree that the Department really should consider how it measures the effectiveness of workplace assessments—say, for those with autism—in enabling them to stay in a job for a longer period?

Marion Fellows: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He raises a very important point.

It is recognised that jobcentre staff will encourage an individual to apply for and accept any vacancy. For someone with a fragmented employment history, this quickly becomes accepted as the only route to employment.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that we should ask the Government to follow the advice and example of the Scottish Government in creating an autism implementation team to improve outcomes, including in accessing work, for people with autism so that they are supported as they make their way in the world?

Marion Fellows: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I do agree. In fact, there are many occasions when this Government could follow the excellent example of the Scottish Government, but in this case it could prove especially fruitful.

Not all jobs are suitable for individuals with autism spectrum conditions, as a result of their own individual barriers. These are common symptoms of ASCs. It is accepted that ASCs will result in individuals experiencing strong resistance to change and poor social communication and interpersonal skills. They will struggle in acclimatising to new routines and procedures. However, this should not prevent them from accessing employment: it means that we need to change our approach within the workplace.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on the way in which she is presenting her case. As well as the barriers of access to employment that she is speaking about, there are barriers of access for people with autism going about their daily lives in general. Does she agree that Hope for Autism, which is based in Airdrie but serves the entirety of North Lanarkshire, is an example of a specialist local organisation doing fantastic work to help young people with autism, and their families, not just in accessing work but in being able to cope with the barriers that they face?
Marion Fellows: I thank my hon. Friend. Yes, he is absolutely right. There are so many organisations UK-wide that support and help people with autism, but we need to really concentrate on getting people on the spectrum into employment.

We need workplaces to become accessible for those with ASCs. I would argue that we need a more holistic approach and acceptance of an individual’s personal preferences and abilities. We must recognise the barriers that some will face when attempting to gain employment. In the first instance, job application forms can be too complex and without clear instructions. Most individuals with autistic spectrum conditions will struggle with deciding whether they should declare that they have an ASC. Again, this is a result of the neurotypical stereotyping that continues to exist today. In other words, people with ASCs are perceived as being very different, and there is no real understanding of the challenges and range of autistic spectrum conditions that exist.

When someone with an ASC is fortunate enough to be invited for an interview, a variety of factors may impact negatively on their performance, as it might be called, in relation to a neurotypical candidate. It is important to recognise that they will be sensitive to sensory stimuli—bright lighting and so on—that will result in increasing their anxiety before they have even begun the interview. We use the neurotypical as a normative benchmark for interview success, but this needs to change. Interviews measure candidates demonstrating their social skills and having the confidence to maintain a flowing conversation. An interviewer will expect the interviewee to respond to questions quickly.

However, the language used in questions can be misunderstood. Not everyone interviewing applicants is experienced or trained in interviewing techniques and can all too often ask one question that contains other questions, causing confusion for an individual with an ASC. One common question in interviews is, “Tell me about yourself.” Someone with an ASC will have difficulty in determining what exactly the interviewer wishes to know: it is too open-ended. Questions need to be concise and designed to avoid misinterpretation. They will struggle to read between the lines or understand the tone of voice. Many interviews use questions that require hypothetical scenarios and hypothetical answers. People with ASCs are factual thinkers and will find that line of questioning challenging. We also know that someone with an ASC will have problems understanding facial expressions and recognising social cues. It is widely accepted that people with ASCs experience difficulty in adapting to new routines and procedures. They will also struggle with adopting a flexible approach in unexpected situations, so not all jobs will be appropriate environments for them. I have not given an exhaustive list.

The Government argue that disability support is in place, such as the local supported employment and intensive personalised employment support programmes, but those are generic disability employment programmes, not designed for autism spectrum conditions. We need specialised support that will prove more effective in assisting people with ASCs into employment and maintaining employment. That role should be taken up by Jobcentre Plus. With proper training, jobcentres would be able to support employers who take on those with ASCs.

Being employed offers structure and routine, which enhance an individual’s life. If employers need to change their approach to hiring staff and allow a time period for those with ASCs to settle into their roles and environment, that should be done. However, there is very little or no evidence to prove that the Government are taking steps to regulate the situation, in spite of their past commitment to do so.

What is not being recognised are the attributes that people with ASCs have and can bring to the workforce. About half of those in this population will have higher education, with some educated to PhD level, yet they remain under-represented in senior organisational roles. So many people with ASCs are extremely skilled in maths, physics, computing sciences and engineering, yet they remain discriminated against, with their talents and intelligence being cast aside—all because the Government will not put into practice the recommendations provided by various autism charities.

The Government are refusing to take the bull by the horns and activate their own strategy and the Equalities Act 2010 to its fullest extent; they would rather tiptoe around autism and claim that they recognise that changes need to be made. Where is the headway on this? People with ASCs are still being excluded and discriminated against. Given their abilities, they have exceptional characteristics as employees, such as honesty, efficiency, precision, consistency, low absenteeism, disinterest in office politics and attention to detail. However, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, the lack of appropriate training and support for employers means that they generally do not see these characteristics—only autism. More often than not, that means that people in the group are forced into entry-level jobs that will not last long, due to their intelligence levels.

We cannot continue to repeat this vicious cycle with the new generation of workforce. When someone is excluded from the workforce despite their credentials, despite their abilities, despite their intelligence, what are the implications of their being unemployed? They are depression, isolation, anxiety and low self-esteem. The system is not fit for purpose.

What are the Government planning to do to rectify the situation? They continuously categorise autism spectrum conditions as a “learning disability”. I suggest that being able to achieve a PhD, complete higher education and have expert level skills is not reflective of having such a disability. Not all people with autism spectrum conditions have learning disabilities, and we need the Government to recognise that. We need to stop regarding the autistic and neurotypical ways of thinking as polar and conflicting opposites; they are merely different, with no wrong or right side at play.

The Autism Alliance has done amazing work in providing the confident autism and neurodiversity toolkit, but it is not being used enough. The difficulties many people with autistic spectrum conditions have may mean that, when they cannot get a job, they have to apply for benefits. Most of my casework is in relation to people requesting mandatory reconsiderations or people being forced to attend tribunals. It is all too obvious that the application forms for benefits such as the personal independence payment and employment and support allowance—

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Will my hon. Friend give way?
Marion Fellows: Yes, certainly.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: In relation to PIP and reconsiderations, does my hon. Friend recognise that, as I said to the Minister yesterday, 85% of all considerations were overturned in April 2019? Rather than that type of bureaucracy, we should be investing in the frontline, as my hon. Friend is saying.

Marion Fellows: Yes, I completely agree.

As I have said, most of my casework is in relation to people coming to me as they cannot navigate the benefits system. They find it increasingly difficult, and many in fact just give up altogether. As a caring society, we should not allow that. Applications for PIP and ESA are designed in such a way that they eliminate the neuro-diverse mindset. They are designed by a Government who would have us believe they are using all the toolkits, training, expertise and guidance from the various charities. It is clear that if this were true, more adults would have accessed employment since 2007, and fewer adults would be struggling to navigate the discriminating benefit process in operation. As MPs, we cannot know the number of individuals who have tried to apply for these benefits and not got beyond an application. People may now be homeless, have mental health issues or worse because of how this Government are failing the autistic population of this country.

I should like the Minister to address these questions. What steps will this Government take to close the autism employment gap? Will the Government commit to ensuring all Jobcentre Plus staff have proper autism understanding training? Will the Government commit to recording autism in the labour force survey so that we can measure progress in the employment of those with autism spectrum conditions?

Finally, will the Government commit to raising awareness of the autism friendly employer award? This would help many more ASCs into employment. There are other awards that MPs could work towards, too. I am proud to be the first parliamentarian to receive the autism friendly award. It is not hard to make a difference for ASCs, but by raising awareness we, together, can perhaps raise employment levels and guidance from the various charities.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the Minister for giving way and for a very constructive response to my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). Does he agree that it is extremely important that parliamentarians undertake the autism awareness training that the all-party parliamentary group has provided? I believe that more than 100 MPs have already done so. I was very pleased to do it. Does he also agree that MPs should undertake the Disability Confident training to ensure that they are Disability Confident employers?

Justin Tomlinson: The chair of the all-party parliamentary group on disability has highlighted two incredibly important asks of all Parliaments and parliamentarians, and I wholeheartedly agree that they should all have that training, and that they should all sign up to Disability Confident. Many parliamentarians have done so and many enthusiastically support both those campaigns, but it does no harm to remind people that, even with busy diaries, that is incredibly important.

The majority of the speech of the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw focused on employment opportunities, so that is where I will start. In the jobcentres, we are grateful for the work of the Autism Alliance, which helped develop the disability toolkit, providing comprehensive information on autism and hidden impairments. We also now have the bite-sized autism awareness learning that jobcentres are looking at. From that, many examples of good practice have developed locally, which we are sharing across the jobcentre network. They include calm and quiet sessions for claimants.

We also have the disability passport, “About Me”, which encourages disabled claimants to disclose their disability and health conditions at an earlier stage. That improves communication, ensures reasonable adjustments in advance and allows individual challenges to be explained only once. That issue was clearly highlighted in the hon. Lady’s speech. We have done more intense training on autism and hidden impairments for 1,000 of our frontline staff to ensure that there is a high level of understanding in every jobcentre. We will continue to do that, and that was one of the hon. Lady’s asks. I would like to invite her to meet me and my team to look at that particular area so we can have confidence that we are doing everything we reasonably can in all jobcentres.
As part of our support for people who could be classed as being further away from the workplace, we have: universal credit personalised support, which could simply be signposting following the first conversation; moving on to the Work and Health programme; the personalised support package, which now includes 800 disability employment advisers and leaders; or the intensive personalised employment programme, which will be launched at the end of the year. The last is highly personalised and tailored to the individual’s needs. That is important, because every autistic person experiences autism differently and many have complex needs or other conditions, such as a learning disability or a mental health condition, so the programme has to be tailored and personalised.

One of the best levers that we have as a Government is the Access to Work programme. Again, while we celebrate the fact that 33,800 people—a record number, up 13%—benefited from Access to Work last year, as with the labour force statistics, we cannot record autism. However, once that comes in to the labour force statistics, we will also have it within Access to Work. I know that it is not an exact comparison, but last year there was an increase of 22% in claimants with a learning disability where there was a crossover. There was also a 28% increase in young claimants who benefit from the Access to Work scheme. That is important because Access to Work has only recently broadened out from simply supporting people with a physical disability or sensory impairments, and we have now stepped up significantly support for mental health, learning disability and autism.

However, it is a journey and we have a real commitment to go much further. We are working with organisations such as the Autism Alliance and Exceptional Individuals to ensure that our staff have specialist knowledge, so that when they talk to employers and the potential or existing employee about how we can provide support, we have the best knowledge of the available technology and the way in which support workers can help, particularly in the interview process. Probably the most powerful part of the hon. Lady’s speech was about interviews and adapting the interview process. I have employed disabled people. I understand that interviews are a strange old process, because they bear little relation to what happens next and generally everybody just claims to be very active at sport. The real question is how they will fit those roles. We talk to employers who are struggling to fill skills gaps about being a little bit smarter. Also, through the Access to Work programme, we can look at travel, which is important, particularly if people are anxious and would find public transport difficult. We will be doing far more.

We are looking to build evidence in this area. We are working with a supported business alliance—57 supported businesses across the country—to provide a greater level of additional support. In return, we can gather the evidence to see how we can break down the barriers and provide long-term sustainable opportunities with career progression.

Neil Gray: As had been said, I appreciate the constructive way in which the Minister is responding to the debate. Alongside the barriers that people with ASCs have to the workplace, they are also, sadly, more likely to be exploited. One of my constituents was affected by unpaid work trials in B&M Stores. In light of this debate, I wonder whether the Minister might reconsider the Government’s opposition to the 10-minute rule Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) to ban exploitative unpaid work trials, so that people with autism and Asperger’s, such as my constituent, are not exploited in such a way again.

Justin Tomlinson: I am conscious of time, so I will have to look into the details. It is right that we absolutely have to do more to enlighten businesses of all sizes about the opportunities. Small changes and good practice can benefit not just individuals with autism, but the organisations that take them on.

This is my second time as Minister for Disabled People and I am very proud that, in the final few weeks last time, I was able to push through the opening up of disability apprenticeships, removing the need to get a grade C in GCSE maths and English for people who would qualify under the disability apprenticeship. That is an important way that we, as a Government, are trying to remove barriers, but we must look at providing additional support within the workplace to go beyond the interview, so that people have an opportunity to demonstrate their skills.

Through our Disability Confident campaign, which now has more than 12,000 businesses of all sizes signed up, we are looking to share best practice. I think we can go further than that, not just by recruiting more organisations to the Disability Confident campaign, but by looking at organisations such as the Health and Safety Executive. To a certain extent, that will help support the point made by the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray). It is very proactive in engaging with businesses on safety, so it is a given that the workplaces will have a safe environment. We are world-leading on this—other countries look to our expertise—but we need to do the same on health. That includes empowering small and medium-sized businesses in particular that do not have personnel or HR departments, so that they can have the skills and the confidence to make small, reasonable adjustments. That would be a win-win for all.

I had the pleasure on Friday, as part of Employability Day, of meeting employers and individuals who had overcome those barriers. That was transformational for those individuals who were enjoying the opportunity to contribute, and to the employers who had struggled to fill gaps and were now benefiting as an organisation.

Jim Shannon: I was just sitting here thinking about the best way of doing this. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) has made some suggestions. When it comes to organising training for the potential employer and the young person with autism, would the Minister consider using the influence of parents and families to enable the training process to be easier for the person who has autism as well as for the potential employer?

Justin Tomlinson: I agree. In all parts of accessing services and applying for jobs, having supportive individuals is a reasonable adjustment that a good employer, a good organisation and a good Government should take into account and should encourage.
In the final moments, I wish to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw. It is fantastic to see so many Members supporting an Adjournment debate. I think that is a recognition of the quality of the speech that was delivered on a really important topic. I think there is much agreement across the House and I would be very happy to meet further to discuss what more we can do. The Government are determined to make a real difference in this area. I am absolutely thrilled to see that there is cross-party support for that. Together, we will do everything we can to unlock every individual’s talent, so that everybody can benefit from the growing economy.

Question put and agreed to.

8.4 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Northern Ireland Centenary

1. Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): When she will announce a schedule of the events that will mark the centenary in 2021 of the creation of Northern Ireland.

Karen Bradley: That is a matter for my colleagues in the Cabinet Office, who will have heard my hon. Friend’s question. He will know that we are changing the date of the early May bank holiday next year to mark VE-day. Perhaps they would want to consider using the subsequent bank holiday for a similar purpose.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The 100th anniversary of the establishment of Northern Ireland is an opportunity to look at the history of Northern Ireland in its times of darkness and of light, and particularly to build on the tremendous progress of recent years. Last week, commemorating the sad passing of Ivan Cooper, the Archdeacon of Derry quoted Lord Carson, who said in 1921:

“From the start be tolerant to all religions, and, while maintaining to the last your own traditions and your own citizenship, take care that similar rights are preserved for those who differ from us.”

Will the Secretary of State be liaising with her Irish counterpart and other interested parties to make the most of this opportunity, as she said, to learn from the mistakes of the past and promote the Northern Ireland of the future?

Karen Bradley: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. We should all reflect on the words that she quoted. She will be pleased to know that, at the last meeting of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office raised exactly those points with his Irish counterpart. It is important that we do mark this in a spirit of reconciliation, mutual understanding and looking to the future.

2. Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Ind): What recent steps she has taken to facilitate the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland.

Karen Bradley: There has been significant engagement over the past nine weeks with the political parties in Northern Ireland, considering a range of important and difficult issues. Progress has been made, but there are a number of areas of disagreement between the political parties.

Mr Shuker: The Secretary of State’s mapping exercise on the impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland revealed 96 areas directly underpinned by or linked to EU law. After Brexit, obviously, these will need to be replaced and shaped by the institutions of Stormont. Given that, does she believe that it would be irresponsible to pursue a no-deal Brexit while the devolved Administration is not in place?

Karen Bradley: My focus is on getting the devolved Administration back together and getting all the institutions that were agreed in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement working—in particular, the north-south institutions, which are incredibly important. Having those, and also having representation of the Northern Ireland Executive on the Joint Ministerial Committee, are both very important points in making sure that Northern Ireland’s voice is heard in the Brexit debate.
Karen Bradley: I am trying to get the institutions restored. It is vital for the people of Northern Ireland that the politicians they elected make decisions on their behalf, so I am doing everything I can to ensure that those politicians are able to do what will be very difficult for all of them to find a compromise and an accommodation and go back into Stormont.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the measures she has taken thus far. There is clearly a need to compromise on all sides in order to bring the talks to fruition. What compromises is she prepared to make?

Karen Bradley: My role is to help the parties but, clearly, if they are able to reach an agreement, I am sure that they will want things from the UK Government, and I will consider those when we are at that stage. If my hon. Friend will forgive me, we are at a delicate stage in the negotiations and I would not want to compromise anybody’s position at this point.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): One of the issues that has to be addressed in the talks is justice for victims. The Secretary of State will be aware that the late William Frazer, who was laid to rest this Monday, devoted his life to fighting for victims; I pay tribute to him and his work. Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the biggest issues must be addressing the definition of a victim, so that innocent victims are entitled to the pension they need?

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman refers to a number of issues, and he is right to do so. He refers to dealing with the legacy of the past. He will know that we have consulted on the institutions agreed at Stormont House and will publish a response to the consultation in due course. He also mentioned pensions for severely injured victims, which have been promised to them for far too long. I am determined to make progress on that matter.

Nigel Dodds: Another issue that is causing real problems across the community in Northern Ireland, in the absence of devolved government, is the atrocious waiting lists in the health service, with cancer victims being made to wait a horrendously long time and targets being missed. Surely in the last days of the Prime Minister’s tenure, she will address that point and ensure that something is done to bring waiting lists under control. It is not good enough that the Government sit on their hands while this is happening.

Karen Bradley: I do not accept the right hon. Gentleman’s comment that the Government are sitting on their hands; the Government are absolutely determined to see these matters addressed and the best way to do that, as he knows, is through devolved government in Stormont. I pay tribute to him and his party for the willingness that has been shown and their determination to engage in the talks very constructively and to make progress. I very much welcome that, particularly from the leader of the Democratic Unionist party, Arlene Foster, whose attitude has been exemplary throughout.
Istanbul Convention and Northern Ireland Law on Domestic Abuse

3. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on ensuring that the law in Northern Ireland is consistent with the Istanbul convention in relation to domestic abuse; and if she will make a statement.  [911626]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): I am sorry to report that, while the UK has signed the Istanbul convention, we are one of only a handful of signatories that have not yet ratified it. So, in the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive, the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice are working closely with the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland to establish how this can be progressed for Northern Ireland, perhaps in the upcoming Domestic Abuse Bill.

Diana Johnson: The Minister is absolutely right. If it was the will of Government to include Northern Ireland in the jurisdiction covered by the Domestic Abuse Bill, that would allow the Istanbul convention to be ratified, so I ask the Government to do that, as did the prelegislative scrutiny Committee on the Domestic Abuse Bill in one of its recommendations.

John Penrose: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that the prelegislative scrutiny process by the Joint Committee made that recommendation. That has opened the door and it is certainly one of the things that are therefore being considered. Obviously, we need to work through the detail, but that door is certainly now open and we are considering it carefully.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that the extraterritorial jurisdiction required under the convention will be included in the Domestic Abuse Bill and therefore enable us to ratify that?

John Penrose: I cannot yet categorically confirm any of those measures to be in or out, but it is certainly one of the points that was addressed by the prelegislative scrutiny Committee. It was one of the things it recommended, so it is one of the things that are being considered very carefully.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Minister of State acknowledge that the fact that every two minutes there is a phone call to abuse charities regarding domestic abuse means that it must top the agenda when the Assembly reconvenes? Further, will he pledge to raise the matter with local parties and be assured of the DUP’s support to make that happen?

John Penrose: I am delighted to hear that there is broad support for the measures that we have just been discussing. I am sure that, when the Stormont Assembly reconvenes, it will be one of the most important issues. There are others, of course, but I am glad to hear the hon. Gentleman’s support.

Leaving the EU: Talks on Restoring Devolution

4. John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the progress of talks on restoring devolution in Northern Ireland.  [911627]

5. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the progress of talks on restoring devolution in Northern Ireland.

9. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the progress of talks on restoring devolution in Northern Ireland.

10. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the progress of talks on restoring devolution in Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): The Northern Ireland parties have made it clear that they want to use the limited window ahead of us to make a success of the current talks process. I agree with them that restoring devolved government cannot wait. I remain determined to do what is necessary to make this talks process a success.

John McNally: The future Prime Minister held a private meeting with the leadership of the DUP yesterday. For over two years now, the Conservative party has been beholden to one political party in Northern Ireland. Does the Secretary of State seriously believe that there is no connection between this narrow and self-interested relationship between these two political parties and the continued absence of devolved institutions in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: I reject that entirely. The institutions collapsed well before the confidence and supply arrangements between the Democratic Unionist party and my party and, as the Northern Ireland Office, we are rigorously impartial. I pay tribute to the Democratic Unionist party and the attitude that it has brought to the talks. I pay tribute to all other parties in that respect.

David Linden: All of us in this House would want to see the restoration of a functioning devolved Government in Northern Ireland. Clearly, one of the things that is most important about that is transparency. In the interests of transparency, will the Secretary of State’s party in the months ahead be offering another Brexit bung to that lot behind us?

Karen Bradley: The matter of transparency is very important. It has been a matter for one of our working groups, which has been working and making good progress on how we improve transparency within the institutions established under the Belfast agreement. I look forward to seeing the parties going back into government and seeing those transparency measures being enacted.

Stuart C. McDonald: Would it not quite simply be a constitutional outrage for the UK to leave the EU in October with Northern Ireland having been without an accountable and elected devolved Parliament for the entirety of the article 50 process? Is that not all the more reason why we cannot and must not leave in October?
Karen Bradley: The people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union and we will leave the European Union as one United Kingdom, but I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to see restored devolved government in Northern Ireland and that is what I am working to achieve.

Patrick Grady: Did the Prime Minister consult the Secretary of State before appointing Lord Dunlop to conduct a review of devolution? Brexit is already driving a coach and horses through the devolution settlement on these islands, and it will not be helped if the two arms of Government do not know what the other is doing, so will the Dunlop review extend to Northern Ireland and the effects of Brexit on devolution?

Karen Bradley: I do not comment on leaked briefings.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): While we listen to all the rhetoric and the excuses about talks not proceeding—we have heard that Brexit is one of them—surely it is in our interest, I am sure the Secretary of State will agree, that we make an even better Northern Ireland, a perfect Brexit and a frictionless border for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Karen Bradley: I agree, and we will have a better chance of doing that if we have the devolved institutions restored. That is what we are working to do.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): As the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is likely to have promised the Secretary of State’s position to about six or seven people, this may well be her last appearance at Northern Ireland questions. Having now spent considerable time in Northern Ireland and knowing the damage that a no-deal Brexit would inflict, will she commit to voting against a no-deal Brexit if the House is given the opportunity to do so? Will she commit, as the Chancellor did yesterday, to doing everything she can to avoid no deal?

Karen Bradley: I assure the hon. Gentleman that this will not be my last appearance at Northern Ireland questions; I will absolutely be at Northern Ireland questions for many years to come. I believe that the right way for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union as one United Kingdom is with a deal, and that is what we are working to achieve.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, may I make the point to this House, which has known the murder of its own Members, that it must condemn threats against any politician. Those of us who are democratically elected put ourselves into public service because we believe in public service. We are all entitled, no matter our political persuasion, to have protection and not to receive death threats. I join him in condemning those death threats.

With respect to Brexit, I have been clear throughout that I want to see the United Kingdom leave the European Union as one United Kingdom. I believe that the best way to do that is through a deal that enables us to leave in an orderly fashion, protecting jobs and the economy. I have also been clear that a no-deal Brexit would be longer lasting and more acute in Northern Ireland, but I am doing everything I can to ensure that we leave with a deal.

City Deals: Scope

6. Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What comparative assessment she has made of the scope of city deals in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): The hon. Gentleman will know that, in line with our 2017 manifesto commitment, we have already announced two city deals in Northern Ireland, with £350 million for Belfast and a combined package of £105 million for Derry/Londonderry and Strabane. Early-stage discussions have also begun with other councils in the mid, south and west, as well as Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council.

Mike Amesbury: On a recent visit to the wonderful city of Derry, I spoke with those involved in shaping the education offer in the city. They told me that a central aspect of the city deal is the establishment of a riverfront university, medical centre and innovation hub. Will the Minister update the House on the timeline and progress of this much-needed facility?

John Penrose: The timeline for that is the same as the timeline for the rest of the city deal. Business cases have to be worked up and the business cases for all the projects have to work well. Incidentally, for any business cases that do not shape up, there are many other ideas that can also be brought through. They will then get approved and will proceed, particularly once the—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call Emma Little Pengelly.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): The Belfast city deal has huge potential to bring investment and economic growth to Belfast and the wider region. Will the Minister outline in a little more detail what discussions he has had with the head of the civil service and with the city councils about getting those projects to implementation stage? When does he anticipate that the first project will be rolled out?

John Penrose: The difficulty is that city deals are by definition local initiatives. We can lay foundations, but they need to be taken forward by local partners and local councils. Also, ultimately, as soon as we get the Stormont Executive re-established, they will have to have an essential role in this. Although we are making progress as fast as we decently can—so are local councils—we are ultimately also dependent on the progress of the talks.
Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): May I say to the Secretary of State how grateful I am for her kind wishes? If she would care to join me in Strangers for a small sweet sherry later on, she would be most welcome. She will be aware that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), who aspires to be the father of the nation—to be fair, he does have some expertise in the field of paternity—has announced his intention of creating a Monaco-style tax-free zone in Belfast, with, presumably, a border around that fair city. Does the right hon. Lady consider that proposal to be risible and ridiculous, or the product of an unfocused mind with no knowledge of Northern Ireland?

John Penrose: I join my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in wishing the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) best wishes for his 21-and-a-few-months birthday. I am afraid I cannot answer for my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson); that is a skillset I do not have.

Being Part of the UK: Benefits

7. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What assessment she has made of the benefits to Northern Ireland of being part of the UK. [911630]

Karen Bradley: Absolutely!

Jeremy Lefroy: One of the successes of the United Kingdom is in attracting foreign direct investment. Could the Secretary of State update the House on recent FDI to Northern Ireland, and the jobs that it has created?

Karen Bradley: My Staffordshire neighbour has announced that he will not be standing at the next election; I pay tribute to him for the work that he has done for the people of Stafford, and will, I know, continue to do until the next election. He is quite right to refer to foreign direct investment in Northern Ireland; it increases year on year. It increased by 25% last year, creating nearly 1,500 new jobs.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Surely one of the benefits of Northern Ireland being in the UK is that people who live in Northern Ireland enjoy the same rights as the rest of us. If the opportunity arises—say, through an amendment to legislation—to extend equal marriage to Northern Ireland, will the Secretary of State and her Government finally support it?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman knows that personally I would like to see equal marriage extended to Northern Ireland. It is a devolved matter, and it is right that politicians in Northern Ireland deal with it, but if there is a vote on that matter in this House, it will be a free vote for Members on the Conservative Benches, as has been made clear.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): Would the Secretary of State, having attended Armed Forces Day events in Lisburn this year, agree with me about the importance of Northern Ireland’s contribution to the armed forces in the first and second world wars, and in subsequent conflicts? Will she lobby for us to hold the national Armed Forces Day events in Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: That sounds like a very good idea. I very much enjoyed my visit to Lisburn for Armed Forces Day. As the hon. Gentleman will know, because we had a discussion on the day, I then went with my family to visit the Somme Museum, and of course I was in Belfast on Monday for the commemoration of the Somme, as were many of his hon. and right hon. Friends. The contribution that the armed forces have made is very significant, and does need to be marked in Northern Ireland.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): In assessing the benefit of Northern Ireland being in the United Kingdom, can the Secretary of State advise the House of the participative role it has played in the review ordered by the Prime Minister of the rights of those in Northern Ireland, based on their rights as European citizens who identify as Irish? If Northern Ireland has not participated, why not?

Karen Bradley: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Northern Ireland Office has very much participated in this, and we are determined to find a way that we can resolve this, in a way that is sensitive to the rights of the people of Northern Ireland.
Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State’s claim that this Government are no longer neutral on Northern Ireland, which sets aside what was previously said about “no selfish, strategic... interest” in Northern Ireland. Will she put together promotional literature, and a promotional programme, that expresses the economic, social and cultural benefits of the Union that can be promoted not only in Northern Ireland but around the world?

Karen Bradley: I just point out to the hon. Gentleman that I am a member of the Conservative and Unionist party; I have never been neutral in my support for the Union.

**PRIME MINISTER**

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [911709] Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 3 July.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): While offering our commiserations to the England Lionesses following last night’s semi-final, may I say that they have inspired millions and made us all very proud?

I am sure the whole House would want to join me in congratulating Rose Hudson-Wilkin on her appointment as Bishop of Dover. I know she will take on that new role with the same dedication and care that she has shown to all of us during her time as Speaker’s Chaplain.

We offer our best wishes to all those taking part in our country’s football teams, who have inspired the next generation of girls and boys to get involved in football.

In March, the Prime Minister told this House that we had to back her damaging Brexit plans so that she could leave with a deal that protected jobs. He cannot do that because he voted three times for no deal.

The Prime Minister: First, I echo the right hon. Gentleman’s remarks about the incident in Port Talbot. Secondly, the figure that was quoted was actually publicly available at the time. It appeared in the Government’s economic analysis in relation to these matters. If he is worried about no deal, let me say this: I have done everything I can to ensure that no one leaves the EU with a deal. I can look workers in the eye and tell them I voted to leave with a deal that protected jobs. He cannot do that because he voted three times for no deal.

Q2. [911710] Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): What message does the Prime Minister have for the people of Hong Kong at this difficult time?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this issue. I have been shocked, as I am sure Members across the House have been, to see the scenes from Hong Kong on Monday and the use of violence at the Legislative Council. The vast majority of the hundreds of thousands who marched did so peacefully and lawfully. This week’s anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong is a reminder of the importance of the rights and freedoms enshrined in the joint declaration, and it is vital that Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy and the rights and freedoms set down in the Sino-British joint declaration are respected. I have raised my concerns directly with Chinese leaders, as have my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and other Ministers, and we will continue to do so.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will want to express its condolences to the families of the rail workers who were hit and killed by a train this morning in Port Talbot. There will obviously have to be a full investigation into this, but our thoughts must be with the families and friends of those that were killed and injured.

I join the Prime Minister and others in congratulating Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin on becoming Bishop of Dover. She has been absolutely brilliant as Chaplain to the House, but she was also brilliant when she was a parish priest in Hackney. She shows such empathy for people, and we wish her well on her way. I am sure she will do really well.

I also congratulate the England women’s football team on their successful journey as far as the semi-finals and wish the men’s cricket team well in their current match against New Zealand, which I understand is 134-1 at the moment. Pride this weekend will be a source of great enjoyment. I think of all those who suffered in the past to try to defeat homophobia in our society and will be enjoying the joy of the streets of London this weekend.

The Chancellor says that a no-deal Brexit would cause a £90 billion hit to the public finances. The former Foreign Secretary says concerns about no deal are “confected hysteria”. Who does the Prime Minister think is right?

The Prime Minister: We are all concerned by the incidents of knife crime that we have seen. We are all concerned with the incidents that we saw over the weekend, and our thoughts and prayers are with the families and friends of the victims. Too many lives of potential are being cut short, and those individuals and their families are being cruelly robbed of those futures.

We have not been failing to act on this; we have been acting on this. We have ensured that we are working across the board, because it takes all of society to work on this issue. It is not just an issue of policing. We have made more powers available to police—[Interruption.] Some Labour Members say it is just an issue of policing. No, we need to ensure that young people do not carry knives. We need to ensure that young people are taken away from a route into crime. That means dealing with drugs: it means dealing with gangs. We have provided more funding to police. We have provided extra powers to police. Sadly, the Labour party voted against that.
The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman claims that the Labour party stands up for protecting jobs and living standards. It has not only voted three times for no deal, thereby putting jobs under threat; it has, consistently, on a number of occasions, voted against the very tax cuts that help people to maintain their living standards. We will take no lectures from the Labour party on protecting people’s jobs and living standards.

Jeremy Corbyn: As I recall, it was this party that put down a motion to take no deal off the table. The managing director of Birds Eye says that no deal would add 20% to the price of some foodstuffs “instantaneously”, and the National Farmers Union says that it would be very damaging to British farming. Both the candidates to succeed the Prime Minister have claimed that they will renegotiate the backstop. Can she confirm that section (12) of the European Council decision to extend article 50 ruled out reopening the withdrawal agreement, and therefore the backstop?

The Prime Minister: I do not think I need to tell the right hon. Gentleman what was in the Council conclusions. They are clear, and I have made them clear in the House. The right hon. Gentleman says that it was the Labour party that put down a motion to abandon no deal and take it off the table. The trouble is that when it came to the votes that mattered—when it came to the votes that would actually have an impact on stopping no deal—the Labour party whipped against them. That is absolutely typical of the right hon. Gentleman: all mouth and trousers.

Jeremy Corbyn: We made very clear what the danger of no deal is, and we will do everything to prevent a no-deal exit, because we know the damage it will do to jobs and living standards in this country.

This Government have comprehensively failed on Brexit. Jobs are at risk, inward investment has fallen off a cliff, and manufacturing is at a six-year low. No deal threatens to crash the economy. The Government themselves say that no deal would cut growth by 10%, yet we have two leadership candidates who are threatening no deal, and, indeed, are competing with each other on the rhetoric of no deal. This Government is now an irrelevance. The two candidates to succeed the Prime Minister have only fantasy plans. As she and her successors have no answers, does she not accept that the best thing to do would be to go back to the people and let them decide which way we go?

The Prime Minister: I have made the point in answer to five of the right hon. Gentleman’s questions that if you want to ensure that this country leaves the European Union with a deal, you have to vote for a deal, which is what he and his colleagues have consistently refused to do. But there is another question for the Labour party. With all this talk about no deal, the question really is “Where does the Labour party stand on Brexit?” The shadow Brexit Secretary does not support Brexit. The shadow Foreign Secretary does not support Brexit. The shadow Chancellor does not support Brexit. The Labour deputy leader does not support Brexit. Labour wants to block Brexit, and that would be a betrayal of the many by the few.
Q11. [911719] Andrew Lever (Northampton South) (Con): The district, borough and county councils of Northamptonshire have been working hard in preparing for the creation of unitary authorities; but they and, most crucially, the people of the county need and deserve certainty that the appropriate unitary orders will be laid before Parliament. May I ask the Prime Minister to pledge that they will be brought forward imminently?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising what I know is an important issue that is of concern in his constituency and elsewhere in Northamptonshire. Subject to parliamentary approval, of course, the new authorities will be a significant step towards ensuring that residents and businesses can in future have the sustainable, high-quality local services they deserve. Officials are working hard with the eight Northamptonshire councils on the detail of the secondary legislation, because that will need to include detail. Our aim is to lay the statutory instrument as soon as practical for parliamentary debate and for approval.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I join the Prime Minister in welcoming the Pride event in London this week and of course right throughout the world, and acknowledge that it is the Scottish National party that has proportionately the largest LGBT group here in Parliament?

This Prime Minister’s days are numbered. Her review of devolution is nothing more than an act of sheer desperation. This is a Prime Minister running scared of the people of Scotland. Does the Prime Minister think the future of Scotland should be decided by the people who live and work there or by her party?

The Prime Minister: The future of Scotland was decided by the people who live and work there; it was decided in 2014 and they wanted to stay as part of the United Kingdom.

Ian Blackford: If the Prime Minister looks at the opinion polls she will see there is a majority for independence.

Scotland’s First Minister was explicitly clear when she said: “It’s for the Scottish people—not a Tory PM—to consider and decide what future we want for our Parliament and country.”

Will the review of devolution include the views of her would-be successors that a Scot would never be Prime Minister and that Westminster should actively choke off Foreign Office support for a First Minister doing her job—doing her job, Prime Minister? This review is a farce. The real legacy of this Prime Minister is shutting down Scotland and ignoring the will of the Scottish Parliament. The Tories have never supported devolution, and it is clear that they never, never will.

The Prime Minister: There is no review of devolution. Only one party in this House wants to stop devolution in Scotland—the Scottish National party.

Q12. [911720] James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Iran continues to use all methods, including an increasingly sophisticated cyber-capability, to destabilise the middle east and pursue its ambition to become a regional superpower in the middle east. Does the Prime Minister agree that a cyber-armed Iran is as dangerous as a nuclear-armed Iran and that we need to do all we can and that is necessary with our allies to combat the increasing threat from Iran in cyber-space?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to raise concerns about Iran’s destabilising behaviour in the region. Our objective continues to be to work with our international partners to find diplomatic solutions and to de-escalate tensions.

My hon. Friend is also right to raise cyber-capability. We have a dedicated capability to act in cyber-space through our national offensive cyber programme, and last year we offered our offensive cyber-capabilities in support of NATO operations.

My hon. Friend talks about working with others: we were the first nation to do that, and we will continue to ensure that we have effective offensive cyber-capabilities that can be deployed at a time and place of our choosing across the full range of international threats.

Q3. [911711] Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister hopes that net zero emissions by 2050 will be part of her legacy—although many of us would hope that we will achieve that objective sooner—but it needs policies to match that ambition. Developing onshore wind farms will help us to tackle the climate crisis, reduce prices for consumers and has overwhelming public support, so does she agree that now is the time to scrap the barriers that have seen new installations fall to the lowest level since 2011, restore subsidies for wind farms and allow them to compete in the contracts for difference auctions?

The Prime Minister: The Committee on Climate Change was clear that 2050 is the right target date for net zero emissions. There is no ban on onshore wind. In 2015, local communities were given more say on onshore wind applications in their areas. Onshore wind has successfully exceeded its expected contribution to our 2020 renewable energy target, but at the same time we are backing offshore wind through a new sector deal, maintaining the UK as the largest market in Europe over the next decade.

Q13. [911721] Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): The Prime Minister has shown a strong commitment over many years to tackling domestic violence and abuse. Her measures introduced in 2012, 2014 and 2015, and the groundbreaking strategy of 2016 on ending violence against women and girls, have all worked to reduce violence towards women. Will she tell us a little more about her hopes for the forthcoming Domestic Abuse Bill, and about how she feels it will continue to help victims of this crime?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for the work he has done on this important issue. He, like me—and I am sure everyone across the House—is absolutely clear that domestic abuse has no place in our country. That is why I have set out plans to end the postcode lottery of support for survivors of domestic abuse.

My right hon. and learned Friend refers to our draft Domestic Abuse Bill, which will introduce the first-ever statutory Government definition of domestic abuse, but this is not just about legislation. If we are going to
transform our response, we need other action, so the
draft Bill will be accompanied by a package of non-
legislative action to tackle domestic abuse, and in November
last year we awarded a further £22 million for various
domestic abuse projects across the country. Wherever
you are, wherever you live and whatever the abuse you
face, everyone must have access to the services they need
to be safe.

Q4. [911712] Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Eve
Leadbeater, a constituent of mine, and Lord Dubs
arrived on the Kindertransport 80 years ago this week.
Is it not important that we learn from history? Three
years after Lord Dubs’s amendment to the Immigration
Act 2016 gave 480 places to child refugees, only 220 of
the places have been filled. Is it not important for the
thousands upon thousands of child refugees in camps
across Europe and the middle east that we honour that
pledge and allow 1,000 child refugees to come into our
country each year for the next 10 years, so that we can
turn the rhetoric, the crying, the care and the compassion
for those child refugees into a public policy that actually
meets their needs and does something about their suffering?

The Prime Minister: I do not know about the hon.
Gentleman’s constituent, but I know that Lord Dubs
came here on the Kindertransport organised by my late
constituent, Sir Nicholas Winton. We as a country can
be proud of everything we have done to help refugees
and other vulnerable children who are affected by conflict,
violece and instability. Since the start of 2010, we have
provided asylum or an alternative form of protection to
more than 34,600 children, and we have granted family
reunion visas to an additional 26,000.

We are determined to continue these efforts. We have
introduced a new form of leave exclusively for children
brought to the UK from the Calais camps, so that they
can continue to rebuild their lives with families in the
UK. That Calais leave will grant those who qualify the
right to study, to work, to access public funds and
healthcare and to apply for settlement after 10 years.
We have a proud record of helping refugees, and we will
continue with that proud record.

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con):
May I thank my right hon. Friend for giving me the
opportunity, as Leader of the House of Commons, to
chair an inter-ministerial group looking at giving
every baby the best start in life? Some excellent work
was done by my ministerial colleagues, and a number of
recommendations were made, including that the
Government should establish a first 1,001 days vision
for what best practice should look like. What progress
has been made on addressing those recommendations?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for
the work that she did as Leader of the House and for
her work on the inter-ministerial group looking at that
issue. Beyond that, the issue of early years is a cause she
has championed for some considerable time, both before
and since she came into this House. I am proud that
more than 850,000 disadvantaged two-year-olds have
benefited from the free early education places that we
introduced in 2013. Our social mobility action plan sets
out a clear and ambitious plan for the early years,
closing the word gap at age five, and we want to ensure
that where a child gets to in life depends on their
individual talents and not on their background. We will
continue to work with my right hon. Friend and others
who rightly put a high value on the importance of the
early days in a child’s life.

Q5. [911713] Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington)
(Lab): My 18-year-old constituent Sian and several of
her fellow students have just completed their German
A-level. Sadly, due to cuts to the school’s teaching staff,
they had to teach themselves for the last two terms. By
contrast, the local private schools still have German
teachers in place. At a time when some would turn their
backs on Europe, does this not also suggest that the
injustices that exist in this country are burning brighter
than ever in our education system?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows,
we have been putting more funding into our schools
and ensuring that the distribution of that funding is
fairer—fairer—across the country. As I just said in
response to my right hon. Friend the Member for South
Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), I want to ensure
that every young person can get as far in life as their
talents and hard work will take them.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): As
long ago as 1875, this country became the first in the
world to require animals to be stunned prior to slaughter,
yet the latest evidence from the Food Standards Agency
is that 25% of all sheep slaughtered last year were
unstunned following the use of a religious derogation.
Religious slaughter is a contentious issue and a matter
of personal conscience and religious conviction for many.
Does my right hon. Friend agree that there should be a
free vote on the Floor of the House on the issue?

The Prime Minister: I understand that my hon.
Friend had a Westminster Hall debate yesterday on this
issue, which raises a number of emotions and concerns across
the House. We have upheld the right of religious slaughter,
but this Government, as my hon. Friend will know full
well, are taking steps to ensure that we monitor what
happens in abattoirs through the introduction of CCTV.

Q6. [911714] Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am
guessing that the Prime Minister always wears factor
30 or factor 50 sunscreen when she goes on her walking
holidays—including in Wales—because she knows
full well that 90% of skin cancers are caused by
harmful exposure to the sun. We quite rightly give free
sunscreen to our armed forces, so is it not time to give it
to our police officers when they are on duty, especially
those standing outside the Palace in the blazing sun for
many hours? Does she agree with her Health and
Social Care Secretary, who says that it is time to
remove the VAT on high-factor sunscreen, so that we
can save lives?

The Prime Minister: VAT rules allow drugs and
medications dispensed by registered pharmacists against
a prescription issued by a qualified health professional
to be zero rated for VAT. High-factor sunscreen can be
on the NHS prescription list for certain conditions and
is provided VAT-free in those circumstances.

The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue, but we
should ensure that people do not just think that skin
safety is about sun protection products, because leading
cancer charities are clear that people should be taking
several steps for protection, including avoiding long periods of sun exposure. I take his point that some jobs involve people being outside for periods of time, but we should all be taking all precautions.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Under the Prime Minister’s leadership, we have a new funding formula for our schools. I warmly welcome it as a first step, but more still needs to be done. To make it fairer still, does the Prime Minister agree that areas that have been historically underfunded, such as Dorset and Poole, need to be protected, while also protecting all schools?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concern around this issue. Our fair funding formula will ensure a much fairer distribution of school funding over a number of years. I recognise that some authorities have been at the lower end of funding in the past. Indeed, several schools in my own constituency come under Wokingham Borough Council, which is one of those very authorities. That is why we are taking steps to ensure that the impact is fair as we introduce this fair funding formula for schools across the country.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises a very important issue, and I am sure the whole House will want to extend our sympathies to the families and friends of young people who suffer sudden cardiac death. He and the all-party parliamentary group on cardiac risk in the young have done very important work on this issue. I am assured by the Department of Health and Social Care that the independent UK National Screening Committee will carefully consider all the relevant evidence, and I know DHSC will study the committee’s findings when they are published in due course—it will look at the findings very carefully. This is an important issue, and we want to make sure we get it right.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): My 27-year-old constituent Kirsty Garrity tragically took her own life in September last year. After her death, her father found among her possessions a book called “The Peaceful Pill Handbook,” which she had bought from Amazon. In a letter to me, Amazon said:

“We believe that legislators, rather than retailers, are best placed to make decisions on what should and should not be legally available for public purchase.”

Does that not sound rather like Facebook, which recently said that it needs to be regulated because it cannot decide for itself what to put, and what not to put, on its platforms? Does the Prime Minister agree that businesses have a duty to think very hard about what they offer for sale and what they put on their platforms, and that they have a duty to behave with a moral imperative?

The Prime Minister: I am sure we all want to send our deepest sympathies to Kirsty’s family and friends. We are determined to make sure that the UK is the safest place to be online, which involves tackling content that encourages suicide and self-harm. Working with the tech companies to get them to accept greater responsibility for the sort of material that is put out across their platforms has been a long-standing issue.

We have seen some tech companies take action to tackle the issue, and we want to ensure a more consistent response from companies to protect the safety and wellbeing of their users, especially those who are vulnerable. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who has responsibility for suicide prevention, is aware of this aspect of online content. She is deeply concerned, and she will be writing to Amazon about it.

Q8. [911716] Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge,Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): A promise was made to pensioners at the last general election that the Conservative party would protect free TV licences until the end of this Parliament. That promise has now been broken, and pensioners like my dad will pay the price. My dad will turn 90 in a few weeks’ time, and the TV is his main source of company. Like many other pensioners up and down the country, the TV is his companion.

Prime Minister, in your last act before you stand down, will you return the free licence to the pensioners of this country?

The Prime Minister: First, may I send my very best wishes to the hon. Gentleman’s father for a happy birthday in a few weeks’ time?

The BBC received a good funding deal from the Government, and many people would ask why the BBC can raise the salary bill for its top performers and personalities while taking the action it has taken on TV licences. The BBC needs to think again.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): The Government have ambitious targets for a low-carbon economy and country, and achieving that will undoubtedly require nuclear energy. Will the Prime Minister encourage the next Prime Minister properly to support and invest in the nuclear industry?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that, as a Government, we believe that nuclear should play a role in our energy mix, and I would wish to see that continue. That is why I am pleased we were able to take the decision we took on Hinkley Point C. I recognise that other nuclear projects have not been able to progress in the way hon. Members had hoped, but I want to see the Government continue to work with the nuclear industry to find a way to ensure that nuclear can, indeed, play a role in our future energy mix.

Q9. [911717] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent William Cree has epilepsy, and he suffers fits, struggles to eat and sometimes cannot walk or get out of bed, and he has memory issues, yet he was allocated personal independence payment only on appeal. He is now at the appeal stage for the limited capability for work and work-related activity element of universal credit, but the Department for Work and Pensions has not submitted the papers to court in time.
Will the Prime Minister look into Mr Cree’s case, apologise for this additional stress and delay, and advise on what she will do to stop this unacceptable practice of the DWP not meeting court deadlines?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, the hon. Gentleman has raised the particular case of William Cree, his constituent. I will ensure that the DWP looks properly into that case, and I will ask why the papers were not available in time for the court.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): As I am sure my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister knows, Stoke-on-Trent is a unique city, being made up of six towns, and it is essential that all those towns prosper. Does she agree that we need to see investment in our towns, particularly through our future high streets fund bid for Longton?

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased to see the renaissance in Stoke-on-Trent, particularly in its ceramics industry. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of high streets, and that is why we have put money into the high streets fund. Bids for that money are currently being considered.

Q10. [911718]Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): As the Prime Minister enters the endgame of her premiership, will she join me in congratulating the Royal Portrush golf club on celebrating the return, after almost 70 years, of the Open golf championship, where some of the greatest golfers in the world will be coming—and there will even be some golfers from outside Northern Ireland! May I ask whether she and her two potential successors would like to join me in two weeks’ time at Royal Portrush?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to congratulate Royal Portrush golf club on hosting the Open and to welcome the fact that the Open has returned to Northern Ireland. We look forward to seeing golfers, particularly from across the United Kingdom, performing well in that particular Open golf. As for being able to join the hon. Gentleman in two weeks’ time, I suspect that I, and the two contenders for the Conservative party leadership, may be rather busy in two weeks’ time, but I will certainly be watching what is happening in the Open with great interest.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that the news of the fire and tragic loss of life aboard the Russian nuclear submarine Losharik while it was working on the sea bed in the high north should encourage her Government to accept that, to maintain operational military advantage and defend the west and critical subsea cable infrastructure from interference, we must, in this the 50th year of our extraordinary continuous at-sea deterrent—Operation Relentless—invest properly in our Royal Navy and her submarine capabilities?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the whole House will want to extend condolences to the families and friends of those who lost their lives. This was aboard a Russian nuclear submersible, but losing one’s life under the sea is something I am sure we can all express our condolences for.

This is an important point about our submarine capability and the Royal Navy. I would like to pay tribute to all our submariners, who work so hard to keep us safe. We are committed to our submarine build programmes. The Ministry of Defence has been given access to the £10 billion Dreadnought programme contingency, so that our submarines will continue to silently patrol the seas, giving us a nuclear deterrent every minute of every hour, as they have done for 50 years, and we thank them for it.

Q14. [911722]Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Prime Minister, Britain needs better buses. In Greater Manchester, our Mayor, Andy Burnham, has begun the process of re-regulating the bus network, so that we can have a transport system similar to London’s. But a bus journey in London is capped at £1.50, yet in my constituency a journey of just a few miles costs more than double that. Prime Minister, should not everyone, in all parts of the country, get the same subsidy, so that they can have a bus service and pay a fair price, one as good as London has?

The Prime Minister: We are spending £250 million every year to keep fares down and maintain an extensive network, which benefits people up and down the country. I am pleased to say that since I became PM the overall number of bus routes is up by more than 2,000. Of course the hon. Gentleman asks me about subsidies for buses, but he might very well ask the Mayor about his responsibility in relation to this matter.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Many colleagues will visit the lobbying event on trophy hunting today, and this is in the same week as Japan has resumed commercial whaling. What more can we do to send the strongest message that this abhorrent practice should be stopped immediately?

The Prime Minister: First, we are very disappointed with Japan’s decision to withdraw from the International Whaling Commission and restart commercial whaling. I have raised my concerns personally with Prime Minister Abe—I did that earlier this year. My right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary has written to his Japanese counterpart on this matter. We will continue to work with the Japanese Government to engage with them and raise our concerns at every level, and we urge them to rethink their decision.

Q15. [911723]Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): The Prime Minister will be aware that the Treasury has taken £4.4 billion from the miners’ pension funds, and she may also be aware of the debate in the House in which support was expressed for a review of the existing pension surplus sharing arrangements. Will she please commission a review of those arrangements? Let us have some justice for the retired miners and their widows.

The Prime Minister: Agreements have been reached on the sharing arrangements. Of course, we all have concerns about pensions and the continuing ability of pension funds to provide for pensioners, but one of the biggest challenges to pension funds—one of the biggest hits on pension funds—came when the previous Labour Government took £100 billion out of them.
Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): We can be proud of the Prime Minister’s driving the global agenda on climate change, but what discussions has she had with her counterparts about how they can follow Britain’s lead as the first major economy to commit to net zero carbon and help to reverse global warming?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I encouraged not only leaders around the European Council table but other leaders when I spoke at the G20 summit at the end of last week to follow the UK’s lead. I am pleased to say that a number have already shown their willingness to do so. We will continue with the message that we can play our part, but it will be truly effective only if everybody around the world recognises the need to take action.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Reference has already been made to the Prime Minister’s moving speech on burning injustices in education. On a day when her former school, Wheatley Park School, near Oxford, is planning to move to part-time education because of what the headteacher calls “enormous” financial pressures, does she agree that before she leaves office she must secure additional funding outside the spending review?

The Prime Minister: We have already put extra money into schools. We recognise the pressures there have been on schools and are ensuring that they are funded. I read in the Maidenhead Advertiser that the right hon. Gentleman thinks I am about to step down from Parliament. I am not. He said that the Liberal Democrat party was looking forward to a by-election in the “Windsor and Maidenhead” constituency; that is not my seat. I believe he claimed that the Liberal Democrats were looking forward to taking the seat, but they could not even win it when they put 1,000 people on the streets of Maidenhead when it was a decapitation target. Wrong on prediction, wrong on facts—typical Liberal Democrats: wrong on everything.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Two of my constituents are relatives of Kirsty Boden, one of the victims of the London Bridge terrorist attack. Despite the fact that at least one of the terrorists’ families received legal aid for representation at the inquest, none of the victims’ families did. Does my right hon. Friend think that we need to look again at the entitlement to legal aid for inquests, so that those people who wish to ask questions about what happened to their loved ones are not left to fend for themselves?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue, and he will have seen from the reaction across the House the concern that people have about it. As I have said previously, we send our deepest sympathies to the families of the victims. I can see why my hon. Friend has raised this as a matter of concern. I understand that the Ministry of Justice is making a number of changes to ensure that there is more support for bereaved families, and we are committed to simplifying the process for applying for exceptional case funding, but I will make sure that the Ministry of Justice meets my hon. Friend to discuss the issue further.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): The whole country has been shocked by the brutal murder of the pregnant mum Kelly Mary Fauvrelle in my constituency at the weekend and the subsequent death of her baby Riley, which was announced this morning. The police now believe that it may have been a random attack by someone unknown to the family. If the Government have been acting on knife crime, it is not working, so what further action will the Prime Minister now take to stop the terrifying increase in the use of knives on our streets?

The Prime Minister: We were all shocked when we saw the terrible act that, sadly, led to the death of Kelly Mary Fauvrelle. Of course, as the hon. Gentleman said, the baby inside her sadly died this morning. The question of knife crime is one I did refer to earlier. We are taking action in a number of ways. We will continue to work, and work with the Mayor of London, on the action that can be taken across London on this issue, but this is something that requires a multifaceted approach; it is about the whole of society. Yes, we look at giving police the right powers—we have done that—but we also need to look at how we can ensure that young people particularly do not feel the need to carry knives and that we deal with the criminal gangs and the drugs that are often behind these terrible acts of violence that take place.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Yet again this year, we can expect to welcome between 35 million and 40 million overseas visitors to our shores. Overall, tourism employs about 3 million people in the UK, including thousands in my constituency. Does that not underline the importance of a tourism sector deal?

The Prime Minister: We have, of course, been working with the tourism sector to look at what support can be given and how we can work with it to enhance not just the offer that it is able to make but the way in which it is able to ensure that people can come here and enjoy the benefits of not just my hon. Friend’s constituency but all our constituencies across the country. Tourism is an important sector for us, and we will continue to work with the tourism industry to ensure that we can enhance that sector, and enhance the benefits to this country and our economy of that sector, but also enhance the benefits to the many tourists who come here and see what a wonderful place the United Kingdom is.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Following the Windrush scandal, in which black British citizens were deported, detained and stripped of their rights to access public services, the Prime Minister rightly announced an independent review led by Wendy Williams. She said that review would be published on 31 March 2019. It is now 3 July. Can the Prime Minister confirm that Wendy Williams will publish her review before she leaves office?

The Prime Minister: It was absolutely right that the Home Secretary commissioned that review from Wendy Williams. She will be publishing that report together. I believe that the report has not yet been received by the Home Office, but, obviously, we will ensure that, when that report is received, that report is published.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming last week’s announcement from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy of this Government’s investment of £4.8 million in the Acorn carbon capture and storage project at the St Fergus gas plant in my constituency?
Does she agree that, along with the development of renewable sources of energy, natural gas will remain an important transition fuel on the way towards a net zero emissions target?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to welcome the investment that my hon. Friend has referred to. It is important, as we look to that net zero target, that we look across the board at the various ways in which we can ensure that we are providing for that net zero target. As he has said, the importance of natural gas within that energy mix in the future will remain. We also look at ensuring that we are providing support for technologies such as carbon capture, because that will play an important part in the future, too.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Prime Minister, a constituent of mine—a single mum who has worked for the Department for Work and Pensions full time over 30 years—has been forced to take part-time work to support her child, a severe sufferer of Down’s syndrome, from childhood to adulthood. Because of the confusing rules in Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs on working tax credits for such workers, she has been forced to extend her mortgage and go part time. Will the Prime Minister please help to resolve this issue? My constituent will not be the only person in the country in that situation.

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has heard the particular case that the hon. Lady has raised. Lady has raised in this House. We do want to ensure—we are working, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities is working, on ensuring this—that women are able to take their place in the workforce. We do see women in the workforce at record levels. We want to ensure, and we are working on providing, greater economic empowerment for women so that they can take their place. I am sure that the Secretary of State or the relevant Minister will respond on the specific case.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: No, no. It is becoming quite commonplace for there to be a flurry of attempted points of order immediately after Prime Minister’s questions. Colleagues will have to be patient. I will exercise discretion and allow one point of order from the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who I believe wishes to raise a matter with which the Prime Minister is well familiar, so this might be a convenient moment. Thereafter, we should proceed with the Prime Minister’s statement. Colleagues can of course raise points of order, more suitably and appositely, after statements.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. If you will indulge me, may I please take a brief moment to thank everyone involved with the introduction of the children’s funeral fund?

Since 2016, I have been asking the Government to introduce a fund to assist bereaved parents during their darkest hour and financially support them in funding a funeral. I have at times been impatient. I have at times been frustrated. But I have always known it was the right thing to do. The Prime Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) and civil servants have delivered on my request, and I understand that the children’s funeral fund will be operational from 23 July.

I thank everyone involved in making this happen: the organisations that have supported me; colleagues who have encouraged me; my family who, like me, have had to revisit our loss; my team, who have held my hand; and you, Mr Speaker, for your understanding. Martin’s fund is a legacy for my son and will be a comfort to every parent who will need to use it in the future; so, from the bottom of my heart, thank you. [Applause]

Mr Speaker: I think it only right that if the Prime Minister wants to respond in a moment, she must certainly do so. Let me just say to the hon. Member for Swansea East that the sheer passion, sincerity and integrity with which she has spoken and conducted herself are an example to us all, and that the determination that she has shown is an enormous credit to her. Her constituency, her party, the House, and people across politics and beyond are inspired by the way in which she has behaved, and we are unstinting in our admiration for her. Before the statement, let us hear from the Prime Minister on this subject because she has brought matters to fruition.

The Prime Minister: May I also commend the hon. Lady for the work that she has done? This was born out of personal sadness, but many families will benefit from the passion, commitment and determination that she has shown in championing this issue. She said that she has sometimes been impatient. Sometimes you have to be impatient, because it is that impatience that spurs others on. I am pleased that we have been able to introduce the fund, and I echo Mr Speaker’s comments in commending the hon. Lady for the way in which he has championed this cause. As I say, we share and are concerned about the personal sadness that she went through, but she has taken that and put it to good use for the benefit of families up and down the country.
G20 and Leadership of EU Institutions

12.52 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on my final G20 and final European Council as Prime Minister.

At this G20 summit in Japan we discussed some of the biggest global challenges facing our nations, including climate change, terrorist propaganda online, risks to the global economy and rising tensions in the Gulf. These discussions were at times difficult, but in the end productive. I profoundly believe that we are stronger when we work together. With threats to global stability and trade, that principle is now more important than ever, and throughout this summit my message was on the overriding need for international co-operation and compromise. Alongside discussions with international partners on economic and security matters, I made it clear that Britain would always stand by the global rules as the best means of securing peace and prosperity for all of us. I will take the main issues in turn.

On no other issue is the need for international collaboration greater than in the threat to our countries and our people from climate change. As I arrived in Osaka last week, I was immensely proud that Britain had become the world’s first major economy to commit in law to ending our contribution to global warming by 2050. I urged other G20 countries to follow Britain’s lead and set similarly ambitious net zero targets for their own countries. Those gathered at this year’s summit are the last generation of leaders with the power to limit global warming, and I believe we have a duty to heed the call from those asking us to act now for the sake of future generations.

Taken together, the G20 countries account for 80% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Discussions were not always easy, but 19 of the G20 members agreed to the irreversibility of the Paris climate change agreement and the importance of implementing our commitments in full. It remains a disappointment that the United States continues to opt out on such a critical global issue.

I outlined Britain’s continued determination to lead the way on climate change through our bid to host, along with Italy, COP 26 next year. And, recognising that more needs to be done to support developing countries in managing the impacts of climate change, I announced that the UK’s aid budget will be aligned with our climate change goals and used to support the transition to lower greenhouse gas emissions.

Both as Prime Minister and previously as Home Secretary, I have repeatedly called for greater action to protect people from online harms and remove terrorist propaganda from the internet. In 2017, the attacks in Manchester and London showed how technology could be exploited by terrorists. Following those events, the UK took the lead and put this issue squarely on the global agenda. Through our efforts, the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism was established—a body that has leveraged technology to automate the removal of propaganda online. But the horrendous attack in Christchurch reminded us that we must maintain momentum, and ensure a better co-ordinated and swifter response to make sure that terrorists are never able to broadcast their atrocities in real time. I therefore welcome the pledge by G20 leaders at this year’s summit to do more to build on existing efforts and stop terrorists exploiting the internet. The UK will continue to lead the way in this, including through our support of the major technology companies in developing a new crisis response mechanism.

At this summit, discussions on the global economy were held against the backdrop of current trade tensions between the United States and China. In this context, I reaffirmed Britain’s commitment to free and fair trade, open markets and the rules-based trading system as the best means to bolster prosperity and build economies that work for everyone. The UK has long argued that the rules governing global trade need urgent reform and updating to reflect the changing nature of that trade. We continue to press for action to build upon the agreement reached at last year’s summit for World Trade Organisation reform, and I believe the best way to resolve disputes is through a reformed and strengthened WTO, rather than by increasing tariffs.

This G20 was also an opportunity to discuss wider global issues with others, including Prime Minister Abe, President Erdogan, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and United Nations Secretary-General Guterres. In my conversation with Prime Minister Abe, I paid tribute to him for hosting this G20 and thanked him for his role in strengthening the relationship between the UK and Japan—a relationship that I have every confidence will continue to grow over the coming years.

In a number of my meetings, I discussed Iran and rising tensions in the Gulf. Escalation is in no-one’s interest, and engagement is needed on all sides to find a diplomatic solution to the current situation and to counter Iran’s destabilising activity. At the same time, I was clear that the UK will continue to work intensively with our Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action partners to keep the Iran nuclear deal in place. The breach of that deal by Iran is extremely concerning, and together with France, Germany and the other signatories to the deal, we are urging Iran not to take further steps away from the agreement, and to return to compliance. The deal makes the world safer and I want to see Iran uphold its obligations.

I believe wholeheartedly in never shying away from difficult conversations when it is right to hold them. In my meeting with President Putin, I told him that there can be no normalisation of our bilateral relationship until Russia stops the irresponsible activity that threatens the UK and its allies. The use of a deadly nerve agent on the streets of our country was a despicable act, which led to the death of Dawn Sturgess. I was clear that the UK has irrefutable evidence that Russia was behind the attack, and that we want to see the two individuals responsible brought to justice. While the UK remains open to a different relationship, for that to happen the Russian Government must choose a different path.

In my discussion with UN Secretary-General Guterres, we spoke about the importance of the multilateral system and the UK’s strong support for it. I also raised concerns about the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the need to ensure a comprehensive response, as well as emphasising the critical nature of continued humanitarian assistance in Yemen.

I am proud that the UK continues to play its part in trying to provide relief in countries such as Yemen, and that we remain committed to spending 0.7% of our
gross national income on development assistance. That commitment puts us at the forefront of addressing global challenges, so I am pleased that at this summit we announced our pledge of £1.4 billion for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, to help save lives.

Turning to the European Council, the focus of these discussions was on what are known as the EU’s top jobs—the appointments at the head of the EU’s institutions and the EU’s High Representative. As I have said before, this is primarily a matter for the remaining 27 EU member states, but while we remain a member of the EU, I also said that we would engage constructively, which we did throughout. After long and difficult discussions over the last few days, the Council voted for a package of candidates with an important balance of gender, reflecting the diversity of the European Union. The Council formally elected Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel as President of the European Council. The Council also nominated German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen as candidate for President of the European Commission; Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Borrell Fontelles as candidate for High Representative for foreign affairs and security policy; and the French managing director of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde, as candidate for president of the European Central Bank.

The Commission President will now be voted on by the European Parliament in the coming weeks. After being approved by the Commission President, the High Representative will then be voted on as part of the College of Commissioners by the European Parliament before the college is appointed by the European Council. After consultations with the European Parliament and the ECB governing council, the European Council will appoint the president of the ECB. The European Parliament will also vote on its President today. Subject to the approval of the European Parliament, this will be the first time that a woman will be made President of the European Commission, and I would like to congratulate Ursula von der Leyen on her nomination.

This was a package supported by the UK, and it is in our national interest to have constructive relationships with those who are appointed. Once we leave the European Union, we will need to agree the details of our future relationship. We will continue to share many of the same challenges as our closest neighbours, and we will need to work with them on a variety of issues that are in our joint interests. But that will now be a matter for my successor to take forward. I commend this statement to the House.

1.1 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I want to say thank you to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for the fantastic campaign she has mounted and the comfort that she has brought to those who have been through the unimaginable strain of losing a child. Those who, sadly, will lose a child in future will at least know that, because of her work, one part of the commemoration of that child’s life will be made a little bit easier. On behalf of so many families, may we just say thank you very much for everything you have done?

I thank the Prime Minister for an advance copy of her statement. While this year marks the 20th anniversary of the G20, there is little progress to commemorate in tackling the urgent challenges that we face. Where the leaders of the world’s most powerful countries fail, we look instead to civil society, trade unions and community groups, and to an inspirational generation of young people, for the transformative change that is required.

This summit’s communiqué did not make the necessary commitments on climate change. Does the Prime Minister agree that President Trump’s failure to accept the reality of man-made climate change, his refusal to back the Paris accords and his attempts to water down the communiqué’s commitments are a threat to the security of us all, and to the security of the planet? Is the Prime Minister concerned that he could soon be joined by one of her possible successors, who has described global warming as a “primitive fear … without foundation”? It is the responsibility of the G20 to lead efforts to combat climate change, as the Prime Minister herself acknowledged. These nations account for four fifths of global greenhouse gas emissions. As I confirmed last week, we back the UK’s bid to host COP 26 next year. In 2017, the Government agreed to:

“Making finance flows consistent with a pathway towards low greenhouse gas emissions”

in developing countries. So can the Prime Minister explain why 97% of the UK’s export finance support for energy in developing countries goes to fossil fuels, and less than 1% is for renewable energy? The Government’s pledge to cut carbon emissions by 2050 is an empty one. They have no serious plan to invest and continue to dismantle our renewable energy sector while supporting fracking.

The Prime Minister says that the international community must stand against Iran’s destabilising activity in the region. The Iran nuclear deal agreement was a multilateral agreement signed up to by President Obama, and a number of other Governments, but reneged on by President Obama’s successor. Beyond just saying that we need to protect the deal, what action has the Prime Minister taken to ensure this? What conversation did she have with President Trump on this issue?

Is it not about time that the Prime Minister’s Government stood up to our supposed ally, Saudi Arabia? She says that she met Crown Prince bin Salman but gives no details. So can I ask her: did she raise the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, did she raise the killing of thousands of Yemenis, and did she pledge to stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia? Did she raise with him the Saudis’ financing and arming of Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar, who is fighting the UN-recognised Government of Libya, and who, only last night, has been held responsible for an airstrike on a migrant centre in Tripoli that killed 40 people and injured dozens more? The Prime Minister rightly points to the need to protect people from terrorist propaganda, so before she leaves office, will she finally release, in full, the report she suppressed on the Saudi Government’s funding of extremist groups?

The Prime Minister talks of confronting countries that interfere in the democracy of other nations, including Russia. I remind her that it was Labour that delivered amendments to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill, which introduced the Magnitsky powers. The truth is that the Conservatives have questions to answer about the almost £1 million-worth of donations from wealthy Russians to their party under her watch. If we stand up to corruption and condemn human rights-abusing regimes, then politicians should not be trading cash for access.
The Prime Minister mentioned the worrying outbreak of Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Could she outline what assistance the Department for International Development is providing in that terrible situation? I welcome the Government’s £1.4 billion for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. However, the main conclusion from the G20 is that the world deserves better leadership for the urgent challenges facing humanity.

Moving on to the EU summit in Brussels, it has taken leaders three days to come up with a decision on who should take the EU’s top jobs. But a three-day summit pales into insignificance next to the three years of failure that this Government have inflicted on us all over Brexit. I would like to congratulate those who have been appointed or nominated to new roles within the EU, especially Josep Borrell as High Representative for foreign affairs and security. For as long as we remain in the EU, we should seek reform. That includes increasing our efforts to tackle tax evasion and avoidance; stepping up our co-operation over the climate emergency that faces us all, all over this continent and this planet; and challenging migration policies that have left thousands to drown in the Mediterranean while sometimes subcontracting migration policies to Libyan militias.

Can the Prime Minister explain her decision for the Conservative party to join a political group that includes far-right, Islamophobic parties such as Vox of Spain? It claims that Muslims will impose Sharia law on Spain, turn cathedrals into mosques, and force all women to cover up. It is a party that campaigned to repeal gender violence laws and threatened to shut down feminist organisations. Does the Prime Minister understand the worry that this will cause many people in this country who will rightly be asking why her party has aligned itself with this far-right organisation whose policies are built on division, discrimination and hate?

Finally, does the Prime Minister agree that whoever succeeds her should have the courage to go back to the people with their preferred Brexit option to end the uncertainty and get Brexit resolved?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raised a number of issues, moving between them with sometimes no apparent link, but I will try to address them. On climate change, I have already expressed my disappointment that the United States has pulled out of the Paris agreement. I repeated to President Trump at the G20 my hope that the United States will come back into the Paris agreement in due course. I am pleased that the other members of the G20 held fast to the irreversibility of the Paris agreement and the commitments we had previously made. As I said in answer to Prime Minister’s questions, we are showing the lead on this. I am encouraging others to follow, and they are showing their willingness to do so.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about international development money in relation to climate change. I am pleased to say that we have committed to provide at least £5.8 billion of international climate finance between 2016 and 2020. This is not only a question of energy mix. It is also about climate resilience, and we are leading on that for the UN climate action summit in September this year. We have already helped 47 million people to cope with the effects of climate change, supported 17 million people to access clean energy and reduced or avoided 10.4 million tonnes of CO₂, so we are putting our words into action.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about my meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. I did indeed raise the killing of Jamal Khashoggi. I was very clear that we expect a transparent and open judicial process and for those who are responsible to be brought to account. I also raised the importance of a political solution in Yemen and the fact that we are supporting the work of UN special envoy Martin Griffiths and want to ensure that all parties are committed to coming around the table and finding a political solution in Yemen.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the issue of Ebola in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I had a meeting with the director general of the World Health Organisation at the G20 summit, during which we discussed that. I also discussed it with the Secretary-General of the United Nations. This is a serious humanitarian challenge. The security situation in eastern DRC makes dealing with this outbreak more difficult in terms of operating through Government and other organisations. The United Nations and the WHO are committed to working through community groups on the ground. He asked about our response. We are the second largest bilateral donor to the response in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the largest to preparedness efforts in neighbouring countries. We have been working not only where there has been an outbreak in the DRC but to ensure that neighbouring countries can respond effectively. I am pleased to say that, when there was a small number of cases in Uganda, Uganda responded extremely well and very professionally, and we have not seen further cases there.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Russia. I thought his comments were a bit rich—who was it, after the nerve agent attack on our streets in Salisbury, who believed the Russian Government rather than our own intelligence agencies? It was the right hon. Gentleman, so I will take no lessons from him on our relationship with Russia.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the European Council. I do not think I heard him welcome the gender balance in the appointment of the top jobs. It is important that we see the first woman nominated to be President of the European Commission and a woman nominated for the role at the European Central Bank.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about Brexit. It was always going to take two years to negotiate; that is the time set out in the treaty under the article 50 process. We brought the proposals to the House. He rejected those proposals. He has not brought forward proposals that command a majority—[Interruption.] I think the Shadow Foreign Secretary said that he has.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): No, I said that the House rejected it.

The Prime Minister: I had noticed that the House had not supported the plans that I brought forward but, once again, it is a bit of a nerve for a party that consistently says it wants to leave with a deal to consistently vote against leaving with a deal.
The right hon. Gentleman talked about going back to the people on Brexit. He talked about the delay and uncertainty. We have been waiting for weeks for the Labour party’s policy on Brexit. We keep being told that the shadow Cabinet is taking a decision on a second referendum and, week after week, we still wait to hear it. It is little wonder that the shadow Home Secretary says she is beginning to worry about Labour’s Brexit policy.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): As you know, Mr Speaker, since the 1980s I have consistently raised the question of Germany’s increasing dominance in the European Union and the European Commission. In his recent book “Berlin Rules”, our former ambassador to Germany states that the EU is and will remain “a German Europe”. Nine of the 28 European Commissioners have German leaders of their cabinets. There are six German directors general. He says that:

“it is Germany’s view which is sought by the Commission before it acts, and by other governments before they decide”.

in the Council of Ministers by majority vote behind closed doors. Is that not a grave concern and a reason why we should leave the European Union by 31 October?

The Prime Minister: I am a little disappointed. Germany has not had presidency of the European Commission since something like the 1960s, so it is a bit churlish of my hon. Friend to suggest that we should not have voted for a German President. May I also point out that Ursula von der Leyen was born in Brussels? That might make it worse for my hon. Friend than the fact that she is from Germany. It is important that we see not only a gender balance but a geographical spread across the Commission in the appointments. He talks about us leaving the European Union. I want us to leave the European Union. I voted three times for us to leave the European Union. Had he voted with me, we would already be outside the European Union.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement and advance sight of it. On a point of clarification, the Prime Minister suggested in Prime Minister’s questions that there was no review of devolution. That is of some surprise to those of us who were listening to Radio Scotland this morning and heard Lord Duncan talk about exactly that; indeed, he said that Lord Dunlop has been appointed to that role. Many Scottish journalists have tweeted that they have had briefings from No. 10, so perhaps the Prime Minister will take this opportunity to clarify whether she is going to Scotland tomorrow or whether she does not know what her diary involves.

I endorse the Prime Minister’s robust response to Russia, which must end its destabilising activity. Those responsible for the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal should be brought to justice, and the Russian state must take responsibility and allow justice to prevail. I also thank the Prime Minister for confirmation of the nominees for the Commission. We, of course, welcome the attempt to achieve a gender balance. It is important that the European Parliament is now able to take a role in this process.

The SNP welcomes that many of the world leaders reaffirmed their support for the full implementation of the Paris agreement but condemns President Trump’s ducking of the issue. The fact that President Trump refuses to wake up to the reality is irresponsible and delusional. This ticking time bomb needs a rapid and robust response. While the UK Government’s commitment is to reach targets by 2050, in Scotland we are trying to achieve net zero faster, by recently committing to a target of net zero emissions by 2045. Scotland has already reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 47% since 1990. But we all need to go further and faster. We have an obligation to the planet and to future generations to recognise that this is a climate emergency.

I welcome the fact that world leaders affirmed their commitment to the implementation of the 2030 agenda for sustainable growth and that the summit agreed to work towards a free, fair, stable and open-market environment in trade and investment. However, the Osaka declaration following the G20 summit says that there is still concern about the state of the global economy, noting “growth remains low and risks remain tilted to the downside.”

The Prime Minister must take responsibility for the Government’s failure to grow the UK economy and fight inequality. Without an appropriate economic response from the UK Government, inequality is set to get worse rather than better. The Institute for Fiscal Studies agreed when it stated:

“If the Office for Budget Responsibility’s forecasts are correct, inequality is likely to increase in the next few years.”

Philip Alston, the UN special rapporteur, found that one fifth of the UK population—14 million people—live in poverty and that, by 2021, 40% of children will be living below the poverty line. Those are staggering figures. No Prime Minister can be proud of leaving this as her legacy.

There was a glaring omission in the Prime Minister’s statement. The Japanese Foreign Minister warned against a no-deal Brexit, and said that it could risk Japanese auto manufacturers going through customs and that operations may not be able to continue. Therefore, I want to ask the Prime Minister: does she agree with the Japanese Foreign Minister?

Will the Prime Minister vote against a no-deal Brexit and against anyone intent on delivering a no-deal Brexit as being her successor? Furthermore, will she now act to undo the punitive austerity measures put in place by her Government to unlock economic growth and to begin to turn the tide on income inequality across the United Kingdom? Will she admit that she has made a multitude of mistakes, and failed to use power to help the powerless and rebalance our economy in a way that lifts the poor out of poverty and the disadvantaged into advantage? Prime Minister, this is your legacy of failure. It is your choice in your final days to do the right thing.

The Prime Minister: First, I will be going to Scotland tomorrow and I will be making a speech about the benefits of the Union of the United Kingdom. May I suggest that, rather than, as SNP Members always do, jumping on the bandwagon of something they read in the newspapers, they should actually wait to hear what I have to say in my speech tomorrow before they opine upon it?

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments about Russia and the importance of our working to reduce and stop Russia’s destabilising activity, which takes many forms. We have seen it, most particularly, in the use of that chemical weapon on our streets, but of course we see it in cyber-attacks, in disinformation and
in attempts to interfere in what is happening in other countries—often in democratic processes—and we will continue to work with others to bring about the aim that we all want.

The right hon. Gentleman references again the issue about no deal and a deal. I am afraid that the answer to his points has not changed. It has not changed from Prime Minister’s questions a little earlier this afternoon. I have consistently said that I think it is in the best interests of the UK to leave with a good deal. I believe we negotiated a good deal. Parliament was not willing to support that good deal, but I voted three times to ensure that we left the European Union with a deal. He chose to vote three times to leave with no deal, so I am not taking any lessons from him on that particular issue.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about failure to use powers. Actually, the best example of a failure to use the powers they have is the SNP Government in Scotland, who have been given extra powers, yet have consistently failed to use them. Whenever they are given extra powers, they do not use them. All they do is come back and say, “Please, sir, can we have some more?” Start doing the day job and stop focusing only on independence—that is what the SNP needs to do.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about economic growth. I am pleased to say that this country, under Conservative Governments, has seen I think 27 quarters of economic growth. That is the longest period of consistent growth of any of the G7 countries and that is a record the Conservatives are proud of.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I share the Prime Minister’s enthusiasm for the appointment of so many women to the top jobs in Europe’s institutions, and I thank her for the role she played in that. I really commend her for the good will and determination she has brought consistently to the table at both the G20 and the EU summit. Does she agree that if, when we leave the European Union, we are going to continue to enjoy a constructive relationship with our neighbours, it is very important that we leave in an orderly fashion, with an agreement?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for her kind words. I agree that it is important that, once we have left the European Union, we continue to have a strong and deep partnership and relationship with the European Union and obviously with the individual member states within the European Union. I believe the best way of achieving that is to leave with a good deal and I am only sorry that Parliament was not able to find a majority for that good deal. It is obviously up to my successor to find a majority in Parliament that can enable us to leave in a way that is in this country’s national interest.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Prime Minister’s statement says that “the best way to resolve trade disputes is through a reformed and strengthened WTO”.

Is it not the case that the dispute settlement mechanism no longer works because the United States does not recognise it and there are insufficient judges, and that those who would have Britain dependent on so-called WTO rules are making Britain dependent on a very weak and damaged organisation?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right to focus attention on the important dispute resolution mechanism at the WTO. That plays an important part in enforcing the rules the WTO has. Obviously, if appellate body member appointments continue to be blocked, that risks the effective operation of the dispute settlement system. That would not be in our interests and it would not be in the interests of any of the members of the WTO, so we are strongly supporting an informal process that has been launched by the general council at the WTO to seek a resolution to this issue of the appellate body. Proposals put forward so far by WTO members bring the right ingredients to many of the concerns raised and we are urging all members to engage constructively in those ongoing discussions.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, a Lincolnshire knight in a cheerful suit—Sir Edward Leigh.

Sir Edward Leigh: It sets off your black gown, Mr Speaker.

After having to negotiate with these people for so many dreary months, the Prime Minister must be mightily relieved that she will no longer have to go to Brussels, but what advice would she give her successor about dealing with these people? Would she recommend, for instance, the injunction that no deal is better than a bad deal?

The Prime Minister: I have always believed that no deal was better than a bad deal, but I believe we negotiated a good deal. The advice I would give my successor is to act at all times in the best interests of this country. I believe it is in our best interests to be able to leave the European Union with a good deal, but it is up to my successor to find a majority in this House to enable us to leave the European Union.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): It is reported this morning that Canada is apparently unwilling to roll over the provisions of the CETA deal—the comprehensive economic and trade agreement—for the United Kingdom in the event of a no-deal Brexit. Could the Prime Minister tell the House whether she discussed this matter at the G20 summit? May I take this opportunity to congratulate the Chancellor, sitting next to her, on the clear statements he has been making in recent days about the obvious danger to our economy from a no-deal Brexit?

The Prime Minister: First, we will continue to work with the Canadians on the roll-over of the Canadian trade deal. I am pleased to say that the Department for International Trade has been able to see agreements on the roll-over of a number of trade deals, including significant deals such as the one with South Korea. But we will continue to work with the Canadians on this issue and it is right that we do that in detail to make sure that what comes out as a result of those roll-overs are arrangements that are in the interests of this country. I am afraid the right hon. Gentleman has tempted me to say this: he has consistently stood up and argued for the
case of not leaving the European Union without a deal, yet he has also consistently voted to leave the European Union without a deal.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I understand that, far from remaining silent at the EU summit, our Prime Minister made recommendations for not just one but for all four of the top jobs, and every single name she nominated or suggested was a highly qualified, highly competent woman. Can I thank the Prime Minister, as this might be her last statement as Prime Minister, for all she has done to champion women in politics in this country and across the world? Can we also send a message back to No. 10 to thank her husband for the highly dignified way in which he represented our country in the partners photo at the G20?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I am not sure if it is the rickshaw photograph of my husband that my hon. Friend is referring to, but I will happily take those compliments back to him.

I was happy to put forward the names of a number of women and to champion the need for gender balance in the appointments to the EU’s so-called top jobs. I believe it is important that we see that gender balance. I am pleased to have continued to be able to champion women, and I will continue to do that when I move to the Back Benches. May I also say to my hon. Friend that, apart from the appointments that have already been announced, it is expected that other women will take up senior posts within the Commission? Those are of course matters for the incoming President of the Commission, but I would expect to see more women taking senior roles in those roles in future.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): In the role that the Prime Minister played in the appointments to the EU’s top jobs, what were the top three things that she supported in the policy programme of the Commission’s new President?

The Prime Minister: Those people, including the President of the Commission, will not take up their positions until 1 November. It is, of course, possible that we will have left the European Union at that point, but I want to see a President of the European Commission—as I said to members of the European Council—who wants to continue working to find an arrangement for the relationship between the UK and the European Union in the future that is a positive and constructive one and that enables us to live with our near neighbours in a way that is to the advantage and benefit of both the United Kingdom and the European Union.

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): As the Prime Minister knows, the UK decided not to give notice to quit the European economic area, as required under article 127. Although I absolutely understand that she would not want to bind the hands of her successor, will she instruct officials to consider rejoining the European Free Trade Association pillar of the EEA agreement, since—as she will understand—the EU is under an international obligation to make existing treaties operable?

The Prime Minister: I recognise that my hon. Friend has championed that aspect of our future relationship. I think that the future relationship that we had negotiated with the European Union was actually better than the proposals that he has put forward, because it gave us greater independence while maintaining economic advantages in our trade relationship with the European Union. That, of course, has been rejected by the House, and it will be up to my successor to find the right way through.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Did the Prime Minister see the embarrassing sight yesterday of the Brexit party MEPs turning their backs on the European Parliament? Does she agree that such acts are born of the absurd notion, which has done so much damage to the country, that we are some kind of subjugated colony of the EU, rather than the full, equal and highly successful member that we have been? Will she join me in rejecting this notion of Britain as a colony, lest it lead to more humiliating spectacles such as we saw yesterday?

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom has played a full role as a member of the European Union. We have been highly regarded around that EU table, and I want us to continue to be able to have a relationship with the EU in the future that will see us not only having greater independence outside the European Union, but able to contribute and work with our partners in the European Union on the challenges that we all face. Issues such as climate change are not restricted to one country or to one grouping of countries: these are issues for us all. We want to continue to work constructively and to maintain that high regard in which the UK has always been held.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Did my right hon. Friend get the opportunity to thank our colleagues in the European Union for their immense contribution, together with us, towards the collective peace and security of Europe over all the years of our membership—not least the free peoples of eastern Europe and those in the Balkans who, at times of conflict, look towards the EU as a beacon of peace and democracy? Did she reassure them that with our membership of the Security Council and NATO we will continue to find ways to collaborate successfully on that continuing peace and security, and that they should ignore the sometimes childish and unfortunate anti-German rhetoric that occasionally comes from our Benches?

The Prime Minister: I have repeatedly given our commitment to maintaining the security of Europe. We do that, of course, through NATO, as the second-biggest contributor and biggest European contributor to it, and we will continue to do so. I was able to thank members around the European Union Council for the co-operation that we have seen between the United Kingdom and member states of the European Union, and to express my desire that that co-operation and working together will continue in the future for our mutual benefit.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Change UK): I do not know whether it is because of the prospect of the new European institution heads, but the Prime Minister will know that the former Foreign Secretary and the current Foreign Secretary are absolutely adamant that during August and September they will be able to negotiate a superior withdrawal agreement—perhaps with extra “positive energy”, as the former Foreign Secretary says. Does the Prime Minister think that it will be that simple?
The Prime Minister: Obviously it is up to whoever succeeds me to take forward negotiations and look at the relationship for withdrawing from the European Union and our future relationship with the European Union in the way that they think fit. The EU Council has made statements about the negotiations so far and about its position on those negotiations, but obviously it will be up to my successor to take those forward.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Did my right hon. Friend have the opportunity to discuss with Secretary-General Guterres or other G20 leaders the troubling reports surrounding the alleged torture and death of the navy captain Rafael Acosta Arévalo in Venezuela? If there is evidence of torture and human rights abuses by Maduro and his henchmen, will she press for them to be held to account by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights or, if appropriate, referred to the International Criminal Court in The Hague?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concern that my right hon. Friend has expressed in relation to this case. I was able on a number of occasions to raise the overall issue of Venezuela; I was recently also able to discuss it with the President of Colombia when he visited the United Kingdom. We are all concerned about the state that we see in Venezuela, about actions that have been taken in that country, and about the appalling circumstances and conditions in which so many Venezuelans find themselves living, which is why so many Venezuelans have been fleeing their country to neighbouring countries, putting a significant burden on those neighbouring countries.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): It is good to hear the Prime Minister making it clear that there is no question of normalising relations with Russia while it remains in flagrant violation of the international norms that, as a permanent member of the Security Council, it is supposed to be at the forefront of upholding. Does it not gall her to see the man who is supposed to be the leader of the free world—the President of the United Kingdom—laughing and joking with this rogue President, Putin? Should not the UK be leading the charge to increase the pressure on Russia, potentially even through expelling its ambassador, while it enables atrocity after atrocity in Syria, gravely damaging the multilateral rule of law and order that is vital to ongoing peace and security in the world?

The Prime Minister: I think what is important for the United Kingdom is that we continue to take this strong position in relation to the activities of Russia. I have referenced a number of those already; I have not yet referenced in response to questions the actions that Russia took in Ukraine, which are matters that I also raised with President Putin.

It is important to look at the actions that the United States has taken. After the attack that took place in Salisbury, it expelled about 60 Russian officials. We saw a significant and unprecedented international response, but in fact the largest number of expulsions took place from the United States. Its actions, I think, have been important in this.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Prime Minister said that international development expenditure would be aligned with emissions reduction, but last week the Secretary of State told us in terms that his main effort was resilience, not emissions reduction. The Prime Minister’s priority is the right one, but does the Secretary of State know?

The Prime Minister: I assure my right hon. Friend that we are working on all these issues. As I indicated in response to an earlier question—I think it was in response to comments that the Leader of the Opposition made—it is important not only that we work on reduction, but that we ensure that while that reduction is taking place, we help those countries that need to build their resilience and their ability to deal with the climate change that we are already seeing. They are not mutually exclusive; I think we should be doing both.

 Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Democracy, freedom and human rights, and the upholding of those principles through international law, must surely be the cornerstone of British foreign policy. Given that this year we have seen the largest number of mass executions on a single day in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, given the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi by that regime, and given its abominable and inexcusable actions in Yemen, does the Prime Minister really believe that it is appropriate to allow the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Mohammed bin Salman to host the G20?

The Prime Minister: I think what is important about the G20 is that what it enables us to do is actually sit down, have those conversations and make those points directly. I was able to make a number of points, as I indicated earlier, about the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and about what is happening in Yemen direct to the Crown Prince in the bilateral that I held with him, and it is possible for those points to be made around the G20 table. It is about engagement; if we do not engage, it is much harder to ensure that we are making those points and seeing those points being responded to. We do take action, we consistently raise the issue of human rights in Saudi Arabia, and we will continue to do so.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her statement. Many across the country recognise the outstanding professionalism, integrity and respect with which she has always represented the United Kingdom on the international stage. When does she think a decision and announcement will be made about our Anglo-Italian proposal to host next year’s climate change conference here?

The Prime Minister: We had hoped that an announcement would be made towards the end of June; unfortunately, that was not possible. There is still a European bid from Turkey. I raised this with President Erdoğan when I met him. It may be some weeks before a final decision is taken, but we continue to make the necessary preparations for what I hope will be a successful bid.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that she is immensely proud that Britain became the world’s first major economy to commit in law to ending our contribution to global warming by 2050, and so am I. I am proud to have been part of that Parliament, and I am proud that my party supported that measure last week, in both the Commons and the Lords. Would the Prime Minister care to correct the record,
and to confirm that she understands that contrary to the impression she gave last week—accidentally, I am sure—Labour peers did not attempt to block the measure? In fact, they intended to strengthen it through an amendment to make it clearer.

The Prime Minister: Labour peers tabled a regret motion against the Government’s proposal for a target of net zero emissions by 2050. I am pleased that, in the event, we were able to put that into law—that is important—and I had hoped that Labour peers would wholeheartedly embrace the measure, rather than tabling a regret motion.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As chair of the all-party group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases, I thank the Prime Minister for the announcement on the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; I also thank her on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who chair the other groups involved. Was there discussion of the real problem of the lack of jobs across the world—not just in the European Union but in its near neighbourhood, in Africa? That is so important. So much time was spent discussing the top jobs; we need to spend an awful lot more time discussing jobs for the hundreds of millions of people who need them.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that ensuring that there are jobs available for people in Africa is a crucial challenge that we all face—one on which, again, the United Kingdom has taken a leading role. On my visit to Africa last year, I was able to talk about how we will use development aid, and other support that we can provide through such things as the great strength of the City of London, to ensure the investment that will lead to those jobs. I was impressed by the recognition of the issue among those I met, and by their enthusiasm to work with us to ensure that those jobs are available in future. I have discussed the subject with other EU leaders, and it is recognised around the G20 table.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): In the light of comments that the US ambassador to the UK made this morning about President Trump’s desire for the NHS to be part of any post-Brexit trade deal, it appears that the special relationship is becoming more of a special interest for the President. What steps can the Prime Minister take in her final days in office, and what does she expect her successor to do, to resist those attempts to access our NHS as part of any future trade deal? What will she do, and what does she expect her successor to do, to ensure that the United States comes back to the table and is part of the Paris climate change agreement?

The Prime Minister: We continue to put pressure on the United States on the climate change agreement, and to raise with it the importance of the issue. As far as we are concerned, the NHS will never be privatised. We will continue to ensure that decisions about public services are taken by UK Governments, not by our trade partners, and future trade agreements will not alter that. Indeed, the President himself made it clear, following his visit to the United Kingdom, that the national health service was not part of that trade agreement.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her leadership on environmental matters and on tackling climate change. Yesterday, the all-party environment group heard from Lord Adair Turner that although Britain makes only 1.5% of global emissions, our influence abroad is massive, not just because we are a world leader in tackling climate change here, but because of the possibility of green tech jobs and investment in the United Kingdom economy. Does my right hon. Friend understand that that is a real legacy of hers? I hope that future Governments will commit further to this.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for that, and for the work he has done on environmental issues in his ministerial roles. He continues to champion these issues. I absolutely agree with him. There are those who say that we can either have economic growth or tackle climate change. That is a false dichotomy. Tackling climate change is about developing new types of job, new technology, and new areas of employment for our economy. Already, something like 400,000 people are employed in, effectively, the clean growth economy—in renewable energy and so forth—and we will see many more such jobs being created. The message that we need to take around the world is that this is about future economies, and future employment and jobs.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Did any of the countries represented at the G20 discuss with the Prime Minister the recent UN resolution regarding the sovereignty of the Chagos Islands? If she is seeking to leave a legacy, perhaps the best things she could do are respect the international rules-based order, respect the decision that sovereignty of the Chagos Islands should be returned to Mauritius, and restore the right to return to the Chagossian community, which would right a historical injustice.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the Government’s position on this. That position has not changed, and no such discussions took place.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The readmission last week of the Russians to the Council of Europe is being described by the Russians as international approval of the Russian invasion of Crimea. Did the Prime Minister have the chance to tell Putin that we totally reject that view?

The Prime Minister: I was able to make clear to President Putin the view that the United Kingdom takes: this was an illegal annexation of Crimea. I was also able to make it clear that we expect Russia to return the sailors and ships that were taken from the Kerch strait.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister spoke of engaging constructively with the European Union, which I welcome, but went on to praise a slate of top-job nominations agreed in backroom deals. Does she not think that the people of the European Union should have had the opportunity to vote for the Commission President in the European parliamentary elections, and that a British Prime Minister should champion democratic values in the European Union, in the G20, and in the United Kingdom, which means a vote on any deal?
The Prime Minister: That was a very clever way round to the hon. Lady’s end point, which was that we should go back to the British people and ask them to think again. I do not think that we should; I think we should accept the decision that they took and deliver on it.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): At the top of her statement, the Prime Minister rightly spoke about climate change and its importance to her, which she is proving, and of the importance of the summit. There were numerous horrifying media reports this weekend that in Brazil, an area of Amazon rainforest the size of a football pitch is being cleared every minute. At the summit, was any mention made of this act of planetary self-harm, which seems to have resumed with menace since President Bolsonaro took power? If not, please could the UK Government make urgent inquiries to establish the position? What is happening is surely not in the interests of any of us, and certainly not in the interests of members of the G20.

The Prime Minister: Obviously, the issue of climate change covered a broad range of topics, but I am certainly happy to take up my hon. Friend’s request that we try to establish the exact situation in relation to these reports of deforestation. It is an issue that we should all be concerned about.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): I am very disappointed that the Prime Minister did not mention in her statement the 500,000 dead, the 11 million people displaced from their homes and the millions from Syria in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. In her discussions with President Erdogan and Prince Mohammad bin Salman, and with the UN Secretary-General and with Putin, did she do anything to press on them the need for a political solution in Syria, an end to this conflict, and a stop to the Russian bombing of hospitals and the killings of civilians that are taking place at this very moment in Idlib and elsewhere?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I was able to raise with President Erdogan and with President Putin my concerns about the need to come to a political settlement in Syria. I also raised very specific concerns about the situation in Idlib and the need to ensure that we de-escalate tensions in that area. So the answer to the hon. Gentleman’s question is, yes I did raise it in a number of the meetings that I held.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): With more EU citizens than ever now critical of the EU project, I wonder whether my right hon. Friend has considered how those hours of horse-trading look to those citizens. We have Ursula von der Leyen, the Commission President, who seems just on creating a US-style new country and an EU army. We have Christine Lagarde for the European Central Bank; hers is perhaps the only name that we recognise, but we do so, I think, for all the wrong reasons. This new group of those in the top jobs seem to have federalism at the heart of their agenda, stripping more powers away from national Governments, and for any problem the answer is more Europe. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that proves without any doubt that the Commission—and its institutions—has no regard or care whatever for the electorates it is there to serve?

The Prime Minister: The nature of the European Union for the future will be a matter for the 27 remaining member states, because of course we will be leaving the European Union. I think it is right that those who have been appointed, or nominated, for those appointments are those who have shown their competence to undertake the roles in the future, but, as I say, how they shape that—how the future of the European Union is taken forward—will be a matter for the 27.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister on the wonderful face that she adopted when she was holding President Putin’s hand. It had more ice in it than the polar ice cap, and it said it all. He, as she knows, gave an interview to the Financial Times, saying that western-style liberalism was “obsoleto”. I hope she was able to point out to him that, having the rule of law, with independent judges, free speech, freedom of assembly and free elections, is pretty good.

The Prime Minister: May I perhaps reassure the hon. Gentleman that, unlike a polar ice cap, on this issue I am not melting? [Laughter] I did make the point to President Putin that liberal democracies have ensured greater prosperity and security for their people than any other system.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): We are used to statements from European institutions that their decisions are not reviewable, including the European Parliament insisting it would block any nominee for European President who was not one of the Spitzenkandidaten. Does the Prime Minister expect the European Parliament to veto the nominee—or might it just decide that compromise is possible where circumstances dictate?

The Prime Minister: I sincerely hope that, after considerable discussion and consultation with the European Parliament, the European Parliament will feel able to accept the package of nominees for top jobs. Of course, the Parliament will be voting on the President of the Parliament as well. But there was considerable discussion with the European Parliament as part of the process, so I hope that it would feel able to accept this set of nominees, notwithstanding, of course, that none of them was one of the Spitzenkandidaten who were put forward.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I commend the Prime Minister for her forthright stance with President Putin over the nerve gas that killed Dawn Sturgess in Salisbury. Will she confirm that she took an equally forthright stance with President Trump, whose views on the climate emergency will, if sustained, lead to the deaths of many millions of people around the world?

The Prime Minister: I have raised the United States’s approach to climate change, and particularly to the Paris agreement, with President Trump on many occasions, and I continue to raise it with him.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My son Alexander is nine today, and in so many ways I think he is incredibly lucky to be growing up in Scotland. Was there any discussion at the G20 of the appalling scandal emerging at the US border, where women and their children have been separated from each other, are being held in overcrowded and insanitary conditions that have been likened to concentration camps and, according to Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio Cortez,
who visited this week, being forced to drink from toilets and abused by US border guards? Has she raised that with President Trump, and if not, will she do so?

The Prime Minister: I wish the hon. Lady’s son Alexander a very happy birthday today.

I am sure we are all concerned about the deeply shocking images that we have seen from the US-Mexico border. Obviously, countries are responsible for their own border policy, but we all, I think, have the responsibility of ensuring that we address migration issues humanely. Concerns about what has happened on that border will continue to be raised.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Following on from the question asked by the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), the Prime Minister will be aware that during the G20 the Russian Federation returned to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. With respect, there are questions about the Government’s approach to its return, but they are perhaps for another time. Given Crimea, given Georgia, given Moldova, given Chechnya, given MH17, given, of course, the nerve agent attack in Salisbury, and given the opportunity that the Prime Minister had to meet President Putin, how does she feel the future of our relationship with the Russian Federation will go now?

The Prime Minister: The point was made, which I reiterated in my statement, that I have been consistently clear: we have no argument with the Russian people. It is possible for us to have a different relationship with Russia, but for that to take place Russia has to change its behaviour and to follow a different path. We will not be able to normalise our relations until it does.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): While we may be concerned at the lack of complete openness and democracy in the appointment of top jobs in the European Union, we are about to get a Prime Minister foisted on us in an election in which 99.75% of the population have no say, so perhaps a wee bit of humility is called for.

When the Prime Minister met Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman of Saudi Arabia and asked for support in building a political solution to the crisis in Saudi and Yemen, did she remind him that the causes of that crisis are military; that one of the biggest players in that military crime is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; and that according to a Committee of this Parliament it is highly likely that British weapons are being used in the commission of those crimes in Yemen? So did she tell him that it is time for the illegal bombing of civilians in Yemen to stop? Did she tell him there will be no more British arms sales to Saudi Arabia until those crimes have stopped? If she did not tell him that, why not?

The Prime Minister: We continue to make the case in Yemen for ensuring that there is a political solution. That is the only way in which we shall see a stable, secure Yemen into the future. We have been playing a leading role in those diplomatic efforts. We are supporting the United Nations in bringing key Yemeni and international actors together to deliver a peaceful solution. We support the efforts of the UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths, and we continue to do so, particularly to secure the implementation of the Stockholm agreement.

On the first point that the hon. Gentleman raised, I am not sure that the SNP is the best party to raise the question of how leaders are appointed to the leadership of their parties.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): And the prize for patience and perseverance goes to Brendan O’Hara.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. In terms of value, the United States is the world’s largest export market for Scotch whisky, worth more than £1 billion last year. Yesterday, we heard that Scotch is on a list of products that could face large import tariffs into America, which would be deeply damaging, particularly for whisky-producing communities such as those in my Argyll and Bute constituency. What discussions did the Prime Minister have with President Trump over the damaging America First, isolationist trade agenda and the effect it will have on markets around the world? Does she agree that in terms of trade, as in so much else, he is not a trustworthy ally?

The Prime Minister: We have been consistently clear with the United States about our concerns regarding the approach it is taking in relation to trade. As I said earlier, we continue to support the concept of a rules-based international order, working through the WTO. As I said in my statement, we want to see reform of the WTO rather than people resorting to the introduction of tariffs. We consistently champion the Scotch whisky industry around the world. I am pleased to say that there have been successes, not least by one or two of our trade envoys, in working with the Scotch whisky industry to ensure that tariffs have been reduced in other parts of the world; I can think of at least one example. We continue to try to ensure that we are opening up markets for Scotch whisky, which is an extremely good product and which we want everybody around the world to be able to enjoy.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the Prime Minister for two solid, busy hours at the Dispatch Box.
The Secretary of State for International Development

2 pm

Counter-Daesh Update

( Rory Stewart )

With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will update the House on the campaign against Daesh, which recently controlled a third of Iraq and Syria—an area the size of the UK—but which has now lost its final piece of territory in Baghuz, Syria. Its sudden rise and fall—morally troubling, profoundly threatening and almost unprecedented—carries deep lessons and warnings for Britain and indeed the nations of the world.

As recently as 2003, the borders of Syria and Iraq were stable. Secular Arab nationalism appeared to have triumphed over the older forces of tribe and religion. Different religious communities—Yazidi, Shabak, Kakai, Christian, Shi’a and Sunni—continued to live alongside one another as they had for more than a millennium. Iraqis and Syrians had better incomes, education, health systems and infrastructure than most citizens of the developing world.

By 2014, all this had changed, partly because of the Iraq war, partly because of the Arab Spring in Syria, but in great part because of the astonishing rise of Daesh. Just three years after the withdrawal of the coalition in 2011, a movement initially founded by a tattooed, drug-taking video store assistant from Jordan had, following his death, captured Raqqa, Fallujah, Ramadi, Mosul and Palmyra, torn off a third of the territory of Syria and Iraq and created an independent Islamic state of 8 million people. It was a state with endemic poverty and struggling public services defined not just by suicide bombs but by a vicious campaign against religious minorities. Well-established borders between nations were obliterated. A few hundred men routed three divisions of the Iraqi army. Secular nationalism was swept aside by a bizarre religious ideology.

No one in 2005, and very few in 2010, would have predicted the success of that movement. There were, of course, many reasons to fear an insurgency in north-east Syria or Iraq. People felt little loyalty to the lamentable Governments in Damascus and Baghdad, with their anti-Sunni discrimination, corruption and poor provision of services, but there was initially very little reason to believe that people would support Daesh rather than other insurgency groups.

Indeed, Daesh’s imposition of early medieval social codes and horrifying videos of slaughter of fellow Arabs seemed to most Iraqis and Syrians profoundly irrational, culturally inappropriate and deeply unappealing. Its military tactics seemed almost insane. It deliberately picked fights not only with the Syrian and Iraqi regimes, but with Jabhat al-Nusra, the Free Syrian Army, Shi’a communities as a whole, the Iranian Quds Force and the Kurds, who initially tried to stay out of the fight. It finished 2014 by mounting a suicidal attack on Kobane in Syria in the face of over 600 US airstrikes, losing many thousands of fighters and gaining almost no ground.

All of this, which should have been Daesh’s undoing, seemed at times simply to encourage tens of thousands of foreign fighters to join it, and they came not only from very poor countries but from some of the wealthiest countries in the world—from the social democracies of Scandinavia as much as from monarchies, military states, authoritarian regimes and liberal democracies. Part of its success was notoriously connected to social media. It was the first terrorist movement that really flourished on short, often home-made, video clips, on Twitter rants and on Facebook posts from the frontline. It grew far more quickly, and survived far longer, than any diplomat, politician or expert analyst predicted.

The options that seemed available to defeat this kind of movement in 2008 were no longer available in 2016. Eight years earlier—or, in our case, six years earlier—there had been a full-spectrum international counter-insurgency campaign that relied on overwhelming force, huge investments in economic development, 100,000 coalition troops, eight years of coalition training packages and almost $100 billion a year of US expenditure. But that approach ultimately failed to create stability in Iraq and there was no appetite to repeat it in 2016. The US and its allies did not want to deploy troops on the ground in Syria and very few near the frontlines in Iraq, and no one was advocating nation building in the middle of another war.

Instead, the counter-attack on Daesh in Mosul was led by the Iraqi Government. Initially, this did not seem very promising. The Government appeared to lack the capacity and will to restore even the most basic services to communities in Fallujah or Ramadi. They were backed by unreliable Sunni tribal militias and by Iranian-supported Shi’a popular mobilisation forces, which alienated and terrified the local populations. Kurdish Iraqi forces also seemed unwilling to fight Daesh in Mosul. The coalition provided training to Iraqi forces but on a much smaller scale than during the surge. Daesh had laid mines throughout the urban areas and was fighting for every inch of ground.

It is remarkable, therefore, that Daesh was ultimately defeated. This was largely due on the Syrian side of the border, to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, and, on the Iraqi side, to the counter-terrorism force, which at times was enduring casualty rates of almost 40% of its combatants. Iraqi forces regrouped and retook Fallujah, Ramadi and Mosul by early 2017, while the forces in Syria had retaken Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor by 2018.

Whereas during the surge the UK and its allies had been intimately involved in trying to reshape the Iraqi Government and security on the ground, our recent involvement has been less extensive. Rather than on nation building, since 2014 it has focused on £350 million of humanitarian aid in Iraq to provide healthcare, food and shelter. We have provided almost £1 billion to Syria over the last four years, including £40 million in aid to north-east Syria in 2018, which is going towards mine clearance, the immunisation of children, clean water, food and shelter.

This assistance continues. In Syria alone, there are 1.65 million people in need, while over half a million have been forced to flee their homes. Unexploded munitions and mines remain a major issue. In Iraq, 4 million people are returning home having been forced out. Nevertheless, this aid is on a much smaller scale than that which was provided by civilian officials from 2003 to 2011, our embassy and associated staff are much smaller, there are no longer coalition civilian outposts in every province, and the coalition and indeed the Iraqi
Government are a long way from being able to take on the task of reconstructing the shattered remains of Mosul.

What lessons can we draw? First, the hundreds of billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of troops committed by the coalition in Iraq from 2003, and more intensely from 2008, were not sufficient to create a stable civil service, a flourishing and sustainable economy, strong institutions, security, or any of the ingredients of a well-functioning state. This suggests that even the best-resourced foreign intervention may not be able to reconstruct a nation in the context of an insurgency. Secondly, local forces with a light foreign support may be able to achieve far more than people anticipate. Paradoxically, the Iraqi operations may have been effective not despite the lack of support from the west, but because of the lack of support. Operating with much less foreign assistance may have given the Iraqi and Syrian forces far more legitimacy, flexibility, control and sense of responsibility.

Thirdly, the sudden rise and sudden fall of Daesh illustrate the extreme fragility of many contemporary societies. The entire political-economic context was and remains so fluid and so open to exploitation, with so little deep institutional loyalty or resistance, that it was terrifyingly easy for an insurgency group to establish itself on both sides of the border. It may have lost its territory for now, but the underlying conditions remain and could allow insurgents to establish themselves again. Even without holding territory, Daesh remains a significant terrorist threat.

Finally, in a context so inherently unpredictable and unexpected, Britain and its allies need to stand in a state of grace, preparing for the unexpected. We need to keep a close eye on countries that may seem temporarily at peace, continue to invest in the development of countries that may seem no longer to need development and continue to deepen our knowledge of countries that may not seem to be a priority today, while retaining our linguistic expertise and, above all, nurturing our relationships with people in those countries and with potential coalition partners such as the US and France and, in a different context, Germany.

Whether in north-east Nigeria, in Somalia or Libya, in Afghanistan or Mali, the key to our response will never be the amount of money that we invest or the number of troops that we deploy. It will be the depth of our understanding and the care and subtlety with which we respond: our ability to deploy development, defence, intelligence and economic levers, diplomacy and a dozen other tools, rapidly and precisely, not overruling other Governments, but supporting them in the right way at the right time with prudence and economy.

That is why I must close this Daesh statement with deep respect for the courage of our military forces, the skill of our diplomats and the generosity of our development programmes, but above all with deep respect for the people of Syria and Iraq who were in the heart of this fight, who gave their lives, who led this response and who provide us with an example of how we can act as partners with energy, but above all with humility. I commend my statement to the House.

2.12 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. However, while the update is welcome, may I point out that it is only the second statement to be made in the House in the 365 days since 4 July last year, although the Government promised quarterly reports to keep the House updated?

We welcome the destruction of Daesh’s final enclaves in Syria. We know that Daesh is a threat to us all and that it must be defeated wherever it emerges. Just today, news reports have revealed the uncovering of another mass grave in Raqqah: 200 corpses have been found, and it is feared that more will follow. The dead, thought to be victims of Daesh, include bodies found in orange jump suits, the kind typically worn by their hostages.

Let me pay tribute to the UK forces who have put their lives on the line and show gratitude—as the Secretary of State did—to the Kurdish forces who have taken such huge risks in in leading the fight against Daesh. Will the Secretary of State now reassure the House that the Kurdish community will not be abandoned or left vulnerable to attacks by Syria or Turkey? He mentions Yazidis, Christians, Shi’as and Sunnis in his statement, so will he tell us what he is doing to support the protection of all communities in the region?

There is also the question of the ongoing role of our forces. The 2015 motion that set down the terms for our engagement in Syria to eradicate Daesh’s safe haven in Syria and Iraq was worded in such a way as to avoid an ongoing military conflict in the region. Will the Secretary of State now set out the purpose of our forces, given that their original purpose of defeating Daesh’s safe haven has been achieved? Does he believe that the original mandate has now expired and that therefore a renewed mandate for military action—and clarity on the role of special forces—is required for continued UK engagement in the region?

Let me say a few words about the ongoing conflict in Syria. There remain serious concerns for civilians in Idlib. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that there are safe corridors for civilians to leave, given that the United Nations has warned that up to 700,000 people could flee Idlib as refugees? Given that dozens of health facilities have been damaged and destroyed in recent months and more than half a million civilians have been unable to access vital medical care, what steps are the Government taking to encourage parties to the conflict to adhere to international humanitarian law and protect civilians?

Last month, I was lucky enough to meet members of a delegation from the Syrian Women’s Political Movement. They spoke about their experiences of being denied their rights to employment, education and medical care and facing sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation. They called for increased women’s representation in peace negotiations and decision-making positions. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to respond to their calls?

As for Iraq, does the Secretary of State share the growing international concern about the arbitrary, draconian and legally unsound way in which the Iraqi authorities are conducting trials of alleged jihadist collaborators and the resentment caused among the Sunni community in the country?

What discussions are taking place about the huge number of detained suspected Daesh fighters? More than 55,000 suspected fighters and their families have been detained in Syria and Iraq. Most of them are citizens of those
two countries, but overall they come from at least 50 countries. More than 11,000 relatives are being held at the al-Hol camp in north-eastern Syria. Michelle Bachelet, the UN human rights chief, has said that the relatives of suspected fighters should be taken back to their countries of origin. Does the Secretary of State agree with her call?

Let me finally raise the issue of Daesh’s ongoing influence beyond the physical battlefield. The Secretary of State has spoken today about Daesh’s physical territory, but its influence online is an ongoing threat and deeply worrying. What are the Government doing to work with our allies to ensure that action is taken by social media companies so that Daesh cannot find new safe havens online to spread its hatred?

Rory Stewart: The shadow Secretary of State has touched on a number of issues, stretching from the Kurdish community to Daesh online. I shall try to deal with them in turn.

What I think is at the heart of the answers to all these questions is that the only way in which we will be able to resolve the problems is through a proper political settlement. Many of the issues raised by the shadow Secretary of State—whether the issue is the minority rights of Yazidis and Christians, or the relationship between Kurds in Syria or Iraq and their national Governments—will have to be resolved in that way. It is very easy to stand at the Dispatch Box and try to talk about an inclusive political settlement, but that is unbelievably difficult to achieve, particularly after eight years of war, deep resentments and a massive militarisation of societies. We see the challenges all the way from Somalia to Yemen, and it will be just as difficult on the Syria-Iraq border, but ultimately that is the only way to resolve these issues, and the more support we can provide for mediators to try to come up with those political solutions, the better off we will all be.

The hon. Gentleman raised a technical and important question about the purpose of British forces. The reason for our forces on the ground was the Iraqi Government’s request for self-defence against Daesh and Syria, and the justification for their continuing presence is to do with the continuing threat posed by Daesh as a terrorist organisation, but not as a territory-holding organisation. I can, however, reassure the House that the nature of our presence is relatively limited. We are talking about airstrikes many of which are not conducted, the planes not being based in the middle east itself, and we are talking about British troops who are predominantly involved in training operations such as counter-IED and first-aid training. Some are based in the Kurdish regions, others in Iraqi bases. We are talking about a few hundred people. This is not the type of operation that we were talking about in relation to Iraq or Afghanistan, and I therefore do not think that a whole new mandate is necessary.

I share the hon. Gentleman’s frustration that a debate on an issue as important as this should be so poorly attended in the House of Commons. I hope that our sense of seriousness as a nation means that the next time such a statement is made, people will engage more in the debate.

Idlib is a source of huge concern. DFID has put £80 million into humanitarian support in Idlib, but it remains true that the populations in Idlib are under a ferocious and brutal attack from the Syrian Government. It remains very difficult to access people within Idlib, and we continue through every mechanism to call on both the Syrian Government and their supporters, including their supporters from Russia, to exercise restraint, but our options have been very limited and we need to do so in a way that does not repeat the mistakes made in the past of laying down red lines that we cannot maintain or raising the hopes of communities in ways that we cannot vindicate or justify.

This brings me to the question of resettlement in Iraq and the 55,000 suspected Daesh fighters and their families and social media. All that is leading up to a much bigger issue: there are clearly some legal issues raised, and there are consular and human rights issues raised, but at the heart of all this has to be the question of Daesh mark 2, or in other words, how we prevent all the same conditions—all the same resentments, all the same abuses, all the same lack of public services and all the same corruption—that led to the emergence of Daesh in its first form back in 2004-5 and its new form of 2011-12 from re-emerging again. We have to work with the Iraqi Government and with those areas of Syria controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces to ensure that people’s rights are respected, that reconstruction money is going in and above all that Sunni Arabs feel they have a stake in a political settlement, whereas at the moment they often feel deeply excluded by the regimes, by the ethnicity of the regimes and by the sectarian allegiances of the regimes.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): On that last point, recognising the considerable caution my right hon. Friend has expressed about the future of Iraq, what more can be done to help promote political reconciliation in the provinces of Anbar and Nineveh and to encourage economic reforms that will enable all the provinces of Iraq to benefit from the stability that our forces have done so much to secure?

Rory Stewart: This is of course an issue that my right hon. Friend knows very well indeed. In essence, the only way that we can begin to bring some kind of life and some kind of hope back to areas such as Anbar and Nineveh is by making sure that we have the right combination of economic development, governance and security, which is a pompous way of saying we need to start fixing houses in Fallujah, Ramadi and Mosul. That means clearing mines out of the way, and that means actually physically getting buildings up. This has to be led by the Iraqi Government. There is more we can do in terms of tax incentives, training, support and infrastructure, but that all points to the next consideration, which is of course security. They still remain dangerous areas; there is still a continuing rural insurgency. The way in which that security is addressed—the identity of the Iraqi forces we bring in and their sectarian allegiances—will be very important in regaining the trust of the population. Finally, we must have the right kind of devolution down to the local level so that people feel that the leadership in Mosul, Ramadi or Fallujah genuinely reflects them—reflects them democratically, reflects their identities, reflects their sense of hope—so that those three elements of security, governance and economic development can begin to produce a sense of hope.
Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): First, may I say as someone whose brother served in Iraq that I am conscious of the sacrifice made by members of the armed forces over the long period in which they have been there? I may not necessarily have agreed with the original direction of travel, but nevertheless the commitment of members of the armed forces is keenly felt by those of us who have family in the armed forces and by those of us on these Benches.

I do not disagree with much of what has been said by the Secretary of State and by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), who spoke for the official Opposition, but I do wish to raise some issues that have not yet been spoken about. Before doing so, however, let me say that the onus is on us not only in these islands but across western Europe to consider our own history in terms of ethnic and religious tension before we ever believe that we could give some kind of panacea to the peoples of Iraq, and I will also say Kurdistan. I think we should first learn from our own history.

The Secretary of State raised some serious issues about opportunities for moving forward into reconciliation, and even the official Opposition mentioned some of the issues highlighted in some of the camps, and I wish to specifically highlight what was mentioned by Ben Taub in *The New Yorker* back in December last year:

“Shortly after ten o’clock, three judges in long black robes shuffled into Courtroom 2 and sat at the bench. Suhail Abdullah Sahar, a bald, middle-aged man with a thin, jowly face, sat in the center. There were twenty-one cases on his docket that day, sixteen related to terrorism. He quietly read out a name; a security officer shouted it down the hall to one of his colleagues, who shouted it to the guard, who shouted it into the cell. Out came a young man named Ahmed. A security officer led him to a wooden cage...

‘Sir, I swear, I have never been to Qayarah,’ Ahmed said.

Sahar was skeptical. ‘I have a written confession here, with your thumbprint on it,’ he said.

‘Sir, I swear, I gave my thumbprint on a blank paper,’ Ahmed replied. ‘And I was tortured by the security services.’

‘Enough evidence,’ the prosecutor said. ‘I ask for a guilty verdict.’

Ahmed wept as he was led out of the room. His trial had lasted four and a half minutes.”

I am sure that the Secretary of State recognises that some of the issues in relation to reconciliation are compounded by corruption within the existing infrastructure of the Iraqi Government, notably corruption in Mosul through the limitation of the impact of international aid because of the mayor of Mosul. I was at a meeting yesterday with my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) on Scottish medical professionals trying to get into Mosul as well.

Does the Secretary of State recognise that there is the issue of women and children, specifically those women whose husbands divorce them by telephone and children where husbands abdicated responsibility for them after they joined Daesh? Their ex-wives and children are now being treated as not only second-class citizens but lower than cattle.

Finally, does the Secretary of State recognise the dire need for truth and reconciliation not only in Iraq, but to enable breathing space between the Government of Iraq and the Government of Kurdistan specifically in relation to some of the border issues, which are allowing a possible Daesh resurgence?

Rory Stewart: That portrait of a courtroom is of course profoundly shocking, and the hon. Gentleman is right to say that if court proceedings are conducted in that way—in other words, if people feel that their constitutional rights are not being upheld and that their evidence is being extracted by torture to gain a prosecution—that simply provides a really strong reason for there to be more insurgency, as well as that being a flagrant abuse and a flagrantly unjust act. The challenge for us is to think what Britain and other countries can actually do about it. The reality is that we have tended to approach rule of law programmes through focusing on training, so traditionally a judge like that would have been put through a training course; they might even have been flown to the University of Kansas for a couple of weeks to go on a seminar and there would have been a lot of investment in legal books and court procedure. The problem however in that specific case is unlikely to have been simply to do with capacity building; it is much more likely to be about the political context. The key thing is to try to communicate to a sovereign Government in the most respectful way we can through the Ministry of Justice that in the end this kind of approach is, as indeed many Iraqis would acknowledge, self-defeating. Working out how we as Britain or France or Germany or the United States or anyone else can actually get involved right down to the level of that courtroom and a decision made by a judge on the bench remains very tough there, or indeed in 100 other countries in the world.

The question of divorce and the treatment of women is again a subset of a much bigger issue: the ways in which this type of injustice and abuse will continue to fuel resentment going forward into the future, and I look forward perhaps to sitting down with the hon. Gentleman to discuss the issues of the borders on another occasion.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is always a pleasure to hear my right hon. Friend talking about this subject; although it is a grim subject, the depth of his knowledge is always enlightening, and I would hope that at some stage we might have a debate rather than just an update statement so that we can engage with him more fully. May I therefore raise a couple of points?

First, does my right hon. Friend accept that ultimately the reason Daesh was defeated was that, by seizing and holding territory, it gave up the terrorists’ best weapon: the cloak of invisibility? Secondly, the only thing I found missing from his statement was any reference to that part of Syria that was not fought upon and occupied by the Syrian Democratic Forces. Can he explain what percentage of the country is occupied by forces other than the Syrian Democratic Forces? What is not a large percentage of the country occupied by forces other than the Syrian Democratic Forces? Is not a large percentage of the country occupied by forces of Assad? Does he now accept what the Government have denied all along: that if we wanted the insurgency in Syria to be defeated, the logical consequence—unacceptable though it seems—was going to be that Assad was at least in part going to win, given the support of his Russian backers?

Rory Stewart: These are two important challenges from the distinguished Chairman of the Defence Committee. I shall take the second one, then move on to
the first. It is of course true that the vast majority of Syria is now in the hands of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Looking back in time, we can see that the optimism of the United States and the United Kingdom that Bashar al-Assad would inevitably be defeated, and the red lines that were created by President Obama and others, have not been vindicated in any way at all. In fact, with Russian backing, the Syrian regime has not only regained the land right the way up to the Euphrates—the edge of the area we are talking about with the SDF—but has pushed south to the Jordanian border and is now pushing up to Idlib, having taken Aleppo and the rural areas around Damascus. The Chairman of the Defence Committee is absolutely correct in his assessment of that. That does not answer the bigger question, which is what Governments such as those of the United Kingdom or the United States will choose to do with the Syrian regime in the future. This returns us to the kinds of challenges that we faced in dealing with, for example, the Shi'a community in southern Iraq under the brutality of Saddam Hussein. How on earth do we balance our humanitarian obligations towards people in horrifying conditions with our sense that we do not wish to operate in the territory of a man who, whatever the sequence of his military successes, remains an unbelievably brutal murderer who is clearly associated with the execution of unarmed prisoners and countless persons through the deployment of chemical weapons? That will remain the key issue for the House to consider over the next months and, indeed, years.

On the first issue, the Chairman of the Defence Committee is also absolutely right. One of the most bizarre, peculiar and ultimately self-defeating parts of Daesh's campaign was its decision to try to hold territory and, in particular, to try to take on conventional forces. The entire idea of an insurgency or a terrorist organisation is supposed to be that it should drift around like mist or, to take Chairman Mao's analogy, that it should work and feed off the consent of the local population. Daesh did neither of those things. It attempted to hold territory and, in Kobane, to take on 600 US airstrike. It attempted to alienate the entire population that it was trying to depend on, through its brutal videos and its incredibly horrifying Islamic social codes. What is extraordinary is not that Daesh was ultimately defeated but that it remained so successful for so long and was able to hold this territory for such an extended period of time.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On Monday, I met the Iraqi ambassador, and it is clear that the Iraqi authorities are keen for the UK Government, EU countries, the US and Russia to take responsibility for Daesh fighters and their families who might—or might not—have been involved in terrorist activity. Will the UK Government take responsibility for those fighters?

Rory Stewart: The position of the UK Government remains that it is more appropriate to prosecute the vast majority of those people in the countries in which their crimes were committed. If those individuals were Daesh fighters, and if they were slaughtering Iraqi and Syrian civilians and committing crimes within that territory, it is perfectly acceptable for them to be prosecuted in that territory, just as it would be for a citizen of any country who committed a crime in somebody else's country.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his thoughtful responses, but I would like to pick up on two brief things. He mentions unexploded munitions and mines in Syria, and I wonder if he could expand on that and tell us how much of that country is still dangerous to live in for the many people who have been forced to flee their homes. Also, possibly a longer piece of work is about rebuilding the peace and about how this House and Governments relate to countries post conflict. What does he think the role of parliamentarians across this House—across both Houses, in fact—should be in supporting parliamentarians and potential parliamentarians in not-quite-yet democracies in the middle east? What role does he think there might be for us in that peace building?

Rory Stewart: First, the mines remain an unbelievably serious issue. They are ensuring that not just a lot of agricultural land but much of the urban centres of Fallujah, Ramadi, Mosul, Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa are almost uninhabitable. This is not just a question of the ordnance buried in those buildings. The old city of Mosul is so profoundly damaged that it is almost impossible to understand what we can do to rebuild these places without ceilings falling in on people's heads. We are talking about many billions of pounds-worth of damage. This brings us to the question of the role that parliamentarians can play, and actually there is one. There is a gloomy analysis of countries such as Iraq, which would have suggested 10 or 12 years ago that there was nothing much we could do, but it is striking that a new generation of leadership is now emerging. The recent visit of the President of Iraq, Barham Salih, shows the emergence of a new, more progressive type of politics in Iraq that wishes to engage with Members of Parliament. That does not mean that we in this House hold the panacea for what is happening in Iraq, in Myanmar or indeed anywhere else, but respectful relationships, partnerships, modelling ways of behaviour and exchanging thoughts with humility about the problems we have, even in this place, dealing with sectarian conflict in Britain or with some of the polarising and divisive effects of our recent referendum here may be useful in dealing with questions on the aftermath of the referendum in Kurdistan.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I do apologise for having overlooked the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood). The problem is that he is sitting in the blind spot, so when the Secretary of State is standing at the Dispatch Box I cannot see the hon. Gentleman or anyone who is sitting in that seat—

[Interruption.] No, this is no criticism of the stature of the Secretary of State. Far from it. I happen to be of considerably diminutive stature, and I cannot see over the hon. Gentleman or anyone who is sitting in that seat—

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I quite understand that it must be my svelte figure that hides me from view.

Following large territorial losses in 2017 and 2018, Daesh declared a global battle of attrition in May this year. What steps is the international coalition taking to ensure that foreign terrorist fighters do not simply move their fighting elsewhere, beyond Syria and Iraq?
Rory Stewart: My hon. Friend has put his finger on the problem. Isis affiliates are now emerging all the way from northern Nigeria to the Philippines, and they are feeding on everything from the lack of legitimacy of the local government; corruption; poor provision of public services; sectarian and tribal conflicts; economic problems, particularly unemployment among young men; fluid borders; and, in cases such as north-east Chad, even catastrophes of climate and the environment. Addressing the root causes that allow this type of insurgent group to flourish involves an enormous development effort, but we are currently about $2.3 trillion a year short of being able to provide the sort of support that could transform the economies all the way from northern Nigeria to the Philippines. What we can do is try to balance our investment with that of other partners in a modest and targeted way. We are now looking much more closely at the work we can do with the French and the United States on the border between Nigeria, Chad, Mali and Niger, but we may have to accept that we cannot control all of the world all of the time, which is why I believe that nimbleness, deep country knowledge, enormous flexibility and enormous energy are going to be required to deal with this over the next 30 to 40 years.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and thank him for his comprehensive update. The defeat of Daesh in Syria is good news, but there have been indications that Daesh is re-establishing in other countries, such as Afghanistan, Nigeria, Algeria and Libya. The recent story in the media about stolen US missiles being in the hands of terrorists in Libya is particularly worrying. As he rightly said, contact and co-operation with other countries is now necessary, but will that be done in Libya, where it is uncertain who is in charge; in northern Nigeria, where Daesh is free to roam; or in Afghanistan, where Daesh is attempting to connect in an area in which it once had influence? It is important to prevent Daesh mark 2 from being established elsewhere.

Rory Stewart: The hon. Gentleman puts his finger on the problem, which is that coming up with a comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy simultaneously in Libya, Afghanistan and Nigeria is beyond us. At the height of the counter-insurgency surge in Afghanistan, there were not only over 100,000 troops on the ground, but over 100,000 international civilians and £100 billion a year of expenditure, largely from the US. Those days have now passed, so we are having to respond to such conflicts with a much lighter footprint.

The reality is that the areas where Islamic State has established itself in those three countries are almost entirely outside Government control. They are areas that are inaccessible not only to us, but to soldiers or police from the central capitals. Security must come first, but that security needs to be based on some kind of trust in the regime in the centre. That will be the real problem going forward.

In some ways, ironically, it may turn out to be an exception that Daesh tried to hold territory in Syria and Iraq, because it made them an easier target. Ultimately, their flaw was that they tried to hold Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Mosul and, in the end, huge courage from Kurdish-led Syrian forces and from the Iraqi army allowed them to retake those areas. However, when Daesh act as an insurgent guerrilla group in remote areas of Afghanistan, Nigeria or Libya, that poses huge demands on Governments that are not actually able to provide intelligence, governance or public services in those areas. A different strategy is necessary, because we are not going to be able to prevent such things from emerging, and we will have to respond quickly with partner Governments when they do.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and my trips to north-eastern Syria on the behalf of the Kurdish authorities. I want to ask about the designation of north-eastern Syria and Rojava as a zone under the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019. I am informed that the Home Office wants to make it illegal for British citizens to enter the zone but, as someone who visited post-war Afghanistan, the Secretary of State will know the importance of allowing British people to visit such areas to help them rebuild. These people were our allies and helped us, as he described it, to defeat ISIS, and it would be totally self-defeating to make it illegal for British citizens to co-operate with them in the future. Will the Secretary of State hold urgent discussions with the Home Office to ensure that Rojava, north-eastern Syria or Kurdish-controlled Syria—whatever one wants to call it—is not in that designated list?

Rory Stewart: The reason why the Home Office has been considering introducing this legislation is that we are looking at ways to try to prevent people from going out to such areas for terrorist activities. It is not primarily intended to prevent humanitarian assistance from going out. One of the legal issues that the Home Office has faced is that, despite having clearly advised that British citizens should not be travelling to such areas in order to prevent them from joining Daesh, we did not have the legal framework in place to make that happen. The proposals that the Home Office has been considering have been designed to target foreign fighters and to exclude people who are going there for humanitarian reasons.

However, I have listened carefully to the concerns, which have also been expressed by a number of international aid agencies, NGOs and others, about the possibility that people going there for good reasons could be caught up with people going there for bad reasons. I am sure the Home Office will have heard the hon. Gentleman’s representations. Indeed, we at DFID have raised similar concerns ourselves.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State’s analysis of the situation was thorough and highlighted the fluid and unstable situation that continues to persist in the region. However, I cannot help but note the cognitive dissonance that seems to exist between his Department and the Home Office, particularly in relation to asylum applications. Some 250 of my constituents are liable to be evicted from their homes, many of whom are Syrians from the region. Will the Secretary of State undertake to write to his counterpart in the Home Office to emphasise the continuing and ongoing danger that the region presents and to stress that sufficient credence should be given to asylum applications, so that asylum seekers are not placed in situations where their lives are threatened?
Rory Stewart: The Home Office is trying to do a very difficult job, and it often does it very well. It is the responsibility of the Home Office to try to have a fair and transparent process for asylum seekers. When processing asylum seekers—even asylum seekers from difficult countries such as Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan—it is extremely important that we verify their stories and ensure that they have legitimate cause to seek asylum. I am sure that the Home Office has heard the hon. Gentleman’s point carefully and will be looking carefully at such cases. However, in my experience, the Home Office takes enormous care and thought, by using people who have deep knowledge of those areas and people who speak the local languages, to ensure that the support that the British Government provide for asylum seekers is genuinely targeted towards the people in most need.

Points of Order

2.46 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During last week’s Prime Minister’s questions, in referencing the conflict in Yemen, the Leader of the Opposition stated: “UK weapons have been used in indiscriminate attacks on civilians in which over 200,000 people have been killed”.—[Official Report, 26 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 653.] Whatever the rights and wrongs of the Saudi coalition and the action that it has taken in Yemen, the latest UN figure for casualties killed by military action is in the order of 10,000. There is academic research saying that the figure may be five times as high as that, but that relates to the numbers killed in the whole conflict by both sides. To say that the United Kingdom has been involved in killing 200,000 people is an absolute and total inaccuracy and not a proper reflection of the complexity of the conflict.

The Leader of the Opposition’s office has been approached by journalists about correcting the record, but they were told that he has no intention of doing so. They then came to me and asked me to try to raise the issue. I have notified the Leader of the Opposition’s office and, by coincidence, the Leader of the Opposition himself in a meeting literally just before coming into the Chamber. Would you say, Madam Deputy Speaker, that an inaccuracy of that scale involving the United Kingdom was something that would merit correcting on the record?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I suggest that Members read “Eats, Shoots & Leaves” about the importance of the comma? The problem with the spoken word is that the comma is not always reflected in the written word. I would suggest that, in this situation, the Leader of the Opposition was referring to the deaths in the overall conflict, which some academics have put at almost 200,000. We should understand that in the wider context of a war in which hundreds of thousands of people have either been killed or are starving.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his elucidation, and I do not make light of this very serious matter. We are talking about the loss of a great many lives, and I am sure it will be appreciated that this is an extremely serious matter that has now been fully aired on the Floor of the House.
I thank the hon. Gentleman for his advice on that excellent book, “Eats, Shoots & Leaves.” I do not know how it will come out in Hansard, but there is a significant difference, as he says, between “eats shoots and leaves” and “eats, shoots and leaves.” He makes a very good point, which I am sure the whole House will take on board.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 10 May, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to raise my grave concerns about her Department’s investigation and recording of claimant deaths and how those deaths might be associated with the DWP.

I raised concerns that, under the Secretary of State’s predecessors, coroners’ letters and peer reviews were not sent to Dr Paul Litchfield, the independent expert who reviewed the work capability assessment in 2013. I also asked for information on deaths after claimants were found fit for work following a work capability assessment, and on deaths since 2015 after a personal independence payment award was reduced or refused.

I received a reply from the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work today, nearly two months later. He said “the Department does not hold any information” on the 2010 to 2014 peer review due to “the length of time since the reviews were carried out, factors such as document retention policies, organisational changes and staff turnover”.

We are talking about the circumstances of people’s deaths some five years ago. To tell me that these documents cannot be found smacks, at least, of incompetence and, at worst, of a cover-up.

I seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how to ensure that the Government make sure that the Department for Work and Pensions, first, keeps proper records and reports back to the House on the outcome of an investigation into these missing documents and, secondly, heeds my call for an independent inquiry into deaths and PIP, which I am sure will be conveyed to the appropriate Minister, sure that the Floor of the House is properly used to raise any such serious matter to the attention of the appropriate Minister.

I am sure the hon. Lady, having taken the opportunity to raise this matter on the Floor of the House—Forgive me, but my voice is not working very well today, and I would be really grateful if the Government Whips would not speak in a loud voice while I am trying to address the House. I appreciate that it is very unusual for the occupant of the Chair not to be properly heard, but perhaps just a little bit of courtesy would be appropriate.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) raises a very important point, and I am sure it will be conveyed to the appropriate Minister, and that the Minister will take appropriate action.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. Once again, she is well aware that I cannot give her an answer on the substantive point she raises, as it is not a matter of responsibility for the Chair, but it is the responsibility of the Chair to make sure that the Floor of the House is properly used to draw any such serious matter to the attention of the appropriate Minister.

Given the urgency of this case, Madam Deputy Speaker, can you advise on what other avenues are open to me to do all I can to have this appalling decision reversed and to prevent Lizanne from having to leave her husband, her business and her community in nine days’ time?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. I am sure the House will take on board the gravity of the situation. I am sure it will be conveyed to the appropriate Minister, and that the Minister will take appropriate action.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Home Office decision makers use the country policy and information note “Nigeria: Trafficking of women” when handling particular types of sensitive protection and human rights claims. This policy is used to form a base of information on the UK’s analysis of Nigeria. However, under the heading “Assessment” on page 1, I was horrified to read what I can only call offensive, belligerent and totally disrespectful guidance:

“trafficked women who return from Europe, wealthy from prostitution, enjoy high social-economic status and in general are not subject to negative social attitudes on return. They are often held in high regard because they have improved income prospects.”

This guidance has caused offence and dismay.

Madam Deputy Speaker, can you advise me first, on how the policy can be corrected; secondly, on how we can ensure Home Office decision makers use a more respectful policy in handling protection and human rights claims; and, finally, on how the House can receive an apology from the Home Secretary for overseeing a Department policy that has caused so much offence to those trafficked women?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Lady raises a matter that is, in the true sense of the word, shocking, if that is indeed the guidance, but it is not for the Chair to pronounce upon the veracity, or otherwise, of documents published by Government Departments.
[Madam Deputy Speaker]

As I said a few moments ago, it is the responsibility of the Chair to make sure that, when a Member wishes to draw a matter of such importance to the attention of a Minister, they should have the opportunity to do so. I hope the hon. Lady will benefit from having had the opportunity to raise her point of order this afternoon. I have every confidence that the appropriate Minister will pay attention to what she has said. Let us hope that steps will be taken to rectify the situation.

I apologise to the House for my inaudibility.

Plastic Pollution

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

2.58 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD):

I beg to move, that leave be given to bring in a Bill to set targets for the reduction of plastic pollution; to require the Secretary of State to publish a strategy and annual reports on plastic pollution reduction; to establish an advisory committee on plastic pollution; and for connected purposes.

You have 10 minutes to rest your voice, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Plastic pollution has attracted massive amounts of attention and coverage in recent years. For those of us fortunate enough to live in coastal and island communities, it is far from a novel problem. Walk along any of the magnificent, if occasionally breezy, beaches of Orkney and Shetland, and the evidence is there for everyone to see for themselves: plastic washing up along our coastlines, despoiling some of the most spectacular, and the last genuinely wild, environments to be found anywhere in Europe. In the northern isles, every spring, we have an impressive and well-drilled series of litter-picking operations—the “Bag the bruck” campaign and Du Voar Redd Up—but as much as we can pick up off the beaches, we know that when the tide comes in again the pollution will start again. We can pick up only what we can see and what we can see is only the tip of the iceberg—there are bigger concerns about what we cannot see. Plastic breaks down to become microplastics, and once they are in the ocean they are next to impossible to remove.

Much of the credit for the rise in interest in this issue can be given to the excellent work of the BBC’s “The Blue Planet” series and Sir David Attenborough. They have raised awareness and forced us to confront the impact of our throw-away culture. In particular, they told us how these microplastics have an impact on our food chain and they have challenged us to do better at protecting our valued marine life. May I also pay tribute to Friends of the Earth and the Women’s Institute, which have been staunch in their continued support for this campaign and given me invaluable support in the drafting of this Bill? Other organisations I have been privileged to work with include Surfers Against Sewage and City to Sea, among many others. But this now goes beyond the campaign groups; in our coastal and island communities, the challenge of plastic pollution is being taken up in every walk of life. From microplastics infecting the food chain to marine life swallowing plastic bags, mistaking them for jellyfish, our throw-away culture has now become an existential threat to many of our indigenous industries, especially our fishing industry.

Therefore, it is perhaps no surprise that some of the leading voices calling for a reduction in plastic pollution in my constituency come from among the Shetland fishing industry. For years, these people have supported campaigns such as “Fishing for Litter”, and just this week the Shetland Fishermen’s Association has been highlighting the environmental damage caused by the practices of gillnetting and longlining. I would like to think that all right hon. and hon. Members are sufficiently acquainted with the different means of fishing that I
would not need to explain what gillnetting is, but 18 years in this House makes me suspect that that may not be the case. So if the House will indulge me, I will just give a little explanation of what I am speaking about.

Gillnetting is a type of fine mesh twine, which works by being placed in the water and left there for prolonged periods. The fish swim into the holes in the mesh, which then tighten around them, trapping them. Gillnetting is brutally effective, but it results in vast nets being placed in the water and left there for a long time. These nets are sometimes several miles long and will be laid end to end. The practice is predominantly to be found among Spanish-owned and licensed vessels fishing within our waters, and it is pushing out many of the local boats, excluding them sometimes from several hundred miles of our territorial waters and doing so in a way that is drawing increasing attention. The aggression that is shown towards local fishermen by the Spanish boats that lay these gillnets is increasingly a problem and it will require to be addressed. More often than not it is the local Shetland boats, which then trawl the waters, that pick up the gillnets and longlines left behind by the Spanish crawlers and that are left having to bring them into port for safe disposal.

We are all acquainted with the phenomenon of finding one Department acting in a way that is contrary to the actions of another, but I must point out that the Department responsible for the fight against plastic pollution is the same Department responsible for fisheries management. It is remarkable that this situation has been allowed to continue in the way that it has and to come to a head in the way it now threatens to do. I am delighted to see the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), in her place this afternoon, but I hope she will take the message back to her Department that, from the point of view of sustainability as well as plastic pollution, this now requires urgent attention. We must have cross-Government, joined-up thinking to ensure that from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs regulating fishing practices, through to the Department for Education procuring sanitary products for school, some of which, regrettably, involve single-use plastic, the Government are testing every proposal and policy to ensure that it is plastic pollution-proof. On cross-Government work, colleagues across the House will, no doubt, be aware that about 90% of the world’s plastic pollution comes from 10 rivers in Africa and Asia. So while we in the UK must ensure that we do our fair share to end plastic pollution, the Department for International Development should be giving that leadership around the world, working with our partners and friends to cut plastic waste around the globe.

Before we can lead, however, we must get our own house in order. In the northern isles, as is often the case, we look to our nearest neighbours in Norway to see how that can be done. Norway has one of the best stories to tell on this. It was always fairly low in the amount of plastic waste it disposed of, but it has now reached a recycling rate on plastic bottles of about 97%, with 92% going on to be plastic bottles once more and 1% ending up as waste. Norway’s example shows what we can achieve, and it sets an example to the rest of the world. We, too, must have the ambition to eliminate plastic waste for good, which is why this Bill and the campaigns that inform it are so important.

The Government have already outlined policies for reducing plastic pollution and I welcome the high-level consideration that there has been on this issue. We can disagree and debate whether those policies are enough. I have concerns that the Government are not doing enough and not doing it fast enough, but it is good that the debate is about how much we should do, rather than whether we should begin to do it. So I do give some credit to the Environment Secretary for his engagement and recognition of this as an issue.

Behaviour changes are going to be key in winning the war against plastic pollution. Interestingly, the Conservative leadership candidates are today debating the efficacy of “sin taxes”, but this is an area where I hope the sin tax will not come under any challenge, because it is clear from what we have seen, for example, with the tax on plastic bags, that such a sin tax is effective and urgent, and we need to see more of this. Plastic is merely one part of our unhealthy approach to litter and waste, and we must build a more circular economy, where everything, or as close to everything as possible, is recycled or reused. This is a process and it is never going to be an event, and never has that been more clear than in this case.

I am realistic about the prospects of success for my Bill, which starts as a ten-minute rule motion today, but it deals with an issue that is not going to go away. That is why there is enthusiasm beyond the walls of this House today for meaningful change. The Government have to listen to people across the length and breadth of this country to deliver meaningful change in order to protect our natural environment for generations to come. This Bill would be a start to that process. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Mr Alistair Carmichael, Tim Farron, Ben Lake, Scott Mann, Kerry McCarthy and Alex Sobel present the Bill.

Mr Alistair Carmichael accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the first time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 415).

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (MAIN ESTIMATES) (NO. 3) BILL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 56), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Question put forthwith, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In the time it took the Financial Secretary to the Treasury to pour himself a glass of water, the House authorised the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) (No. 3) Bill, which, among other things, includes

“authorisation for the use of resources for the year ending with 31 March 2020”
to be
“increased by £348,553,768,000.”
It goes on to authorise all the rest of the expenditure of similarly great magnitudes that the Government expect to use over the next couple of years, without any possibility of debate or amendment, which is not what Members from the Scottish National party were led to believe when the English votes for English laws process was introduced. We were told then that the estimates process would be how we would scrutinise the Barnett consequentials of estimates.

The Bill represents the supply element of the confidence and supply arrangement that one of the other parties in the House has with the Government—it is good to see that at least a couple of them are here, which is more than there were the last time the supply estimates went through the House. Will you advise me, Madam Deputy Speaker, as to whether any other mechanisms are available to groups of Members to secure £1.5 billion of funding for their constituencies without any of them really having to show up very often?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and understand the point that he has made. I will separate his party political points, which of course are not a matter for the Chair, from his procedural points, which are partially a matter for the Chair.

I advise the hon. Gentleman that although he and his colleagues might not have had the opportunity to examine every line of proposed expenditure, we had two days of debate—yesterday and the day before—on some aspects of the matters in the Bill that the House has just passed. The hon. Gentleman makes his point well, and I fully understand his criticism of the procedure. It is not for me to agree or disagree with him, but I am quite sure that the Procedure Committee and others will take seriously the points that he has made.

3.12 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): I beg to move,

That the draft Capital Allowances (Structures and Buildings Allowances) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 17 June, be approved.

The instrument before the House gives effect to the amendments to several tax Acts, principal among them the Capital Allowances Act 2001. The Government are determined to ensure that the UK tax system supports business investment and jobs. At 19%, the UK has already reduced its corporation tax rate to the lowest in the G20, and it is scheduled to fall still further to 17% in 2020. The Government recognise the importance of providing tax reliefs for genuine business costs, which is why we are taking steps to increase the overall competitiveness of the capital allowances regime.

At the autumn Budget, we announced an increase in the annual investment allowance for plant and machinery to £1 million per annum for two years, meaning that businesses will be able to deduct five times more qualifying plant and machinery expenditure in the year in which they make the investment. However, the UK is currently the only G7 economy that offers no capital allowances on investments in structures and buildings. That means there are no allowances on critical investments in bridges, roads or tunnels. It also means no allowances on investments in shops, offices or factories.

In the 2018 Budget, the Government set out to rectify the gap in the capital allowances regime by providing relief to businesses on qualifying expenditure on new non-residential structures and buildings. The Finance Act 2019 gave power to that effect, and I am now pleased to introduce the draft statutory instrument necessary to enact the change. It was important to follow the legislative process to provide taxpayers with certainty that the allowance will come into force as soon as possible, to minimise the risk of deferred investment and to allow the Government to consult extensively on this important measure, as we have done.

At the Budget, the Government published a detailed technical note for consultation that outlined the key features of the new allowance. Businesses that invest in new builds or renovations on or after 29 October 2018 will be able to claim tax relief at 2% a year on eligible costs, over a 50-year period. Following the first round of consultation, officials met scores of different companies, representative bodies and individuals from throughout the country. At the spring statement 2019, the Government published detailed draft legislation and invited further comments from stakeholders.

I am pleased to report that the vast majority of stakeholders welcomed the structures and buildings allowance. I extend my thanks to the many individuals and organisations that participated in both rounds of consultation, either in person or through written representations. Stakeholder responses have been a considerable help in the shaping of the new allowance, leading to amendments, including those relating to short-term leaseholds, eligible pre-trading costs and periods of disuse.

As I have said, the structures and buildings allowance has been designed to enable businesses to claim tax relief on the costs of new non-residential structures and buildings.
This means that qualifying expenditure on new builds or renovations for which all the contracts for the physical construction works were entered into on or after 29 October 2018 will be eligible for relief. Relief will be available for any business that fulfils two conditions: first, that it owns a qualifying asset, either through direct building or by acquiring one from a developer; and secondly, that it uses the building for a qualifying activity for which the business is chargeable for UK tax.

Qualifying persons will be able to claim tax relief at 2% a year on eligible construction costs, including renovations. The allowance will apply across all sectors and sizes of UK trade, benefiting business owners, workers and the wider economy. The relief will be limited to the costs of the physical construction of the structure or building, and will not apply to the costs of acquiring the underlying land, rights over land, or planning permissions.

In summary, the regulations will enact important improvements to our capital allowances regime, in line with the power this House approved in the Finance Act 2019. Since 29 October 2018, business investments in new, and renovations of old, structures and buildings have been accompanied by an expectation of this allowance of 2% relief per annum against income or corporation tax bills. It is now important for the House to honour the commitment made in the Finance Act 2019 by enacting the regulations, thereby bringing them into force in line with their commencement provisions. I therefore commend the regulations to the House.

3.18 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): The Minister said that he got support from businesses for tax relief. Well, that is not a surprise: when people are offered tax reliefs, they will accept them because it is cash in their pocket.

In a document published on 5 March last year, the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that our current tax system “does not consistently deduct the cost of investment meaning that some investments are discouraged, some are incentivised and some are unaffected by the tax system.”

It went on to say that there should be “a clear policy justification”, which should be focused, and that we should ensure “that the benefits outweigh the costs.”

The document also said:

“Too many reliefs have weak or poorly articulated policy aims”.

and that

“digging into the details and evaluating how each relief stacks up against a clearly stated tax design”

is important. It continued:

“The bar for introducing any new relief should be high.”

On the very same night, the Chartered Institute of Taxation and the Institute for Fiscal Studies had a debate about business tax reliefs, which asked whether they were “corporate welfare or essential elements of the tax system”. The question is, do we think they are an essential element of the tax system? In the debate on the Finance Bill, we raised these matters, but we were not able in any way to amend the law, which is regrettable. However, we did raise, in a sense, the whole question of tax reliefs, and it is a desperate shame to find ourselves here again debating the introduction of what amounts to another corporate tax relief, when so little has been done to sort out the scope of the scores of tax reliefs already in operation.

At the last count, the Government were responsible for managing 115 principal tax reliefs totalling £430 billion, as well as 80 minor tax reliefs totalling an estimated £690 million. However, alongside these, there are up to 235 reliefs in operation for which we have no cost data at all. I repeat: we are forgoing revenue on 235 tax reliefs, but Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs does not count the cost. I find that quite remarkable. I cannot think of a single other policy area where the Treasury would be uninterested in Government expenditure.

Ministers tell us that the cost of these reliefs is negligible so there is no point making efforts to manage them more effectively. I do not believe that that holds water, especially when we consider that the Government regularly deprive citizens of small but essential sums of social security for the crime of being perhaps five minutes late to the jobcentre. Perhaps the Minister can explain why the Government can give away millions to large companies without counting the cost, while stripping the poorest in our society of the pounds and pence they need to survive. I ask that especially in light of an interesting article by the Minister in The Sunday Times some weeks ago about our being one nation. It would be interesting to hear him comment on that. I agree with him that we have to bring the nation back together again, and that is an important part of this issue. I would also like to know what efforts the Government have made to improve the management of tax reliefs at HMRC. Will the Minister now commit to a moratorium on introducing further tax reliefs, unless the annual cost data on them can be collected and published by HMRC?

Turning to the measure before the House, it will not surprise anyone here that the pile of opaque and unaccountable tax reliefs is being added to, with yet another tax relief for businesses that does not necessarily fit the robust criteria set by the Institute for Fiscal Studies—criteria that this House should set in relation to the introduction of tax reliefs.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The hon. Gentleman was talking about the cost of tax reliefs. Has he worked out the cost to UK business and investment of imposing a policy that would requisition 10% of businesses that have more than 250 employees? I understand that that is Labour party policy.

Peter Dowd: I do not think it is a question of requisitioning; it is about a different approach and taking a different look at engaging workers in our economy. That is it—it is as simple as that. I appreciate and completely accept that the hon. Gentleman does not accept the concept, but that does not mean that the concept is wrong.

The Government boast about their corporation tax giveaways, but it is clear that even those billions, stripped from our public services, are not enough to satisfy their intentions in relation to corporate welfare. Furthermore, it seems that, in their rush to hand out giveaways, they have given no consideration to how this measure will fit into the already complex and convoluted system of capital allowances. It is not necessarily a question of saying whether I agree or disagree with these things; it is a question of saying we have a convoluted system—and it is incredibly complex. We do not have any review.
mechanisms of these reliefs, and we do not have any sunset clauses on them—in fact, we have debated that in Committee in the past, but the Government seem to have no response.

This new measure on structures and buildings allowances will, as the Minister said, provide relief for qualifying expenditure on new non-residential structures and buildings incurred on or after 29 October 2018 on a 2% per annum, straight-line basis. At the Finance Bill earlier this year, the Government blocked our attempts to require Ministers to publish details of the likely take-up of this new allowance across different-sized businesses.

Despite those concerns, the secondary legislation before us remains vague, with important definitions that would assist in addressing areas of ambiguity delayed and deferred to guidance. We have had lots of this deferral to guidance, secondary legislation and other things—potentially even tertiary legislation in due course. It really is not good enough. We need transparency and openness; we do not need to be told, “This is going to happen, but the detail may come a little later on.” Similarly, the decision by Ministers to delay finalising the details of this new allowance until June, when the final stages of the Finance Bill took place in January, is yet further evidence of the continued environment of uncertainty that business is forced to operate in under this Government.

The Chartered Institute of Taxation rightly criticised the Government over these new regulations, stating at the time of the 2018 Budget that “it is neither sensible nor responsible for the government to introduce reliefs into the tax system at a time before they have consulted upon the scope and application of the relief or fully considered, and are therefore able to legislate for, the details of the relief.”

It concluded that these regulations will only complicate matters, particularly given that plant and machinery are excluded. That means that taxpayers are still required to identify the plant and machinery in buildings, with the same grey area that currently exists between buildings, fixtures, plant and machinery. The administration of this new allowance will be substantial and burdensome for businesses, flying in the face of the Government’s initial promise to simplify the tax system.

The demotion of much of the detail of this allowance to secondary legislation remains of great concern to the Opposition, particularly given that capital allowances are yet another means of extending tax breaks to large businesses, many of which do not necessarily need the relief. The reality is that many small and medium-sized businesses that desperately need support from the Government will struggle to access this relief without incurring substantial costs as a result of hiring tax experts to guide them through its complexities.

Rather than continuing this piecemeal approach, which seems only to confuse and deter businesses in need, Labour remains committed to carrying out a review of tax reliefs once in government to evaluate individual reliefs against their effectiveness and value for money. It seems that, again, this opaque Government will not commit either to a proper review of the measure before us or to a wider review of the full plethora of their corporate relief giveaways.

This is no way to run the country. Once again, the devil will be in the detail of the guidance that HMRC publishes, particularly when it comes to what constitutes qualifying expenditure, the definitions of terms such as “dwellings” and “mixed-use building”, and clarification of the treatment of successive leases and the new flexible rules in instances where expenditure is incurred after a building comes into use.

Although the Opposition remain sceptical about the introduction of yet another poorly-considered allowance on top of the 1,200 allowances that already exist—many of which have existed for decades without review—we will not be voting against the secondary legislation today. Instead, we will wait to scrutinise the guidance when HMRC publishes it later this year. [Interruption.]

I can hear Ministers sniggering. A responsible Opposition will vote against something when they disagree with it and will support something when they agree with it. When we want to consider the detail, implications and other information that comes from the Government, we will hold back. That is what a responsible Opposition should do—not automatically vote against or support things willy-nilly—and that is what we are trying to do, because we are being responsible. Ministers can snigger at that responsible approach if they want to, but we will continue to be responsible, and we will continue to oppose this Government as and when we feel it is necessary to do so.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Let me begin by thanking the Association of Taxation Technicians and the Chartered Institute of Taxation, which have provided me with some information so that I can help to scrutinise this incredibly technical piece of legislation.

I would first like to raise a couple of issues. The tax information and impact note on these regulations explicitly says that there is “no impact on civil society”. This is directly contradicted in the explanatory memorandum, paragraph 12.1 of which says that charitable organisations will be required to keep more documentation and to gather together that documentation, which they currently do not have to do. I would suggest that there is a direct impact on civil society, so the tax impact and information note should be updated to reflect that.

I have the same concerns as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), on the decision to implement the relief in this way. In June 2018, the Office of Tax Simplification published a report called, “Accounting depreciation or capital allowances? Simplifying tax relief for tangible fixed assets”. It is hugely riveting, I promise. The report said that the tax system should look to reduce, or at least not increase, the different types of expenditure in classes of assets that have to be identified solely for tax purposes. Unfortunately, the way in which the Government have chosen to do this increases the number of classes of assets that have to be identified purely for tax purposes. As this directly contradicts an OTS recommendation, it would be useful if the Minister explained why the Government have chosen to do it this way, and not to change the current system of capital allowances to include this measure, perhaps along with plant and machinery, as this is already a very difficult distinction for people to make. With the lack of
published guidance, I fear that the distinction between plant and machinery, and fixed assets, meaning the building itself, will remain difficult to assess. I have concerns about that.

The other issue is about the timing of this legislation. It was announced as something that would happen immediately as part of the Budget on 29 October 2018. However, we are now considering these regulations in July, without the publication of the guidance. We do not have the guidance to be able to work out whether the measure to which the measures are being implemented makes sense. And this is not just about parliamentarians’ scrutiny. Businesses and organisations that have operated under this new system since 29 October have had to keep all the relevant documentation since then without knowing what the relevant documentation is and without knowing the exact classes of assets they can claim against under this tax relief.

Given the huge amount of uncertainty businesses are already experiencing because of Brexit, it is incredibly concerning that they must deal with this additional uncertainty. I get what the Government are trying to do; they are trying to make it a more attractive proposition to create and renovate properties. I understand that logic, but they have actually implemented this measure in a cack-handed way that has increased uncertainty this year, and certainly until we get the guidance and see how things are beginning to work.

Concerns have been raised with me about the fact that the Government have chosen not to include prisons and student housing, for example, in this legislation because they fall under a residential remit, rather than under the remit of a commercial property. I understand why they have chosen to do this, but it seems to be a missed opportunity. We cannot class prisons and student accommodation in the same kind of residential category as we would class a dwelling-house, and there may have been an opportunity—particularly given the pressing need for changes in the prison system—to include some flexibility. I am not saying that this is what the Government definitely should have done, but I do not think they considered it enough; nor did they put forward an argument why they did not do it in the documentation that they have published.

The Treasury has said that this will cost £585 million in 2023-24—that that will be the Exchequer impact. Neither the tax information and impact notes, nor any of the other documentation that I can find—perhaps it was more explicitly mentioned in the Budget and I did not catch it—says what is the expected economic impact in terms of an increase in GDP as a result of these changes, which would presumably result in a commensurate increase in the tax that the Exchequer receives. It would be useful to know whether the Government think that this tax relief is value for money and whether it will generate more tax revenue for the economy than it will cost.

The Government have told us that it will cost £17.7 million for new HMRC systems to be put in to administer this tax, but they have not been clear about the economic benefit that they see coming out of it. That is partly, I think, because of what HMRC said in the tax information document:

“Since Budget 2018, HMRC has attempted to gather further information on the number of those” businesses “likely to claim the SBA.”

However, it has not been able to do so. I do not understand how the Government can tell us that this tax relief will have a positive economic benefit if they cannot even tell us which types and numbers of businesses are likely to claim it. It would be useful to know whether the Government have any firmer details on that since the note was published and any information on whether they think that there will be an economic benefit.

My next point, which I am sure the Minister will get very used to me raising during our future deliberations on SIs and in finance debates, is on when the Government intend to review this tax relief. This is a massive tax relief in terms of the fiscal impact that it will have. The Government are saying, I assume, that it will have a positive benefit in terms of its economic impact. I would like to know when they will review it to see whether it is working as intended, because there is no point in having something that will not work as intended. I am sure the Minister will say that there will be a review in three to five years’ time that will be sent to the Treasury Committee and that I just have to look at the Government’s website at some unspecified point during that period. However, can he provide a bit more detail on the exact timescales for a review of this tax relief, given that it is so significant in nature, so that we parliamentarians can scrutinise whether the Government have actually achieved what they set out to do?

My last point is about the guidance, which I have already mentioned. When the guidance is published, will the Minister be sure to ask somebody in his team to ensure that Labour Front Benchers and I have access to it and are made aware of where it is, because it may be published in some place on the HMRC website that we, as people who do not run businesses that claim capital allowances, will not regularly check? It would be incredibly useful if he committed to fulfilling that small ask as well as answering many of my questions.

3.58 pm

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to both Opposition Front Benchers for their comments, which were quite wide-ranging. I will try, if I may, to keep my responses reasonably short.

The hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) began with a very wide-ranging critique of reliefs as such. He then cited the Institute for Fiscal Studies on the reliefs in general that have built up in the tax system over the past several decades. However, in trying to criticise the Government on the grounds that the system is not consistently applied across different reliefs, he does not reflect on the fact that this measure is designed to correct an anomaly. We have an anomaly in our system in that we do not offer reliefs on structures and buildings. We are therefore removing a disincentive to investment and levelling the playing field in a way that has a clear policy justification.

The hon. Gentleman said that there is an absence of transparency, but there were 18 weeks of consultation in two phases on both the principle and detail, so it is hardly clear that that is true. He also implied that a Labour Government would remove tax reliefs. If that is true, I would welcome him indicating to the House which reliefs a Labour Government would propose to remove or abolish.
Peter Dowd: The Minister ought not to put words in my mouth. I exhorted him to read what I said. Unlike the leadership candidates, who are spending money left, right and centre, the Opposition are responsible. The point I was trying to make is that it is important to review reliefs. There are 1,200 of them. Many other countries review reliefs—there is nothing particularly radical about that, and I exhorted the Government to do so.

Jesse Norman: It is hard to make sweeping criticism of the idea of reliefs and then not indicate any that a Labour Government would propose to abolish. It raises the question whether the Labour party is serious about this. The hon. Gentleman described these reliefs as “corporate welfare” and giving away millions of pounds to large companies. All companies benefit that have qualifying investments and are subject to UK taxation in the way indicated; it is not just larger companies. Many of the reliefs he describes are negligible and therefore should not necessarily be the target of extensive review. He talks about the reduction in corporation tax as though it is a bad idea but neglects the fact that significantly more corporation tax has been raised following these reductions.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Minister for being willing to give way. I am sure he is aware of the evidence repeated over and again by the bodies that have looked into this that the reason for increased corporation tax take was not the reduced rate of corporation tax—rather, it related to the return to profitability of banks and so forth. It was not related to the reduction in rate, and just about every authoritative study that has looked at this has suggested that.

Jesse Norman: Those companies’ return to profitability was the result of proper, prudent financial management. I remind the hon. Lady that in the specific case of the financial sector, the bank levy has taken billions of pounds a year more from the banks than the Labour tax that it replaced. I do not think her view has credibility.

The hon. Member for Bootle criticised the timetable, but it is designed specifically to keep uncertainty to a minimum. Far from the suggestion that it would create more uncertainty, the point of my saying that qualifying expenditure on new builds or renovations for which all contracts for the physical construction works were entered into on or before 29 October 2019 will be eligible for relief is precisely to give very clear direction to future investment. I do not agree with many of the points that he made.

Kevin Hollinrake: Does the Minister think that the hon. Member for Bootle understands how reliefs work? He said that it was about giving away millions of pounds to corporations. Actually, if a corporation invests on the back of a relief, it still costs that corporation money; it just makes the investment slightly more attractive.

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is right. The point of the relief we are giving through the structures and buildings allowance is precisely to level the playing field and to enable and encourage more business investment.

The hon. Member for Bootle and for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) asked about reviewing or monitoring. As they will be aware, the Treasury and HMRC continuously monitor tax reliefs according to the level of risk they pose, and they publish annual statistics on tax reliefs, including cost estimates where they are available.

I will now turn to the other points made by the hon. Lady. She says charitable organisations will be heavily affected. The statement that the acquirers of structures or buildings are asked to fill out consists of four factual pieces of information: first, what is the asset; secondly, when was it built; thirdly, when did it come into use; and, lastly, how much did it originally cost? That is not a heavy burden on any institution.

Kirsty Blackman: To be fair, I did not say it was a “heavy” burden. The tax information and impact note says that there will be “no impact on civil society”.

That is not true because there will be an effect on civil society. It may be a minor effect, but there will be one, and I was just asking for the tax information and impact note to be updated to reflect that.

Jesse Norman: I perfectly understand, and it is a verbal point. This is subject to a de minimis factor: any Government action will have some minuscule effect on many people, but that does not mean that it is significant enough to register.

The hon. Lady raised a question about process, which I have already addressed. She raised a point about the Office of Tax Simplification. The difficulty with the suggestion it has made is that, if the boundary were removed between buildings that get relief at 2% and plant, fixtures and so on that get relief at 6%, the result would have to be a combined rate of relief somewhere in-between. The effect for many businesses with long-term investments in plant would be that they lost out through reduced relief or delayed relief if the rate went down. There would be a significant number of losers and a negative impact on business investment, when we are trying to have the exact opposite effect.

The hon. Lady raises the issue of student housing. This measure is of course specifically aimed away from residential property and other buildings that function as dwellings and towards commercial properties. For that reason, student housing is not included, but hotels and care homes will qualify because the underlying businesses are service providers whose premises are being used in a trade.

Kirsty Blackman: Much of the student housing in my constituency works almost as serviced apartments. They are apartments with one shared kitchen and a number of flats, and they are much more like a hotel or care home in that they are run as businesses and students are there only for a short period. Are those kinds of serviced dwellings for students included or are they not included?

Jesse Norman: The answer is that they are not. The hon. Lady is welcome to write to me with specific details of the student housing in her constituency. Of course, many students live in housing that universities would regard as equivalent to hotel accommodation of years ago. However, the general rule is that it is not included, but that hotels and care homes—where there is such trade, as I have described—are included. I think that is a tolerably clear line.
The final point the hon. Lady raised was about the impact on GDP. The independent Office for Budget Responsibility has estimated that the capital allowances package announced at the Budget would increase business investment by 0.4%, so that number has been calculated and put into the public domain.

**Peter Dowd:** The Minister is talking about numbers and putting the record straight. He referred earlier to the bank levy and bank surcharging. In 2017-18, they raised £2.6 billion and £1.9 billion, totalling £4.5 billion, and in 2023-24, they will raise £1.1 billion and £2.1 billion, totalling £3.2 billion, so they will raise considerably less than they raise now, not the billions more that the Minister suggests they will raise.

**Jesse Norman:** If I may, I will just correct the record. I said that they have raised billions more—and they have raised billions more—than the pre-existing Labour tax. That is a fact of the financial environment that surrounds banks, just as this is a new fact for the financial environment that surrounds corporations more generally. And on that point, I will sit down.

**Question put and agreed to.**

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**Dangerous Drugs**

3.49 pm

**The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd):** I beg to move,

That the draft Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Amendment) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 4 June, be approved.

I am sure that Members of the House will have noticed that the amendment made by the draft order is based on scientific and technical detail and is therefore distinct from other amendments to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 that have recently been brought forward for debate. In that context, I place on record my thanks to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs for its expert advice on the matter and for its continued work, which has informed the draft order.

The purpose of the draft order is to amend schedule 2 to the Misuse of Drugs Act by reducing the scope of the generic definition of the compounds referred to as the third generation of synthetic cannabinoids. Given the concerns that have been expressed in other debates on this subject, I should clarify that it will not repeal the generic definition of the compounds commonly known as Spice and Mamba, which will remain subject to control. This measure follows the advisory council’s recommendation, which was published on 22 December 2017. I hope that it will be helpful to hon. Members if I explain the background to the recent control on these drugs and why the Government are making this amendment.

**Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con):** I am relieved that the Minister specifically mentions Spice; having worked for a short time in the Ministry of Justice, I have seen exactly the damage that comes from that drug. Will he confirm that this statutory instrument is in effect simply a tidying-up exercise—a technical change—and will not in any way mean a looser regime of drug licence management?

**Mr Hurd:** Like my hon. Friend, I have seen the results of Spice and Mamba directly while out on patrol on the streets of Newcastle. We have had passionate debates in this place about those drugs—particularly with my hon. Friends the Members for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who are passionate about their impact on town centres. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) and other colleagues that the draft order is not in any way a relaxation of controls; it is simply a response to representations made by the scientific community about the need to revisit our regulations because of some consequences that were not intended when they were originally drafted.

**Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP):** It is really good to hear the Government accepting solid evidence when it comes to drugs issues, because they do not have a very good record in that respect. In Scotland, we have had 1,000 drug deaths in the past year. The Select Committee on Scottish Affairs is doing an inquiry into the reasons behind that, and one thing that we have found is that the Misuse of Drugs Act gets in the way of treatment and recovery and is an impediment to dealing with the problem, yet the Home Office will not send a Minister to our inquiry. Will the Minister confirm—today,
now—that a Home Office Minister will turn up, give evidence and defend the Government’s approach to drug use?

Mr Hurd: I am more than happy to speak to the hon. Gentleman offline about this. I am not aware of the underlying issue, but I certainly agree with him about the absolute need to proceed in this complex and extremely sensitive area on the basis of evidence. I am more than happy to have a conversation with him outside the Chamber about the Scottish question and situation, because I am not aware of that problem.

Perhaps it would be helpful if I gave some background to the recent control of these drugs and why the Government are making this amendment. We rely on independent experts, the ACMD, which first published advice in 2014 on the third generation of synthetic cannabinoids—a group of compounds, commonly referred to as Spice and Mamba, that mimic the effects of cannabis. The advice recommended that these compounds be captured by way of a generic definition as class B drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act because of their harms and widespread availability. This followed the control of the first generation of synthetic cannabinoids in 2009 and of the second generation in 2013.

The ACMD also recommended that the compounds be placed in schedule 1 to the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001, because it could not confirm any known medicinal uses at the time. Placing these compounds in schedule 1 reflects the fact that they have little or no known medicinal or therapeutic benefits in the UK, and will mean that they can be legally accessed only with a Home Office licence, which is generally issued for research or industrial purposes.

Following the ACMD’s recommendations, the changes came into effect on 14 December 2016, but shortly after their implementation, the ACMD and the Home Office were informed by representatives of the research community that the breadth of the definition meant that it captured a large number of research compounds, many of which were reported not to be synthetic cannabinoids. As a result of the broad, generic definition, research institutions needed to obtain schedule 1 licences when they may not otherwise have needed them.

The licensing process is in place to ensure a minimised risk of misuse and diversion of, and harm from, controlled drugs. However, as I am sure the House will agree, we would not wish to place substances under control and make them subject to the licensing requirements where there is no need to do so. It is therefore important that we amend the definition, which has created an additional formal regulatory burden for the research industry relating to compounds that were never intended to be controlled. To remedy this, the ACMD made a further recommendation in December 2017 that the scope of the generic definition be reduced.

The order amends the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 to reduce the scope of the generic definition of the third generation of synthetic cannabinoids, so that while those compounds that have been found to cause harm are captured by it, fewer compounds are unintentionally captured. Owing to the continued harms posed by the third generation of synthetic cannabinoids, the order does not repeal the generic definition. I repeat for clarity that such compounds as those that go by the street name of Spice and Mamba will continue to be caught by the generic definition.

The order, if accepted and made, will come into force on 15 November. A further statutory instrument will be introduced via the negative procedure to make the necessary parallel amendments to the generic definition under schedule I of the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001 and in the Misuse of Drugs (Designation) (England, Wales and Scotland) Order 2015, so that those compounds unintentionally captured will no longer require a Home Office licence for the conduct of research, as they will no longer be controlled.

I hope that I have made the case to the House for amending the generic definition of the third generation of synthetic cannabinoids so that it no longer covers a number of compounds that were unintentionally controlled. I commend the order to the Committee.

3.57 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): We will not oppose this statutory instrument. In fact, we welcome the proposed amendment to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Revising the generic definition of synthetic cannabinoids will mean that compounds never intended to be controlled will no longer be controlled, while those most likely to be misused and cause harm will be. That said, we must ensure that neither this change to drug policy nor any other adds to the problems that we already face in controlling the use of drugs.

The Government’s approach to drugs since they took office in 2010 has been ideological and plagued by irresponsible cuts. The UK now has the highest recorded level of mortality from drugs misuse since records began. Under this Government, the UK has become the drug overdose capital of Europe.

There is nothing more important than preserving the life of our citizens, but the current woeful approach to drugs fails to do that, so it must be time to consider different approaches, based on what would most effectively reduce harm, such as overdose prevention units, commonly known as drug consumption rooms—places that take people off the streets, and provide them with a safe environment, clean needles and somewhere that they can engage with treatment to combat their addiction. Labour supports piloting such schemes.

There is also the use of cannabis oil for medical purposes. Last October, there appeared to a breakthrough on this, when the Home Office brought in new legislation to allow expert doctors to issue prescriptions for cannabis-based medicines, if they believe that such treatment could benefit their patient. However, as we have learned from recent high-profile cases, there appears to be some confusion around the Home Office guidelines when it comes to bringing the substance into the UK. We need assurances from the Government that any changes they make to drugs policy will be fully implemented, clear in how they will be delivered and effective immediately.

Opposition Members recognise that there needs to be a complete shift of emphasis, understanding and effectiveness in the UK’s drugs policy and we would be looking to establish a suitable forum, such as a royal or parliamentary commission, to identify what works and what we need to do to make our drugs policy efficient. So, although we support the order and welcome
the changes as positive advances in drugs policy, there is still a long way to go in the bigger picture of drug control and legislation.

3.59 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The SNP also supports the order before us for many reasons, many of which are contained in the fantastic report from the Health and Social Care Committee, “Drugs policy: medicinal cannabis”, published this morning. We support it not least because we believe that, under the current regime, the potential exists for research and investigation into medicinal cannabinoids to be hindered, and in some cases blocked completely.

All hon. Members will have had constituents contact them about medicinal cannabis and the potential positive impact they feel it would have on them or their families in the face of sometimes horrendous medical conditions. I know that there are no simple answers to many of the questions facing the authorities and the Government, and that opinions in this place and throughout society are varied and sometimes conflicting. However, surely it is a primary duty of Government and the state to ensure the best possible health and welfare of its citizens, and I hope that we can all agree that those with chronic health conditions, sometimes causing unimaginable pain and suffering, should not be denied the potential fruits of research into cannabinoids simply because the legislation has not kept pace with scientific progress. As the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs made clear in its initial letter to the Minister at the end of 2017, when referring to the current statutory position:

“There are potential delays to clinical research as compounds within the scope of the MDR which move into trials in humans need to obtain appropriate licences and put practical arrangements in place for clinical trial sites”.

It is also important to note that the council’s recommendations, which have led to the order we are discussing today, were based on wide consultation with those directly involved in and managing clinical research, including the British Pharmacological Society, the Medical Research Council and the Royal Society of Chemistry. So we welcome the prospect of such trials and research becoming easier and more simplified. It is only through the scientific method of hypothesis, testing and analysis that our pharmacologists—that is easy for me to say, Mr Deputy Speaker—and clinicians can make the discoveries necessary to develop and improve on the treatment and medication available to those in desperate need. That is the story of all modern medicine in recent history, and I am glad that the order will give the scientific community some of the tools and legal protections needed in that regard.

We now know of some of the problems encountered by those attempting to access medicinal cannabis since the relaxation of legislation last year, and hope that those who have been stymied in their attempts to secure medication and treatments for their loved ones will see the changes in policy that we are making today as progress that they themselves have driven. It is disappointing, however, that the Minister, in his reply to the ACMD earlier this year, did not take the opportunity to take on board some of the council’s other recommendations that it feels would help scientific research and, in the long run, potentially help more people in need of improved and transformative medication. I understand the reasons that the Minister gave in his letter, but I would ask that he give the council’s recommendations further consideration, coming as they are from a body not known for proposing such changes in law lightly.

I would be failing if I were not to draw comparisons between the broadly sensible, pragmatic approach taken by the UK Government in this instance, albeit slow; and their head-in-the-sand attitude to the cross-party consensus—which we have just heard from the Labour Front Bench—in Glasgow for progress on drug treatment facilities in that city. As my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) highlighted, the west of Scotland has an appalling level of illegal drug abuse and addiction and a high number of deaths, and the Home Office’s refusal to allow the health authorities and third sector organisations in Glasgow to try to alleviate some of that suffering is in marked contrast to the spirit in which we are discussing the order before us.

Not so long ago, this Government had set their face against even entertaining the idea of medicinal cannabis, yet here we are today. In that spirit, I implore the Minister and his Government to think again on safe drug consumption rooms. We should be in the business of saving lives, which is exactly what that approach could do. We must give our pharmacologists and scientists every advantage as they seek to discover new treatments and medications, but, more importantly, we must alleviate the suffering of those, such as Alfie Dingley and Billy Caldwell, who have waited too long. We must all get our collective finger out in this place and improve the legislation.

We also owe it to the families, many of whom feel forced to smuggle in this life-changing treatment for their children. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), who is not in her place, who recently travelled over to the Netherlands with Emma Appleby to secure the medicine required for her epileptic daughter, Teagan. The issues they faced, with Border Force initially confiscating the medicine amid much confusion, highlighted not only the inconsistency in the law, but that the law is not fit for purpose. The families are also forced to spend a lot of money, and often to fundraise, to travel overseas and secure medicine for their children. This is not right. We welcome the SI as a step in the right direction, therefore, but in doing so we urge the Government to do all they can to ensure that this process is robust but as quick as possible.

4.5 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I join others in welcoming this statutory instrument, but I ask the Minister why it has taken so long. The recommendation from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs was made in December 2017. Why has it taken more than 18 months to get to this point? Given the changes being made to facilitate research, for goodness’ sake, would it not have made sense to act immediately on its advice, rather than delaying for so long?

I urge the Government, despite their inclination, to go further and embark on a process that focuses on evidence, including the evidence of harm. Does the Minister think that drugs policy should be based strictly on evidence of how we best reduce harm? If he accepts that premise, he will accept the need for significant further reform.
Picking up on the point made by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), I urge the Minister to appear before the Scottish Affairs Committee. There is a danger that if Ministers refuse to attend Select Committees it will send out the most appalling signal to anyone else tempted not to respond to a Select Committee request to give evidence. This is such an important matter. The Scottish Government, to give them credit, want to trial new methods. Consumption rooms make enormous sense. There is evidence that we could significantly reduce the number of deaths from dangerous drug use through that sort of approach. It is scandalous that the Government are standing in the way of the trial in Glasgow of that much safer approach—standing in the way of good evidence-based policy making.

If the Minister accepts that we should be guided by the evidence of what works best to reduce harm, he would inevitably explore what they have done in Canada by ending the ludicrous prohibition on cannabis, which has brought about the most appalling side effects. So many young people are being driven into crime, too often ending up with criminal records, and being confronted by violence in the poorest communities in our country. The extent to which young teenagers from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are used by criminal networks to sell these drugs and are putting themselves at risk of extreme violence is shocking.

If the Government are interested in protecting young people from harm—both the violence that is an inevitable consequence of the illegal market and the risks of buying on the illegal market, where the only strains available now in places such as London are the most potent strains of cannabis that pose the biggest risk to a young person's mental health—the Government will see the sense of regulating the market and taking the market away from criminal networks. We hand billions of pounds a year on a plate to organised crime in the most ludicrous way. We put young people at risk of extreme violence. We put young people's health at risk. Instead, we could be raising tax revenues to educate people about the dangers of drugs—both currently illegal and legal drugs.

Let us remember that the most dangerous drug of all, in terms of harm to self and others, is alcohol—alcohol which is consumed in vast quantities in this very House of Parliament, for goodness' sake. The hypocrisy in this debate is breathtaking. Aspirants to become our Prime Minister—members of the Conservative Cabinet—make embarrassing admissions about misdemeanours from their past, while others have been convicted of doing the same thing and have had their careers blighted.

Let us end this hypocrisy. Let us follow the evidence. Let us regulate the market, take the criminals out of the market and protect our young people more effectively.

4.10 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who is a fellow Select Committee Chair: he chairs the Science and Technology Committee and certainly knows a thing or two about good evidence.

It is actually quite encouraging and unusual, in the case of an issue involving drugs, to see the Government accepting evidence and doing the right thing. This statutory instrument is a really good reform of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Of course synthetic cannabinoids, which could be used in research to try to develop treatments which we know could help countless people in our constituencies, should be taken out of schedule 2.

As I have said, it is unusual to see the Government accepting good evidence. They normally approach drugs issues uninformed by evidence, and are singularly unresponsive to developments and debates relating to such issues and to the environment that is an emerging feature of all our constituencies and communities. They turn their face against the international innovations that are springing up not only in Canada, but in Portugal, Germany and other countries that take a very different approach to dealing with the contagion of drugs-related problems in the community. This Government are immune to the mayhem that their general policy on drugs is currently generating.

The 1971 Act is not just in need of minor tinkering. It is in need of widespread reform, review and updating. We in the Scottish Affairs Committee are conducting an inquiry into problem drug use in Scotland, because in two weeks' time we expect to find that more than 1,000 people have died as a result of drug use. That means that 1,000 families will have been impacted by deaths that need not have happened. There are things that we could do to try to address and resolve this problem.

Our Committee had a fascinating session yesterday and I want to share it with the Minister. We do not know whether he will come to the Committee, but he will have to answer these questions; the Home Office will have to address the way in which it is currently handling drug issues and policies. I ask him to come to the Committee and tell us what he is going to do, because in one way or another we will get the answers from the Home Office.

As I have said, yesterday's session was absolutely fascinating. It was attended by senior police officers from across the United Kingdom, and even by a representative of the Government's own Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. There is overwhelming consensus and agreement that the criminal justice approach to drugs issues is failing. It is failing our communities, it is failing our constituencies, and, in particular, it has ultimately failed the bereaved.

We heard not just about this useful statutory instrument, in which a reclassification is liberalising policy, but about the constant ratcheting up—as a senior chief police officer put it—of drugs classification. Let us take the example of cannabis. Cannabis was classified as a B drug. The classification went down to C and then back up to B. We are hearing that there is overwhelming consensus that something different is required: we must start treating drugs as a health issue and not a criminal justice issue. I know that my colleagues in the Health and Social Care Committee are also looking into whether the general policy and its consequences could be changed and I am grateful to them for that.

Norman Lamb: I meant to mention the following case when I spoke earlier: a family in Norwich have just had to spend well over £1,000 on a private prescription for
their young son who has epilepsy. They will not as a family be able to afford more than a few weeks’ worth of paying for this privately. It is ludicrous that that family, desperately in need of help for their young boy, cannot get it through the NHS. I think there have been only three prescriptions so far under the NHS.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I have allowed the debate to drift a little away from the scope of the debate, but I do not want it to drift too far. I ask Members to bear that in mind.

Pete Wishart: That is the point. It is all about this statutory instrument because it will help people like the family the right hon. Gentleman mentioned. It will supply the evidence and research so that that could happen. It is unacceptable that people, because they do not have this in place, are having to go abroad and are still being arrested when they come back to the United Kingdom. That was mentioned in the report from the Health and Social Care Committee today, so progress has been made, but we are looking forward to looking at the whole issue of cannabis when we go Portugal to see how decriminalisation has worked there. Portugal had drug deaths on a par with what Scotland is currently experiencing, but the number has been cut to a manageable level because of its approach to cannabis and decriminalisation.

As I say, yesterday’s session of the Scottish Affairs Committee was fascinating. Let me tell the Minister something that the assistant chief constable of Scotland said because it is important for this particular measure. He said:

“There are 61,500 problematic users in Scotland just now. It is growing in number. For the vast majority, the end for them is death. And the criminal justice process is actually pushing people into a place where there is more harm.”

That is from an assistant chief constable responsible for keeping people safe.

Someone on the Minister’s own advisory council said:

“We are seeing police creating ways to reduce the harm done by the Misuse of Drugs Act. If we fully implemented the law of possession, we would be creating harm.”

That is what we are hearing from everybody, but we are hearing nothing from the Government because they will not come to our Committee to tell us what they actually feel about this; they are not prepared to come to defend this, which is totally unacceptable. We now need to hear that they are prepared to come in front of us.

When the Government do talk about drugs issues, the policy is, “We don’t want to send the wrong signal.” A fat lot of good that does to people six feet under the ground as a result of failed drug policies, part of the ever-increasing drug deaths.

The Home Secretary is happy to dispense with all the compelling evidence—everything he hears, all the international examples about drug consumption rooms—because, as he said, of his own childhood experience in his own personal neighbourhood. The Government know the evidence about drug consumption rooms. The Government have even accepted the evidence about drug consumption rooms. The only thing the Government have not done is do anything about it. People are dying. Do something about it. This works: all international evidence shows that drug consumption rooms make a difference. They stop people dying and allow them to get the treatment and recovery services that they should be entitled to.

It is appalling that the Government have one message on this: the belief that a drugs war can be prosecuted and won. All we need is the kids from “Grange Hill” and Nancy Reagan singing “Just say no.” It is time that this Government grew up and accepted the real range of issues on this matter.

We know that a health approach to drugs issues is required. We know that problematic drug use is a result of a complex cocktail of deprivation, poor mental health, trauma, stigma and addiction disorders, but the Government’s policy does nothing about this.

We want the Government to attend our Committee to defend their current drugs policy. I say to the Minister again: for his summing up, he can get his notes from his civil servants and get them to say that somebody will be coming to our Committee who will give us evidence and is prepared to defend the Government’s policy, because right now this is unacceptable.

4.19 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I thank the hon. Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) for their constructive approach to this narrow statutory instrument, which is essentially a tidying-up exercise to comply with requests from our research community. I am glad that that has been understood and welcomed. Mr Deputy Speaker, many speakers have taken advantage of your traditional generosity in straying over the boundaries of this SI into a broader conversation around drugs policy, and I acknowledge that passions on this run high. The demand for a review of policy will not go away, but I believe that this needs to be led by the evidence. Speakers today have presented one side of the debate, but those on the other side believe with equal passion that the evidence tells a different story. However, I do not think that this is the day to have a debate on drugs policy.

There is a lot of passion about attendance at the Scottish Affairs Committee, and if I was unclear in my response on that, it is because I am not technically the Minister for drugs. That invitation has gone to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), the Minister with responsibility for crime and safeguarding, and I am assured that she will respond in due course. She has not declined to attend, as has been suggested—[Interruption.] Well, I am assured to the contrary. Anyway, I am sure that she and her officials will have heard the passion behind this request and will respond in due course.

The fact of the matter is that today, the Government’s policy on legalising cannabis and drug consumption rooms is set. Hon. Members will also be aware that a new Prime Minister will mean a new Administration, a new Government and an opportunity to reopen these debates where necessary. I am sure that many Members on both sides of the debate will be encouraging that to happen. I should say to the Chairman of the Science and Technology Committee, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), for whom I have great respect, that I strongly believe that policy in all areas should be driven by evidence. That is why I welcome the
fact that the Home Secretary has asked Dame Carol Black to lead one of the largest reviews of drug demand and supply for many years.

Norman Lamb: I welcome the appointment of Dame Carol Black to do this work. Will she be able to look at the experience from Canada, so that we can look at all the options in making our decisions about the right way forward?

Mr Hurd: We are determined to look at all aspects of drug demand and supply, and the terms of reference of the review are public. I want to add, because this is relevant to the context of the narrow debate that I thought we were going to have, that in the interests of updating evidence—this relates particularly to the right hon. Gentleman’s point on updating evidence on harm—I have asked the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs to review the current classification of synthetic cannabinoids in this context. That review is due to report by the summer of 2020, and I hope that he will welcome that.

I want to talk briefly about the issue of medicinal cannabis, which a number of Members took advantage of your generosity to address, Mr Deputy Speaker. As the Minister who led the work, under the direction of the Home Secretary, to change the law, I am pleased that we took that step at the pace that we did. It was clear to me that it was absolutely necessary, when we were confronted by the evidence from families who were suffering what I believed to be unnecessary hardship and pain as a result of regulation and law. As has been pointed out, the law liberalised the situation but effectively required prescriptions to be issued by specialist clinicians. As was disclosed in evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee, which reported today, there is clearly an issue around the levels of clinical confidence at the moment, and my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care are absolutely determined to work closely with partners to try to build that clinical confidence, which is clearly a priority, so that more families do not have to suffer the pain and frustration that are clearly out there.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful to the Minister for his tolerance. What advice do we give to the family from Norwich whom I mentioned who are spending well over £1,000 on just three weeks’ supply of cannabis oil for their son with epilepsy through a private prescription? They simply will not be able to afford to carry on, so what should they do?

Mr Hurd: The legal route that we have opened up is that if the situation complies with the various conditions in the framework set by the regulations, a prescription for such drugs is allowed, as long as that is what is recommended and approved by the specialist clinician looking at the case. Given where we are with the evidence base, and although our decisions were informed by expert advice, the right hon. Gentleman will understand that we had to put strict conditions in place in relation to the change being clinically led. This is not about decisions by politicians and not necessarily about decisions by GPs; it is about decisions by specialists in the area. I am sure that he will understand the reasons for our caution in that respect. As I said, the issue is now about how to build the research and evidence base to increase clinical confidence inside the NHS. That must be the priority at this time.

I have enjoyed this debate, which has ranged further than I expected, and I welcome the support for this SI and the proposed changes following recommendations from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Amendment) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 4 June, be approved.
Backbench Business

Whistleblowing

4.26 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I beg to move, that this House calls for a fundamental review of whistleblowing regulation to provide proper protection for a broader range of people.

I thank the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for his support in making the application to the Backbench Business Committee and all the other MPs who supported the application. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee, the Chair of which is sitting in front of me, for enabling this incredibly important debate to take place. I want to start by telling four brief stories to illustrate why facilitating whistleblowing is so important.

I was the Minister in the then Department of Health who initiated the review led by James Jones, the former Bishop of Liverpool, of the horror of what happened at Gosport War Memorial Hospital. In his report from June last year, the very first chapter deals with the nurses who tried to speak up in 1991 about what was happening in that hospital. However, the report refers to the silencing of those nurses’ concerns and to a patronising attitude towards them, although they were trying to do the right thing. The consequence of not listening to those nurses is the extraordinary and horrifying conclusion of the report, which is that over 450 older people died following the inappropriate prescribing of opioids. These old people had gone in for rehabilitation but came out dead.

In this context, we can often be talking about life and death situations, so enabling and empowering people to speak up can literally save lives. That, at its most clear and stark, is why this matter is so important. The horrific scandal at Gosport hospital could have been stopped if those nurses had been listened to, but they were not, and that is an outrage in itself.

Scrolling forward to 2013, Dr Chris Day, a brave junior doctor working in a south London hospital, raised safety concerns about night staffing levels in an intensive care unit. It is in all our interests that brave people should speak out about safety concerns in any part of our health service, but perhaps particularly in intensive care units.

What happened to Dr Day, because he spoke out, is wholly unacceptable. He suffered a significant detriment. His whole career has been pushed off track, and his young family have been massively affected. Junior doctors in that unit were put in the invidious position of being responsible for far too many people compared with national standards, so he pursued a claim against both the trust and Health Education England. The NHS spent £700,000 of public money on defending the claim and, in large part, on attempting to deny protection to junior doctors who blow the whistle against Health Education England. Lawyers, disgustingly, were enriched.

Late last year, the tribunal that eventually heard Dr Day’s case ended early after he was threatened with a claim for substantial costs. He and his wife could not face the prospect of losing their young family’s home, so he caved in. That is surely scandalous treatment of a junior doctor. He was defeated by superior firepower.

We have the grotesque spectacle of the NHS, of all organisations, deploying expensive QCs to defeat a junior doctor who raised serious and legitimate patient safety issues.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman’s work on Dr Chris Day’s case to get the answers we deserve on how he has been treated. Many whistleblowers face an inequality of arms at tribunals. They have often lost their job by that point, and they face a very difficult situation, with highly paid QCs running rings around them, which is often the result of employers trying to find loopholes in the law to avoid liability.

Norman Lamb: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support in pursuing the Dr Day case, and I completely agree with the points he makes.

Sir Robert Francis, in his 2015 “Freedom to Speak Up” report, spoke about how NHS whistleblowers who had given evidence to him overwhelmingly experienced negative outcomes, and he talked of a hostile culture of fear, blame, isolation, reprisals and victimisation—in our NHS, for goodness’ sake.

Those stories continue. The impact on individuals can be devastating and profound. They can be ostracised, abused and disadvantaged in their career, with dire consequences for their mental health. One nurse who tried to expose wrongdoing said, “I would never put myself in that position again. I would rather leave.” What a damning indictment of how we treat people in our treasured and cherished public service.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman and I have both worked on the general issue of whistleblowing. I pay tribute to his leadership on the matter, along with that of my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who I hope will catch your eye later, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The right hon. Gentleman is making some very good points, and we know two things. First, we know there is strong concern across the country about how whistleblowers are being treated. We see it in the west midlands, and he is articulating the point. Secondly, we know whistleblowers help to ensure proper accountability and transparency. In my view, the work that he and others are doing on whistleblowing has not received anything like the amplification it requires.

Norman Lamb: I totally agree with the points the right hon. Gentleman makes, and he makes them well. I will come on to discuss them in a moment.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con) rose—

Norman Lamb: I will give way briefly, but I am nervous about the Deputy Speaker and overstaying my welcome.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Let me just reassure you on that. I hope I do not make anybody nervous.

Dr Johnson: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, as he is being most generous with his time. He said that the doctor was feeling under pressure from the overwhelming firepower and the potential to incur
the NHS’s substantial costs. What support did his union, perhaps the British Medical Association or defence unions such as the British Medical Defence Union or Medical Protection Society, offer him on legal costs?

Norman Lamb: Shockingly, the BMA abandoned him, and that is a story in itself, which needs exploring further. Not just in the NHS but across the economy, people are often literally on their own, faced by expensive lawyers. I speak as a former employment lawyer and I know what happens in employment tribunals. They were intended as a layman’s court, but they are anything but that these days.

The third story I want to mention is that of my constituent Mark Wright, a successful financial planner at RBS. Things started to go wrong after he raised concerns about unacceptable practices in the bank—this was before the crash. On 17 September 2008, immediately after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, an intranet statement was put up in RBS saying that the group was “well capitalised”. That was clearly an attempt to reassure staff, including staff shareholders, customers and investors that the bank was secure. Of course when the bank crashed, those staff shareholders lost a fortune, and many, including my constituent, believe that they were badly misled by that intranet statement.

Mr Wright’s mental health was destroyed as a result of trying to challenge the bank, as was his career. He made a complaint to the Financial Conduct Authority, which reported his name back to the bank, for goodness sake. The FCA was later criticised by the Complaints Commissioner. I pursued his complaint with the FCA and it denied knowledge of the intranet statement repeatedly to me, yet an internal FCA email has emerged, after a subject access request to the Complaints Commissioner. It was dated 14 March 2014 and it said “the intranet notice that Mr Wright refers to was online between 17 September 2008 and January 2009... as staff used it to take reassurance that all was well which would tend to support Mr Wright’s allegations”.

That was an email within the FCA, yet we were never informed of that email or of that finding in that explosive document.

Clearly, the FCA has a copy of that intranet statement, yet it will not or cannot disclose it to us. The FCA says that the law does not allow it to do so. RBS, which is part state-owned, will not disclose it, yet clearly it is in the public interest that it should be disclosed. I believe I was misled by Andrew Bailey, the chief executive of the FCA, who told me, in effect, that Mark Wright’s allegations offered nothing that was not already in the public domain and he referred to an intranet statement by Fred Goodwin, which he said had been “in the public domain for nearly 10 years”.

Yet the intranet statement has not ever been in the public domain. The Treasury Committee, which had looked into this, had never received a copy of it. So I was misled, and we have a regulator that is too close to the banks; that failed to protect Mr Wright’s disclosure or his identity; that, crucially appeared to fail to take the allegations about the misconduct of that bank seriously; and that cannot or will not put a crucial statement into the public domain. Let us just think about the damage caused by bankers in the run-up to the crash. Had we empowered people like Mark Wright to do the right thing, rather than destroyed them and ignored them, we might just have prevented the disgusting behaviour and greed of those bank managers, and we might have seen some of those responsible for destroying our economy behind bars. As it happens, they have got away with it.

The fourth and final story is of foster carers throughout the country who are frightened to raise concerns about any behaviour from the council that they deal with. Of course, the council refers children into their care, so if a foster carer is concerned about the behaviour of a social worker and expresses concerns, that council can just stop the flow of children to them, and so their income stream—their ability to earn a living—disappears. This has a chilling effect on the willingness of any foster carer to speak out about child protection concerns, because they fear losing their livelihood.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does that not highlight how, whether in finance, the NHS or anywhere else, this happens in situations with a power differential and a hierarchy? Someone has power over someone else and can make them lose their job or lose what they love doing, so there is a constant threat.

Norman Lamb: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We need effective legislation to redress that imbalance of power.

All the cases I have outlined highlight the value and importance of enabling people to expose wrongdoing. Effective protection for brave people who decide to speak out is first of all vital for that individual—they should be celebrated, not denigrated—but it also benefits us all if we give them protection. As the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said earlier, this is actually an issue of good governance. It is about keeping organisations honest; protecting businesses from fraud, crime and other wrongdoing; and maintaining the highest possible standards. Good protection for those who speak out acts as a deterrent against bad behaviour; closed, secret cultures, which cover up wrongdoing and destroy those who try to speak up, deliver poor public services or cheat customers in the private sector, particularly in financial services, or lead to the toleration of bullying, sexual harassment and so on. So often, non-disclosure agreements are the final step that keeps the wrongdoing secret, slamming shut the door on proper scrutiny. Things need to change.

The question is: does the current law work? Palpably, from the examples I have given, it is clear that it does not. First, it leaves out key groups—not only foster carers—that simply are not covered by the legislation. It leaves out job applicants, volunteers and priests. Just think about the abuse of children by so many priests over the past few decades. Had priests been given the protection to speak out, perhaps we would have prevented some of that dreadful abuse. The legislation leaves out non-executive directors and trustees. It leaves out relatives and friends of the whistleblower when they are victimised because of what the whistleblower has done. It leaves out someone who is victimised by being presumed to be a whistleblower—if a company thinks that someone has spoken out, even if they have not, and does something like dismissing them, that person has no rights under the legislation because they are not actually the whistleblower. That is a ludicrous situation.
Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and am sorry that I was not here at the start of the debate. Some time ago—I think when the right hon. Gentleman was at the Department of Health—I was the co-author of a review of the NHS hospitals complaints system. One reason why we were not more forceful on the point he is making was that we thought legislation was in the pipeline, or that there was an attempt to put things right for potential whistleblowers.

I am still concerned. In my own local authority area, Rhondda Cynon Taf, the Cwm Taf health authority has just been heavily criticised for maternity deaths. One of the people involved got in touch with me anonymously. I did not know what to do with the letter—I did not want to pass it to the authorities—so I passed it to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, which was at that time completing a report on the Cwm Taf health authority. It is still a major problem and people are afraid. Even when they think there is greater understanding and leeway, people are afraid. We have to put that right.

Norman Lamb: I totally agree with the right hon. Lady, Sir Robert Francis, who did the report in 2015, recommended the introduction of “freedom to speak up champions” in the NHS, and that has happened. However, this is an administrative process within trusts that, I am afraid, simply has not worked—that is the brutal lesson that we have to learn.

For those who are covered by the legislation, the law does nothing to enable a concerned person to speak up in the first place. For example, the law is silent on standards expected from employers, and it offers only inadequate protection after the event—after the person has been destroyed by a cruel organisation. The individual who then tries to pursue their rights under the legislation is too often faced by highly paid lawyers and is pressured into non-disclosure agreements, which, as I indicated, can result in wrongdoing never being exposed. Indeed, we know that the terms of some non-disclosure agreements are unlawful because they seek to shut up the individual and to stop them speaking out, even when a crime is involved.

Only a tiny percentage of cases that are pursued to the tribunal actually end up with a decision of the tribunal. To succeed, someone must show that the reason— or, if there is more than one reason, that the principal reason—for a dismissal is that the employee made a protected disclosure. They therefore open themselves up to false claims that other reasons existed. If the tribunal decides that there were other reasons, either the person’s claim is dismissed or their compensation is reduced.

There is no full definition of the range of disclosures that are covered by the legislation, so the protection is completely uncertain. Disclosure has to be to a prescribed person, but what happens if someone does not know who to report their concerns to? They could easily find themselves entirely unprotected—for trying to do the right thing.

Mr Mitchell: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Norman Lamb: I am conscious that I am trying the patience of the Deputy Speaker, and I need to get to the conclusion of my remarks.

The brilliant organisation Protect highlights the fact that a number of laws, such as in the utility sector, make it an offence to disclose certain information and include no public interest defence exceptions for whistleblowing. Even if there is awful wrongdoing, the person is prevented from speaking out, because they would commit a criminal offence. That surely has to change.

The brutal truth is that brave people who do society a service by exposing wrongdoing are not adequately protected, and many have no protection at all. After Gosport, I met the Prime Minister and made the case for reform. I explained to her that these are life or death situations in many cases. I have heard nothing from the Prime Minister at all since then, and that was last summer. It is time for a fundamental review by the Government and for new legislation. Such a review needs to listen to all the interested parties—to the all-party group on whistleblowing, to Protect and to Compassion in Care, which has set out proposals as part of what it calls Edna’s law. All must be involved, and we must look at international best practice.

The all-party group has a report due out soon. It follows a comprehensive survey, which included getting the views of very many people who have tried to whistleblow, and it will offer vital evidence to the Government. It will propose an office for the whistleblower, which could be of extremely powerful value in supporting people and would be a centre of excellence, providing guidelines to employers, monitoring activities and providing support, advice and training to members of the public, public institutions, private sector bodies and so on. It is a very important proposal.

I want a commitment from the Minister to undertake a thorough review, because it is long overdue. I also want a commitment to ensure that if the UK leaves the EU, it will at least meet the standards of the proposed new EU directive and preferably go much further. The UK was a pioneer, but the legislation is flawed and inadequate. New legislation to deliver high standards of governance in the public and private sectors is long overdue. We need safe space for brave people to do the right thing; effective mechanisms to hold people to account for wrongdoing that is uncovered, including potential criminal sanctions; and effective compensation and support for those who suffer as a result of speaking out.

4.50 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure and an honour to follow the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who has done such incredible work in this area and on the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking, on which most of my remarks will focus. Many points in his speech resonated with me, particularly when he mentioned a whistleblower who said, “If I knew then what I know now, I never would have spoken out.” Every single whistleblower I have been in contact with has said exactly that. If that is the case, we have got this drastically wrong.

There is so much good work going on. The all-party group is doing tremendous work, and many of those people are in the Public Gallery today. Whistleblowers are so valuable to us in so many ways, as the right hon. Gentleman described. The principle underpinning the work that is happening is that they should be encouraged,
their contribution should be valued and, of course—more than anything—they should be protected. From my experience within the financial services sector, that is the opposite of what happens; I will allude to a number of cases during my speech.

Mr Mitchell: May I take my hon. Friend back to the last comment made by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb)? He talked about the importance of an office for the whistleblower and addressed the critical problem of the lack of effective high-level co-ordinating leadership, and in my view a national office for the whistleblower would be the answer. Does my hon. Friend agree that the creation of a national office for the whistleblower—to protect, advise and support whistleblowers by overseeing, co-ordinating, setting standards and holding to account the regulators and employers—is the right way to proceed? The vital point is that it would not investigate cases of whistleblowing; it would ensure that cases are properly investigated by existing bodies, identify failings and successes, and propose systemic improvements that would help to get us out of this very difficult situation.

Kevin Hollinrake: I support that principle and many other recommendations mentioned by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk. I will be interested to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on whistleblowing, when he speaks about his group’s recommendations.

I just know that this is something that we have got to get right that we have got wrong at the moment, because the people who step forward to take these risks can lose everything—their careers, their jobs and their livelihoods. It is devastating when they tell their loved ones that this is what they are doing. In addition, their colleagues, friends at work and self-esteem are put at risk. From the cases I deal with, it seems that that is all put at risk for no benefit, as people do not even achieve what they set out to by highlighting the issue, and they suffer devastating consequences as a result.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I have not put in to speak because the issue that concerns me is still pending, but does my hon. Friend accept that even being a senior consultant is no protection against what can happen to someone who blows the whistle? I have a case of a senior consultant in an eye unit who became concerned about financial irregularity and, even worse, substandard treatment that was causing eyesight to be lost. The effect of his complaining was that he was the one who was suspended and who faced a General Medical Council examination. The Royal College of Ophthalmologists was simply shown the results of an internal inquiry, not the source material. The Care Quality Commission did nothing, and the GMC is only now beginning to look into his claims—now that it has dismissed the false allegations that were made against him. Is that not a disgrace?

Kevin Hollinrake: I could not agree more. My right hon. Friend highlights the importance of some of these cases. We have to ask why an organisation would not want to know about this. My role before coming to this place four years ago was as managing director of my own business. We were quite a large business at that point. I dealt with all the complaints in the organisation because I wanted to know what was going on there, and that is the best way to find out. These people are our eyes and ears. We were an ethical business and we ran it well, but if anything was going off track, we would want to know about it. However, it seems that when these people step forward, the people around them—their superiors, I guess—too often feel that the situation is too risky and look to close down the complaints.

From the fair business banking perspective, we know that one third of all serious economic crimes are brought to light because of the actions of whistleblowers. It is very rarely the regulator that is going in there and identifying the problem and then dealing with it—in fact, quite the opposite. It is therefore absolutely fundamental that these people will step forward. All the whistleblowers we deal with say, “I would never do that again.” Other people in the sector hear about that and are then deterred from stepping forward. That is an absolutely intolerable situation. What these people do should be welcomed.

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk talked about the case of Mark Wright. In my experience, this not just about the organisations themselves but also about the regulator. The regulator could take a much firmer stance. Whistleblowing is part of its processes. It has responsibilities under protected disclosure to deal with whistleblowers, but that is not what happens. It pays lip service to the issue of whistleblowing. It says, “Yes, okay, we’re dealing with that,” but the cases that I will highlight illustrate that that is not what has happened. The FCA has got a terrible reputation in this area.

Norman Lamb: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the sense one gets from the FCA is that it regards these people as irritants—troublemakers? The people who investigate the allegations of whistleblowers are often people who have been through the revolving door, in and out of banks and the regulator, and so are too close to the people they are supposed to be regulating.

Kevin Hollinrake: Yes. I ask myself all the time, “Why is it like this?” and that is one of the reasons—the revolving door. Those people are part of a wider group or club—the old boys’ tie kind of stuff. This cannot be allowed to be the case.

As I said, the right hon. Gentleman highlighted a case that was heavily reported where the FCA told RBS who the whistleblower was. That seems absolutely unthinkable, and it was criticised by the Complaints Commissioner. When the FCA dealt with the case of the chief exec of Barclays, Jes Staley, who had tried to find out the identity of a whistleblower, which is totally against protocol, he was fined a modest sum that was probably a few weeks’ wages for him. Where is the deterrent there for not treating whistleblowers in the wrong way?

In my own experience, Joanne Rossouw contacted me about fraud at Barclays relating to payment protection insurance claims under the Consumer Credit Act 1974. She felt that there was a total lack of protection and support from the FCA and that its communications were simply unacceptable. The case of Paul Carlier was heavily reported. He whistleblowed on foreign exchange dealers at Lloyds and was then unfairly dismissed. The FCA had promised to support his case and to provide
an opinion to the tribunal he went to when he was unfairly dismissed, but did not do so, despite Andrew Brodie at the FCA calling the Lloyds process for the treatment of whistleblowers a whitewash and a joke. That was not the only case—there were others that he dealt with. Yet these people are not sanctioned. Why is that?

Paul Moore, my constituent, was the first person to raise the issues at HBOS. In 2004, he described a toxic culture at HBOS, with pressured sales targets and people taking unacceptable risks in lending money. Of course, HBOS collapsed in 2008. He was unfairly dismissed. He was treated disgracefully by the Financial Services Authority, as it was then. As the right hon. Member for North Norfolk said, if we had taken a robust approach when whistleblowers came forward, it may have stopped the financial crash happening in the first place, which cost our taxpayers £1.8 trillion.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): My hon. Friend is underlining the point that the regulators are stricken with lethargy when it comes to responding to whistleblowers. Does he agree that whistleblowers need the protection of an independent office to advocate for them with these bodies, which are sometimes very forbidding in the way they respond to the approach of whistleblowers?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to improve how we deal with whistleblowers and the legislation around them. We must also insist that regulators, which already have access to sanctions, deal with these issues robustly. There is a cultural problem in the FCA in dealing with this. That must be addressed, and it can only be dealt with by the leadership of the FCA.

The most egregious case I have dealt with over two years as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking is that of Sally Masterton. She was a senior risk manager at Lloyds. In 2013 she wrote a report called “Project Lord Turnbull”, which highlighted the fraud that was concealed at HBOS before the takeover by Lloyds. She identified a billion-pound fraud—these are not small numbers or small issues, which is perhaps why they are swept under the carpet. She was asked to set out her findings. She produced the report and gave it to her superiors. This was happening at the same time as a police inquiry into the low-level fraud that was happening at HBOS. She was then suspended and prevented from working with the police, despite the fact that the police had said in an email that she was vital to the investigation. She was later constructively dismissed.

She was then discredited. Lloyds wrote to the FCA to discredit her, effectively saying, “This person is a rogue employee. They are not a cogent witness.” The FCA accepted that without any investigation. That was in 2013. Five years later, Lloyds apologised to Sally Masterton, saying that she had been disgracefully treated for five years and admitting that it had tried to discredit her all the way through that process—imagine what those five years of her life were like. The FCA told Lloyds to intervene because she felt she had been terribly mistreated. Andrew Bailey himself had met Sally Masterton and determined that she had been disgracefully mistreated. Lloyds apologised to her and came to a financial settlement with her, but the FCA did not sanction anybody in Lloyds for that mistreatment. That is incredible.

All the FCA keeps telling me is that there is another investigation going on—Linda Dobbs’s investigation of Lloyds’s reporting of information before and after the HBOS takeover—but that is unacceptable. The FCA has already established the mistreatment, yet it will not move forward to sanction the people responsible. Under the senior managers regime, these people, including the chief exec, could be sanctioned, fined or banned. That is exactly what should happen.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very relevant point, and it applies to my constituent who suffered reputational damage following his whistleblowing about the High Speed 2 project. I am sure my hon. Friend will come on to talk about what either the FCA or another body can do to provide protection for whistleblowers and restore their reputation.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is right. The FCA has a huge opportunity. It should regulate without fear or favour, but that is not where we are. It constantly looks over its shoulder at the banks and seeks to defend their reputation by concealing the truth, rather than robustly investigating these issues.

I asked Andrew Bailey four times a simple question in connection with this issue: did he follow the processes set out on the FCA website for how it deals with whistleblowers? Sally Masterton’s case was supposed to be referred to his team within five days and then go through the proper process. Did he do that? He has not responded to that question four times. It is totally unacceptable.

Sally Masterton says in her protected disclosure to Andrew Bailey:

“This is the tenth time that whistleblowing issues have been raised with you and ignored,”

over a period of five years. That is despite the fact that the FCA itself, in communication within the FCA, has admitted her report was well drafted and presented, and one FCA person said to another:

“I see a couple of potential risks…We may get challenged as to what we”—

the FCA—

“did about this report when received or LBG’s treatment of Mrs Masterton”.

Stephen Kerr: We should also mention the fact that there was whistleblowing to the Financial Reporting Council on the audits done at HBOS about the amounts of money set aside against expected liabilities. The head of the FRC, Stephen Haddrill, appeared before the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, of which I am a member, and said some really interesting things about ongoing inquiries with other regulators in relation to whistleblowing, but nothing further has been said.

Kevin Hollinrake: I think this is about KPMG’s audit of HBOS in 2008, which was signed off a few months before HBOS went bust, despite the fact that the risks to that business were clear. The FRC then gave KPMG a clean bill of health. There was the revolving door between the FRC and the auditors as well. It is a very big concern, which I know my hon. Friend has raised in his Select Committee work.
Ann Clwyd: I am sure everybody would like to join me in paying tribute to Julie Bailey, who was one of the best whistleblowers in the NHS. She triggered the Mid Staffs inquiry and the Francis report, as well as raising many other issues. She is now living in Wales. The way that Julie Bailey was treated after she became a very well-known whistleblower is an absolute disgrace. It is an example of what happens to whistleblowers, and it does not matter how well known they are.

Kevin Hollinrake: The right hon. Lady pays a very important tribute and makes a very important point about how we can persuade more people to come forward. It has to be about how they are protected and looked after. Looking at other regimes internationally and how they deal with this will be an important first step in reforming our whistleblowing procedures.

The big thing I would say about all the issues I deal with is that they go right to the top of these organisations. These are not at low level, they go right to the top. They must be dealt with—yes, by whistleblower reform, and, yes, by a regulator that is far more robust and regulates without fear or favour. I believe we need other measures, including a public inquiry into some of these situations and into the circumstances of the disgraceful treatment of many businesses, particularly by Lloyds and Royal Bank of Scotland.

I endorse many of the recommendations made by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk. How we need a much more robust Financial Conduct Authority regulator. Culturally, the biggest issues in the regulator need fixing.

We should look at whether we should provide financial incentives for whistleblowers of the right nature. We do need to make sure that our regulator goes in robustly when we see these mistreatments or improper practices, together with our law enforcement agencies. That is what happens in the States in these situations. It is a case of saying, “Either you deal with us and you deal with these issues, or we really will take further steps, including potential criminal sanctions.”

The situation is not where we want it to be, but I conclude by thanking the whistleblowers who do come forward. They are so important, and we would not be where we are today in understanding what has happened in the banking sector without the incredible contribution of many of the whistleblowers I deal with.

5.9 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly in this debate. I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk. On helping to secure it in time generously allocated by the Backbench Business Committee. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who—along with so many other colleagues present—has worked so hard to ensure that the issue gets the attention that it deserves.

I have spoken in this House before about my constituent, MS Julia Davey, who ran two successful businesses, Angelic Interiors Ltd and Angel Group Ltd. Despite fixed assets and shareholder funds worth multi-millions across the two businesses, they both ended up being placed into administration, which has lost Ms Davey more than £6 million. She followed advice from Lloyds bank during her time running the two businesses, and she believes that responsibility for the liquidation of her assets lies with it.

In 2009, unbeknown to Ms Davey, her account was transferred by Lloyds to its business support unit. Two years later, she was told that she had to pay for the services of a so-called turnaround company, Baronsmead Consultancy, which went on to charge her extortionately for its work. In good faith, she paid it more than £6 million in costs and fees, only to discover from a well-placed whistleblower inside Baronsmead that, far from working in her interests, it was taking her money while colluding with Lloyds to put her out of business and into administration.

Sadly, in the 18 months in which I have been trying to help Ms Davey since our last debate on the topic, nothing has progressed. Ms Davey is still being pushed through bankruptcy processes that she should not have to face. Like the constituents of other hon. Members, and like others who have been mentioned in this debate, she has found her life left in ruins. Her mental and physical health have both been hit, and she tells me that her wellbeing has been further disregarded by Deloitte, which took her to court at a time when it knew that she was the sole carer for her mother, who was dying from cancer. Just a few weeks ago, Ms Davey’s office was broken into; two laptops were stolen and the server was tampered with. The campaign against her has been relentless, but there has been no such rigour from the Financial Conduct Authority or the police to bring to justice those whom she believes to be the real perpetrators.

Ms Davey might not have known the true course of events that led to the demise of her businesses if it had not been for a whistleblower who alerted her in 2013 to what was being done to her companies. Clearly, whistleblowers are invaluable in calling out immoral and frankly criminal acts such as those that have been detailed in our debate. As other colleagues have outlined, we urgently need legislation to protect whistleblowers and the public by deterring and preventing these situations. The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 has failed to protect whistleblowers or address the concerns that they raise. It is high time that an independent structure was put in place to vigorously regulate the banking industry and protect whistleblowers, to prevent further cases like Julia’s.

It is greatly worrying that banks and their advisers can operate so unethically, employing turnaround companies to act on their wishes to liquidate a company while posing as a supportive business and facing no accountability whatsoever. In my constituent’s case, the turnaround company, Baronsmead, is not covered by regulation because it does not fall within the remit of the FCA. Similarly, not all the activities of Lloyds Banking Group come under the FCA’s watch.

I would be grateful if the Minister commented on how and when new regulations might be introduced to provide oversight of all the operations of banking groups and the companies that they employ. I would also like to know why the FCA is not investigating the case as a genuine whistleblower complaint, eight months after receiving the information. The whistleblower has provided extensive evidence of the wrongdoing involved, but my constituent feels that the FCA has blocked her questions about an investigation and allowed the bank’s cover-up to continue.

As I mentioned, the whistleblower first came forward in 2013 to raise concerns about the manipulation of Ms Davey’s companies by Lloyds Bank and its agents,
but those concerns were not acted on. It was only after WhistleblowersUK entered the picture in November 2018 that a meeting was arranged between the FCA and the whistleblower. Ms Davey’s case was then referred from the FCA to the National Crime Agency, but since then the FCA has not answered questions about what investigations might be going on with the NCA, using the Federal Information Security Management Act as a shield.

I ask the Minister why no information is being provided to my constituent, her advocates or the whistleblower. Furthermore, what can be done to ensure that the FCA acts on this serious matter? I understand from WhistleblowersUK and its chief executive, Georgina Halford-Hall, that there is concern that when the FCA gets involved in such cases, it is seen to be an ally of the financial services, rather than an independent regulator, and that the complaints processes are designed to stifle information that could lead to prosecution.

Staff at the FCA have told WhistleblowersUK that the FCA has a responsibility to ensure that there is not a run on a bank that might impact the UK economy. That would not be a problem if whistleblower intelligence were acted on. This is a public interest issue of extreme importance; members of the public, especially owners of small and medium-sized enterprises, must be aware of the malpractice that can happen in the banking industry and, most importantly, be protected from it. I look forward to the report that WhistleblowersUK is due to release later this month, which I am sure will be very helpful.

I am grateful for the opportunity to present Ms Davey’s case to the Chamber, but I am disappointed that I have had to do so. This case has dragged on for years, and in that time, Ms Davey has endured repeated attempts to smother her case, as well as attacks on her health, her private information and her personal property. She has gone from being a successful small business owner, who trusted her bank to uphold its professional and moral obligations, to being forced through bankruptcy procedures, and desperately fighting court case after court case. The serious injustice of having lost millions must be addressed, and stringent regulation should be brought in, so that the complaints processes are designed to stifle information that could lead to prosecution.

5.16 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I declare an interest as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on whistleblowing. I was very impressed by the speech of the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). It was a compelling and comprehensive argument for the law to be reviewed. It is vital that we keep whistleblowing laws and protections, and public interest disclosure laws, up to date and relevant in an ever-changing, fast-moving landscape. I hope that the Minister will listen carefully to the arguments presented—the motion gives a strong case to be answered—and give a considered response. I know well that she is extremely conscientious in performing her duties as a Minister of the Crown.

I was hugely impressed, as ever, with the speech of the local hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). Since becoming a Member of Parliament, I have had to look more closely at the performance of regulators, and what surprises me is how thoroughly inadequate most regulators in this country are at regulating what they are supposed to regulate. It is all too clear that there is, at times, an unholy relationship between the people who staff the regulator and the industry that they are supposed to regulate, and that stifles the tension that there has to be between a regulator and the sector or industry being regulated.

The APPG plans to publish a report shortly identifying how the law fails to protect whistleblowers of any type—I stress “of any type”. The APPG has consulted a whole range of groups, and has positive, effective and practical proposals for change. We hope to learn from other countries as we aim for a “best in class” legal framework. I believe this is one of the aspects of competitive advantage that we should be claiming for the United Kingdom, in terms of our economy and how we treat those who, in most cases, feel driven by conscience to speak up, to raise concerns and to do the right thing for the right reasons.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I commend the hon. Gentleman and the APPG for the excellent work they do in this field. Prior to this debate, the Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association wrote to me. Referring to a recent staff survey in the NHS, it said that only 28% of respondents felt safe to raise their concerns as whistleblowers. So I agree wholeheartedly with the powerful contribution that he is making.

Stephen Kerr: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention because it underlines the fact—and it is a central purpose of the APPG—that we need to improve the overall perception of whistleblowers, and the attitude to them.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I apologise for being a bit late for the start of the hon. Gentleman’s speech. Members who have been in this place for a long time will remember the case that I had of a consultant called Mattu. He was a whistleblower and he was suspended. He was never really employed again by the NHS and the case cost—you could take a guess at the figure—something like £3 million. It ended up in the courts, where they tried to use my letter against that individual. So on the one hand we encourage whistleblowers, but we do nothing to protect them and sometimes we try to destroy their reputation.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful for that intervention. I think I remember taking part in a Westminster Hall debate in which that case was highlighted.

We are going to publish our first report of a series. We have created an ambitious work schedule for our all-party group, but our primary report, based on the first-hand testimony of whistleblowers, should be published soon. I see so many people in the Chamber who have been of so much support to the group’s work, and who have served on the panels that we have put together to receive evidence and witness testimony, so I take the opportunity to thank publicly the Members who have been willing to do that.

We have also worked alongside WhistleblowersUK, which specialises in supporting whistleblowers. I pay tribute to its work and that of other such organisations. Most importantly, I would like to thank the whistleblowers themselves. The whistleblowers who have come before us to give testimony have proven to be caring, principled
members of society who have put themselves at considerable risk to call out malpractice and misdemeanour. Some of those people are not covered by the current whistleblowers’ protections and law; many work, but some were not working.

In less than 12 months, we have heard and collected over 400 pieces of individual evidence to contribute to the series of reports that we intend to publish. Many of the testimonies were very difficult to hear and I will tell hon. Members why. These are people who put everything on the line. As colleagues said earlier, when those whistleblowers first spoke up, they did not realise what it would involve. However, having started out on that course, they stuck with it. I have nothing but total admiration and respect for these people. They have suffered mental trauma, loss of their career, loss of their businesses, persecution of their families, stringent gagging orders—all in the name of blowing a whistle on crime, corruption, negligence, wastefulness and cover-ups.

Many of these people are not employees; they are service users, bystanders, parents at school, patients at hospitals, suppliers, customers and taxpayers. Whoever they are, we should be grateful for whistleblowers. They saw themselves as doing their job, doing their duty, doing what was right. They did the right thing to uphold what they thought was the right standard—the professional standard. They thought they would probably be praised and recognised for speaking up, doing the right thing, protecting people, protecting reputations—organisational reputations, individual reputations—and standing up for the public good and public confidence, particularly in our public services.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the public sector is sometimes the worst offender? I was contacted by a firefighter who had reported his hierarchy—I will not go into it because it is subject to legal action. He sent the report to the police and they then sent it back to the fire service he was reporting. That is the public sector. Unbelievable!

Stephen Kerr: As we have discovered, this is a common characteristic of how whistleblowers and the issues they raise are treated. Issues they raise in anonymity and confidence are then disclosed to the very body they are raising concerns about and because of that they are easily identified. What follows is deeply unpleasant—to hear about it is deeply unpleasant; to experience it must be something else. So I do agree.

Whistleblowing in a work environment in the public sector should not be difficult, but it is, and it is up to this Parliament to change that. Without whistleblowers, we would not know about Gosport War Memorial Hospital, Cambridge Analytica, Lux Leaks, the behaviour of Jess Staley, the CEO of Barclays, Mid Staff NHS Trust or Rotherham’s grooming gangs. These are issues that make headlines, but there are many more cases that Members probably know of in their constituencies, from all over the country and across all kinds of sectors and activities, public and private. Bringing these issues to light, while difficult, undoubtedly identifies better ways for companies to work, for services to be delivered and for justice to be served.

Norman Lamb: The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. It was good to work with him in applying for this debate. We have heard about cases in the public sector, such as the one the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) mentioned, and about others in financial services, such as those the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) mentioned. It is worth comparing the outcome for those brave people, whose lives, as he says, are destroyed, with the outcome for those guilty of wrongdoing in the banks, for example, who continue to earn a fortune and who no one has touched for their wrongdoing, despite the devastating impact they had on our economy.

Stephen Kerr: Whistleblowers are heroes, not villains—although sometimes there are villains in their stories—and they should be treated with respect and listened to. Sometimes they are looking for no more than validation of what they have brought to the attention of the authorities. Whether they should have a financial award, or whatever, is a side issue; the real issue is how they are perceived and responded to.

Dr Whitford: The hon. Gentleman raises financial rewards. Does he think they might make the personal situation for a whistleblower within a workplace worse, because it would be easy to ascribe their actions to their seeking a financial benefit as opposed to genuine altruism?

Stephen Kerr: I completely understand, and am sympathetic to, that point. We need to work together to establish this independent office of the whistleblower. Sometimes whistleblowers pay such a heavy price in terms of the financial consequences that flow from their actions that perhaps there is a case for compensation, but I have not made up my mind. We have to hear more evidence and have a wider discussion in Parliament about these issues. It is absolutely clear, however, that whistleblowers need somewhere safe to go, and to be supported and have their cases properly advocated in the face of power, authority and bureaucracy. I mentioned the problem of blacklisting. One person told us how he had been blacklisted for speaking up. He had reported criminal activity to the employer. Instead of dealing with the issue, the employer dealt with the person who had spoken up in the first place and coerced them to stay silent. It is bad enough to have something criminal going on within one’s business, but then to cover it up, and contrive to force those who are willing to speak up for the reputation of the organisation or business to leave, is clearly unacceptable, and then to seek to blacklist them so that they cannot work in a profession in which they have trained and acquired qualifications is truly shameful.

The complex legal framework surrounding whistleblowing covers too few people. It is complex and legalistic. Many of the whistleblowers whom we met were not recognised as whistleblowers by the law. The tests that are necessary to stop people abusing whistleblowing are too stringent and do not recognise complexity. One employee brought up issues of racism at work and the flouting of HR rules. The employer, instead of recognising the whistleblowing, tried to diagnose a mental health issue, sending the employee on medical leave. The company-appointed psychologist then broke confidentiality to speak to the managers of the business. Although regulators confirmed that the employee had a point, they were dismissed and have received no justice.
Whistleblowers can be dragged through the courts, with mounting costs and unending hassles. For many, their cases have consumed their lives. It may be thought that the best advice such a person could be given would be “Move on and forget it”, but that is not justice; it is unjust. While it might be said to have been good and well-intentioned advice, is that really the way in which we in this place want the affairs of our country—economic, and relating to public service—to be dealt with? I really do not think so.

However, it is equally important not to limit the definition of whistleblowers to employees. As I said earlier, and as was mentioned by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk, many categories of people should have the protection to which whistleblowers are legally entitled. We must ensure that, when they blow the whistle, they are given proper protection under the law—and the law is too vague in this regard.

When an individual faces the full force of a corporate or public sector legal department, it is a complete mismatch. Public corporations should be mandated to disclose legal costs to shareholders in such cases, and the same should be true of public authorities. They should have to make clear and transparent the costs of fighting whistleblowers that will be borne by the taxpayer. Some of the estimates of the costs that have been incurred by public services are absolutely mind-blowing and wholly disproportionate.

One brave whistleblower in Scotland had evidence of HR malpractice. It should have been a simple grievance dealt by the organisation, which should have been pleased to receive the feedback from that person. Instead, the person and their family, who also worked there, were victimised. They cannot afford legal representation, and will have to argue their own case at a tribunal against a public sector legal department with an expansive budget.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my very good friend for allowing me to intervene. It seems to me that the very best companies, corporations and organisations should include in their codes of ethics or conduct a requirement for employees, or people for whom they have responsibility, to report things that are wrong. In the first instance, that should happen within the organisation, but if people still feel that they have not obtained satisfaction, there should be a device within the organisation enabling them to report things, and they should not be victimised for that. They should be applauded, because if they do that, the company will get better.

**Stephen Kerr**: I completely agree with my hon. and gallant Friend. I cannot understand why any organisation would not embrace the feedback someone brings them when it has to do with the types of things whistleblowers raise: why on earth would any business or public sector organisation not want to know when things are not being done right—what is right in terms of the law, what is morally right, and what is right in terms of the values of the organisation? And there absolutely should be a no recriminations policy in any organisation worth its salt. I also absolutely believe that there needs to be a place where whistleblowers can go, a safe harbour where their case will be properly treated and respected and where they will get the necessary level of support, whatever that support might be, so their case can be properly heard.

I think I have made it clear that I strongly believe that no organisation of any repute should be operating in the ways we have heard discussed in this debate by various colleagues. Governments and companies should be confident enough to know when they are wrong, and they should be honest and brave enough to address that. The reaction to whistleblowing should be to say, “Thank you; thank you for speaking up”, and then when the whistleblower’s words and evidence are evaluated organisations should be more than happy; in fact, they should be recognising and themselves rewarding whistleblowers who speak up so that the changes that flow from that will mean they as businesses or public service organisations can become more efficient, effective and ethical in the way they operate.

The APPG will soon publish its findings and recommendations, and we will further consider and promote the case for an independent office for the whistleblower, giving protection to and advocating in the interests of whistleblowers. We shall also be asking for an end to the use of non-disclosure agreements to cover up wrongdoing, criminality and other morally dubious behaviour. That idea must be fully debated and explored, because there are currently far too many abuses of NDAs.

Parliament and Government have a responsibility to set the conditions and the standards; we have to create the culture in our country where people feel confident that they can and should speak up in the public interest. We want whistleblowing recognised as a positive and public-spirited thing to do, and I look forward to the Minister’s reply today, but this is the start of the debate on this issue, not an end, and we must recognise the courage and integrity of people who do the right things for the right reasons, because they are guided in what they are doing by conscience and the public interest.

5.37 pm

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) has made a good and wide-ranging speech, and he is right that this is the start of the process, not the end of it: there is clearly a need for significant legislative reform. I thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for getting this debate under way and for the consistency he has shown over a number of years in supporting those who blow the whistle, and indeed for how he set out today why there is a need for a fundamental review of the regulations. It has been clear for some time that we are simply not protecting people in the way I think we would all like to see.

We have had piecemeal reforms, often as a result of case law, which have given some notable advances in protection, but that has also left gaps and loopholes, and it still remains the case, as we have heard on a number of occasions today, that the best-run organisations with the most comprehensive policies in place can be very daunting places for someone to blow the whistle in, and it does not come without consequences.

I know from my own experience as an employment lawyer before I was elected to this place about the issues employees face across a range of sectors when they are brave enough to speak up. We must not underestimate how difficult that is and how brave people are when they decide to blow the whistle, because there are many
examples of how people have suffered, with careers destroyed, and worse, as a result of sticking their head above the parapet. This can involve anything from being shunned by colleagues to being dismissed on spurious charges. There are a number of unfortunate consequences that can arise from blowing the whistle, so we really should support those who have the courage to do it. Sadly, the treatment that some people receive can continue even after they have left their employment. This is far from being the benign environment that we would like to see. We are having new laws in Ireland and Australia, and a new EU whistleblowing directive is coming in in 2021, so if we are to ensure that our workers’ rights at least keep pace with those in the EU, which is what the Government have committed to, we must begin to think about how we can strengthen workplace protections for whistleblowers.

I have spoken before about whistleblowing in the NHS and the importance of providing a workplace environment where NHS staff are able to raise concerns about things they are worried about. It should be an environment where NHS staff are able to raise concerns about NHS and the importance of providing a workplace environment where there is no fear of repercussions or unfavourable treatment and where staff feel confident that action will be taken to resolve their concerns.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As my hon. Friend knows, the Department of Health is based in Leeds, and one of my constituents whistleballed about the DH2020 process in her role as a trade union representative. She was not supported, and she was hounded out of the job she loved, incorrectly. She won her case at an employment tribunal, but that was no compensation to her because she is no longer in that job and has had her career ruined by whistleblowing on behalf of all the employees in the Department of Health who have been affected by DH2020.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and that is something I will come on to later. The current legislation is retrospective. It is righting wrongs after they have occurred but, as we have heard, it is too late to put a career back in place after the event.

In the NHS, it is particularly important that people feel able to blow the whistle safely, not only because they have general obligations as an employee, but because many staff have a professional duty to raise concerns where they see them and could actually be in trouble with their own regulators if they do not do so. NHS England and NHS Improvement policies are very clear on this. They say:

“If in doubt, please raise it. Don’t wait for proof. It doesn’t matter if you turn out to be mistaken as long as you are genuinely troubled.”

The NHS constitution pledges that NHS employers will support all staff in raising their concerns. As we have heard on a number of occasions, however, that clearly has not happened. Fine words are not enough. Sadly, staff do not have the confidence to raise concerns without fear of repercussions.

The most recent NHS staff survey, in which staff were asked whether they would feel safe raising concerns about unsafe clinical practices, found that only a fifth said that they strongly agreed that that was the case, and three in 10 said that they did not feel safe raising such concerns. When asked whether they were confident that their organisation would address their concerns, just 14.8% of staff strongly agreed with that statement. Given that 17.8% of staff said that they had seen errors, near misses or incidents that could have hurt patients in the last 12 months, it should be deeply concerning to all of us that staff in the NHS do not feel that their concerns are being acted on.

As the right hon. Member for North Norfolk mentioned, junior doctor Chris Day was a prominent example of someone who blew the whistle and was treated appallingly. He raised legitimate concerns about staff ratios, then lost his job. The tribunal action that followed resulted in a lengthy and, in my view, wholly unnecessary legal battle in which Health Education England effectively sought to remove around 54,000 doctors from whistleblowing protection by claiming that it was not their employer. Four years and hundreds of thousands of pounds later, it eventually backed down and accepted that it should be considered an employer after all.

Norman Lamb: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the contract between Health Education England and the trusts, which demonstrates the degree of control that Health Education England has over the employment of junior doctors, was not disclosed for some three years in that litigation? It was drafted by the very law firm that was making loads of money out of defending the case against Chris Day. I have raised this with Health Education England, but it will not give me a proper response because it says that the case is at an end. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is totally unacceptable and that it smacks of unethical behaviour for that law firm to make money out of not disclosing a contract that it itself drafted?

Justin Madders: The right hon. Gentleman highlights an important point, and in response I will quote something that Sir Robert Francis said:

“When asked for advice by NHS organisations about issues around public interest disclosure, legal advisors have tended to be influenced by an adversarial litigation—and therefore defensive—culture.”

That notion is clearly present in this particular case. At the end of the litigation, Health Education England said:

“Having never wished to do anything other than facilitate whistleblowing for doctors in training, HEE is happy to be considered as a second employer for these purposes if it removes a potential barrier for junior doctors raising concerns.”

However, as we have heard, that did not manifest itself during the four years of the litigation. Why did it take so long for HEE to accept that it should be considered an employer? What message does that send to NHS staff about the corporate attitude to whistleblowers? It is hardly encouraging.

Whistleblowers are a vital safeguard when all other systems have failed. As the right hon. Gentleman said earlier, there is a whole list of cases in which if the whistleblowers had been listened to earlier, lives could have been saved— Gosport, Morecambe Bay, Mid Staffordshire and Bristol Royal Infirmary. The Francis report shone a light on some of the completely unacceptable treatment that NHS staff have experienced. One individual told the inquiry that

“finding employment is proving very difficult and I question whether any of it was worth it.”
Another said:

“I have often been so depressed by this experience that I have often considered suicide.”

Damning words. It shames us all that some people feel that way for having done what we all think is right.

I acknowledge that some progress has been made on the protections afforded to NHS employees in recent years, particularly as a result of the “Freedom to Speak Up” report and the regulations brought forward by the Government to protect whistleblowers’ future employment prospects. I remain worried about other issues, however, such as protections for other workers who support whistleblowers. Where a team of medical professionals are working on the same thing, it is easy to envisage circumstances in which two or more employees notice an issue of concern together, but only one of them actually makes the disclosure. I raised that matter with the Minister, and it was made clear at the time that the only remedy available to the second person or other associated parties would be to register a grievance under their employer’s grievance policy. That protection is not strong enough, so we need to recognise that people work in teams. Unity is strength, and collective arguments are always better, so we need to strengthen the protections in such situations.

Another issue is that it is only once someone has lost their job that they can take their previous employer to an employment tribunal and seek redress, but the onus is on the whistleblower to prove that it was their disclosure that led to them losing their job. The Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association has come across many cases of employees facing action after speaking out based upon circumstances different from their whistleblowing case, but which appear to be clearly linked. Such action can be subtle, such as bullying, harassment, undermining, being overlooked for opportunities for promotion, or a general feeling that the employer may be looking for a reason to act against them. Of course, such instances are virtually impossible to prove, but they contribute to the climate of fear for whistleblowers, who may worry that they are only ever as good as their next mistake. We cannot continue to allow promising careers to be left in tatters as a result of ineffective whistleblowing protections.

We must send a strong message to employers that, as the legislation intended, those making disclosures should be protected, not attacked.

By its very nature, the legislation only gives a person protection after a detriment has been suffered, when it is often too late. No tribunal can fully mend a destroyed career after a dismissal. It is disturbing that the success rate of whistleblowing claims that reach tribunal is only 3%, which shows how easy it is for employers to use parts of the legislation to avoid their responsibilities. I do not know of any other tribunal jurisdiction that has such a low success rate. If I was still practising and my success rate was 3%, I would not be in a job for long, but that percentage shows why we need to understand how the legislation is not working as well as it could be.

Of course, as we have already discussed, most employers are in a much better position. They are able to rely on expert legal advice; they can put forward alternative allegations and reasons for treatment, and they can allege misconduct or redundancy. There are too many hoops to jump through and too many opportunities for employers to argue that disclosure does not count under the legislation, which of course removes the employee’s protection altogether. That is wrong.

It is not enough for an employee to rely on their own assertion of subjective belief that the information tends to show a breach of regulations. That leaves them at the mercy of the roulette wheel of justice, and potentially having to wait many months before they can know for sure whether their disclosure will have full protection under the law.

In considering how the law operates, we need to examine whether protected conversations, which were introduced under the coalition Government, are working as intended. Of course, a person can have a protected conversation with someone without mentioning whistleblowing at all, but a potential disclosure might have been raised earlier. Employees in that situation who have been told that there is a payment for leaving their employment are in a vulnerable situation, and they will not know for sure whether their disclosure would count.

We need to see whether there is any correlation between protected conversations and disclosures made under the whistleblowing Act.

Whistleblowers should not only be protected but venerated for their role in defending the safety of others. Nobody who makes a disclosure, wherever they work, should do so in fear or at the risk of having their livelihood taken away. The whole culture of workplace protection in this country is one of extreme disposability, be it temporary and agency work, zero-hours contracts or just the ease with which people can be dismissed. This does not lend itself to a healthy environment in which people feel confident and secure in speaking out without fear of reprisal.

The truth is that we have allowed a situation to develop in this country where job insecurity is considered to be just part of the landscape. That has to change. We owe it to people to ensure that protections are as effective as possible, which is one of my tests for a decent and civilised society. At the moment, it is a test we are comprehensively failing.

5.52 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). I am impressed by his hard work in matching the sad reality of NHS practice with its policy on paper and in thinking through the implications for patient care.

I am grateful to the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for helping to secure this important debate and to the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for his hard work as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on whistleblowing, on which I also serve. As he did, I thank all those whistleblowers who have been willing to come before our group to discuss this issue.

I also thank my constituents. Even though I am a new Member of Parliament, a number of my constituents have tried to blow the whistle and, in almost every single case, their experience has accorded with what has been described today—an initial unwillingness to address the issues and problems raised, followed by, in many cases, retaliation. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston described the variety of ways in which that retaliation occurs, which are difficult to write down and take action against.
The retaliation has been quite extreme in some cases. One constituent had a vexatious legal case taken against them. They were cleared, as they should have been, because they had done absolutely nothing wrong. Of course their name is still on the legal record, even though they were cleared, and they believe that is having an impact on their employment.

The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) described the pattern at Lloyds bank, which is a common one. His account accords with the account of the Thames Valley police and crime commissioner, with whom I have discussed this case a number of times. He is rightly exercised about it, because it indicates many people’s continuing unwillingness to deal with these issues properly.

I do not want to speak for long, but I want to address the need to reform PIDA and the non-disclosure agreement regime. That must come after a thorough review of all the arrangements for whistleblowing, as urged by the all-party parliamentary group on whistleblowing.

As a number of speakers have said, it is unclear to many whistleblowers who is a prescribed person under PIDA and the Public Interest Disclosure (Prescribed Persons) Order 2014. I find in my constituency casework that even within the category of “prescribed persons” it is often very unclear whether the scope of interest of that prescribed person covers their case. For example, in the field of education, the chief inspector is able to deal with issues relating to the welfare of children living in school-provided accommodation but cannot deal with unethical educational practice within those schools. It appears that the only body that could be appealed to in that case is the Secretary of State for Education, but there does not seem to be a clear procedure in that Department to deal with whistleblowing concerns. I recognise that this is not the same Department as today’s Minister’s, but the Government overall need to make sure that proper procedures are in place. After all, our constituents are informed on the website that lists those prescribed persons that if they cannot find someone to report to and they do not want to report to their employer, they should take their case to their Member of Parliament. If we do not know exactly who then to take the case up with to try to get some resolution, that puts us and our constituents in a difficult position.

We need to have a proper investigation of whether the existing list of prescribed persons is appropriate and whether those bodies are adequately prepared. In addition, because of the lack of preparation in many cases, we find that regulators and other bodies are ill-equipped to separate out vexatious complaints and genuine whistleblowers—there is a huge inefficiency in the system there. We also find that regulators who are not on the list of prescribed persons often are not aware of, and do not understand, how to advise whistleblowers about who they should approach. I have had a number of cases where whistleblowers have tried to ask the relevant regulator, who is not a prescribed person, what they should do and they have then been signposted to the wrong people and given duff advice. That should not be happening, and the Government need to grasp the nettle and provide coherent guidance.

I very much agree with the right hon. Member for North Norfolk about many of the gaps, but we also need to deal with the issue raised rightly by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) about the fact that those bodies, including those that have a duty under this regime, often talk to each other in a way that completely contradicts the principles of the legislation. They are sharing information inappropriately, even though it is already covered by that PIDA regime. One case of that has been mentioned, but I have dealt with one case where someone’s case was casually discussed at a semi-social networking occasion by a public employee and the whistleblower’s employer. What makes it even worse is that the case was related to child protection. We cannot have this situation where almost chummy relationships lead to that valuable information being inappropriately shared.

I want to comment on the use of non-disclosure agreements and bring this discussion into line with that on their use in sexual harassment cases. The Women and Equalities Committee has criticised their use in relation to sexual harassment, and we should be questioning whether they are ever appropriate in relation to whistleblowing cases. The UK legal system is strong on libel compared with that of other countries. Those of us concerned about investigative journalism might argue that it is too strong, but it is very strong in international terms. If untrue statements are made by those who have been whistleblowers, that can be pursued in court by their previous employer or by the body about which the whistleblowing complaint was made. If we are really to learn from the testimony of whistleblowers, it should not be possible to silence them with NDAs.

As everyone else has done, I wish to end my speech by thanking the whistleblowers in my constituency. There are a number of them I cannot name because of the procedures I have just talked about and because they are concerned about the impact on their professional reputation if their name becomes known as that of a so-called troublemaker. That is an enormous problem because, as Members have mentioned time and again, whistleblowers provide a corrective to malfeasance and illegal activity, and their testimony is incredibly important.

When I talk about whistleblowers’ evidence, I always think about the phrase “It can lead to positive change”. I learned that phrase from the Oxfam whistleblower Helen Evans, who was one of my constituents. The whole process of what happened to her is instructive. Sadly, some people tried to weaponise the evidence that she brought to the table and use it against international aid; in fact, quite the opposite: she was economic empowerment. She was never arguing against international aid; in fact, quite the opposite: she was arguing for it. She has been determined to argue that what she and others uncovered indicated not only that those vulnerable young women and girls in Haiti had been appallingly treated, but that they really needed economic empowerment. She was never arguing against international aid; in fact, quite the opposite: she was arguing for it. She has been determined to argue that what she did must lead to positive change, and indeed her example, and that of others, is leading to positive change in the international aid sector. Those who initially did not listen to her now say that they are grateful for her testimony. That is often the case with whistleblowers, but they should not have to go through that fight to get to that understanding.

We need positive change in our public services and in the private sector, wherever unethical or illegal behaviour goes unchallenged. We should recognise and praise those whistleblowers who help us to get that positive change.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds). I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who set the scene, and I thank the hon. Members for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for making such valuable contributions, as others have previously and will afterwards. The members of the all-party group have been engaging on this subject and are to be congratulated on sustaining their interest and on their efforts today.

Like the hon. Member for Oxford East, I would not be happy to make known all the cases I have been involved in over the years, because of the individuals and organisations in Northern Ireland that were involved. I know of cases involving the health service, the council, sometimes the police and sometimes other organisations, but I shall not go into any of the details, because that would inhibit the people who came to me. I am always clear about the confidentiality of those conversations.

I wish to dwell on one case, because it has dragged on for so long. When I describe the case, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton will know it and the person involved, because he is indirectly involved in the case or has knowledge of the person. First, though, let me say that a review of the 20-year-old PIDA is welcome and necessary to ensure that the UK remains the best place in the world to do business. Piecemeal reforms, often as a result of individuals bringing claims, have extended the scope of who is protected, but unfortunately there remain gaps and inconsistencies. The Government recently committed to ensure that workers’ rights keep pace with those in the EU, whatever the Brexit outcome. This is an opportunity to reiterate the commitment to ensure that worker protection does not fall behind in the coming years.

I feel that I can say all that for a few reasons. In my constituency, I had a constituent who was engaged in what was at the time the longest-running employment tribunal case. It ran from 2007 to 2012 and involved 50-plus tribunal days. It was an absolute endurance test for my constituent and led to his substantive mental breakdown. My parliamentary aide and I supported the employment tribunal process for some 18 months while he recovered. We helped that gentleman and his family. Sometimes, we need to be aware not only of the impact on the individual who does the whistleblowing, but the financial, emotional and mental impact on the family, too. It is clear that what that gentleman went through was horrendous.

In the end, the employment tribunal found that my constituent had made 12 protected disclosures involving going concern matters for the UK company and intangible asset valuations that could not be justified. Does that sound familiar? We had Carillion and BHS in 2018 and 2019. If people learned their lesson, wouldn’t that be great? But people do not learn their lesson, because these things seem to happen over and over again, as has been explained here today.

I make that point because, during those 18 months, my constituent and I engaged in occasion with the FRC on an investigation into his disclosures. The investigations by the FRC and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales were lamentable. In fact, in response to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee audit inquiry, the FRC’s chief executive officer recently refused to disclose what whistleblowing investigations had been undertaken in the last 10 years.

In 2011 and 2012, the predecessor of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy had a consultation on the Sharman inquiry on going concern, which started in late 2011, to which I made an extensive contribution.

The 30-plus responses have all been removed from the FRC website. Eight years on, we have another BEIS/FRC consultation on going concern. Will this accounting profession ever get things right? Concurrently, in November 2011, the then Department issued a consultation on the reform of the FRC.

In December 2010, the FSA and PwC conducted an independent inquiry into the Royal Bank of Scotland. Their press release stated:

“The issues we investigated do not warrant us taking any enforcement action, either against the firm or against individuals.”

How disappointing. It continued:

“The FSA cannot publish the content of the RBS review as information gathered from the bank during the course of the review remains confidential under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000.”

Last month, eight years later, we had a further report from the FSA’s successor, the Financial Conduct Authority. Disappointingly, it essentially concluded the same.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the FCA and the FRC. With the change that is now coming to the FRC, we have an opportunity to break away from the pattern of performance in the past. We have an opportunity to disconnect from that past. Does he agree that it is vital that, whatever replaces the FRC, it is not continuity FRC?

Jim Shannon: Yes, I absolutely agree. I do not think that anybody in the House today, or probably outside it, disagrees with what he has said. Continuity would not be what we want; it is change that we want, and the quicker, the better.

Concurrently, the HBOS whistleblower, my constituent Paul Moore—I have his authority to mention his name—met the then Treasury Committee Chairman, Andrew Tyrie MP, now Lord Tyrie, in February 2011. We were delighted to learn, as was subsequently published, that the Committee would look to engage independent assessors, who would report to it for some of its future investigations. That was announced and reported on the front page of the business section of The Daily Telegraph on 5 May 2011, and it was followed up in subsequent inquiries.

However, only days ago, commenting on the Government response to its excellent report on the future of audit, the Chair of the BEIS Committee, the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), stated:

“The collapse of Carillion and accounting scandals at Tesco, BT and Patisserie Valerie and others have provided a painful lesson that audit isn’t working. Businesses, investors, pension-holders and the public deserve better. Urgent audit reform is needed, not yet further consultation.”

That is exactly what the hon. Member for Stirling referred to. She continued:

“The CMA and BEIS Committee’s extensive inquiries on audit proposed a range of practical recommendations to improve competition, tackle conflicts of interest and improve the culture...
of challenge in audit firms. Their response to our report suggests the Government is in danger of kicking vital audit reforms into the long grass.”

Then they will get lost, and we will forget about them. That should not happen. She added:

“We should not wait for the next corporate collapse. The Government needs to ignore the lobbying of vested interests in audit and set out a clear timescale for delivering on the substance of the CMA and BEIS Committee’s recommendations”.

We should listen to what the Chair of that Committee says.

Are things different in 2019 for audit and whistleblowing, compared with my experience in 2011 and 2012, when I first came into the House? No, nothing has substantially changed yet. Yet, whistleblowers regularly provide an early warning sign when things are going wrong. Often dubbed the canaries in the coalmine, they can help to avoid a future scandal. They can save organisations money. One in every three serious economic crimes was highlighted by a whistleblower, according to a recent survey. That makes whistleblowing more effective than all the usual watchdogs—corporate security, internal audits and law enforcement—combined.

In addition, we need a regulator who is willing and able to listen to whistleblowers who come forward, and to protect them from retaliation. Research by Professor Kate Kenny from Queens University in Belfast shows that the cost of whistleblowing can still be very high, financially and personally—both physically and mentally. I witnessed that up close with my constituent and his family.

For a healthy economy and a reputable financial sector, we need to start supporting whistleblowers. Finance has never been more difficult to regulate because it incentivises people to chase excess profits, even at the expense of ethics and the long-term survival of an organisation. It remains acceptable—in many cases, profitable—to remain silent about wrongdoing. We need to encourage whistleblowers. What this all means is that a significant shift is needed, starting with helping employees to speak up, otherwise the financial sector and the remainder of the economy remain at risk of another crisis. In fact, we may be asked to foot the bill, just as we did with the trillion-odd pounds last time.

The Democratic Unionist party has been very active in supporting the APPG on fair business banking and victim support groups such as the SME Alliance and the CYBG Remediation Support Group in pressing Her Majesty’s Government and the banks to put in place a voluntary redress scheme for SMEs that is truly independent. Wow! Wouldn’t that be great? Such a scheme should also address the unintended consequences of light-touch regulation enabled through the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 and the abuse of SMEs. As a banking redress process is finally beginning to take shape, will the Minister make a similar commitment to address much more effectively the “Future of Audit” report and the renewed vigour for updating our whistleblowing legislation? Like the banking redress for SMEs, these are important matters for our economy post Brexit. The original PIDA whistleblowing legislation has its genesis some 20 years ago. I will therefore appropriately finish by restating my opening comments.

A review of the 20-year-old PIDA is necessary to ensure that the UK remains the best place in the world to do business. Piecemeal reforms, often as a result of individuals bringing claims, have extended the scope of who is now protected, but there remain gaps and inconsistencies. The Government recently committed to ensuring that workers’ rights keep pace with those in the EU. This is an opportunity for the Minister to reiterate the commitment to ensure that protection of workers does not fall behind in the coming years. The Democratic Unionist party—part of the partnership with the Conservative party in government—supports that commitment with regard to updating our whistleblowing legislation in a post-Brexit Great Britain and Northern Ireland.
that in Mid Staffs—indeed, this was an issue in some of the later scandals—there was an obsession with becoming a ‘cleanest’ trust. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and others have talked about how people cover things up. Whether it is a high-profile business or a public service that has been corporatised, there is a drive to remain shiny and perfect on the outside, instead of admitting a problem and trying to fix it.

Having produced his report, Sir Robert Francis set up the “freedom to speak up” guardians in hospitals and the national guardian. In Scotland, the local person in health boards—we do not have trusts—is a specific non-executive director who is a whistleblowing champion. The advantages of a non-executive director is that they are on the board, with a clear and loud voice, and they are not an employee, but they are part of the system. The “freedom to speak up” guardians are employed by the trust, so they are operational—they are a person to go to—but they are also an employee. There are issues at the trust and health board level with how the guardians or champions themselves are protected. Perhaps we need not only an independent national office but an independent system. In the NHS, that might be people who are taking responsibility for safety or healthcare services information. Unfortunately the legislation on that is in the Brexit long grass, but I hope it will eventually come forward.

There is a national guardian in England, but it does not have statutory powers. Scotland has set up an Independent National Whistleblowing Officer, who is basically the public services ombudsman. They are completely separate—they are outside the system—and they have statutory powers, which is important. A reporting and advice line was set up back in 2013, so that if people were afraid to report locally or were not getting anywhere, they could report to that phoneline.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Lady makes a good point about what is happening in Scotland now, but it is worth mentioning the evidence that my APPG received from Police Scotland and NHS Scotland. For example, the lessons that NHS Scotland has learned in Inverness are being taken on board by public authorities in Scotland. The size of our country allows us to do things a bit more quickly and deftly, but undoubtedly the lessons of the past are being learned and implemented, and I applaud NHS Scotland and Police Scotland for that.

Dr Whitford: So small is beautiful after all—that is excellent. The evidence is there; it has been there for years. The problem is that action has not been taken.

The Independent National Whistleblowing Officer has already developed, published and is consulting on standards. The standards will look at bullying and harassment—an issue that has come out in NHS Highland—and patient safety issues, and they can empower reporting and review. They include primary care and social care. They include not only trainees like Dr Chris Day, who was appallingly treated, but students and volunteers. No one should be limiting and excluding the person who saw bad and dangerous behaviour from coming forward and doing something about it.

Every health board will have to report on the actions they have taken to remedy the findings of an investigation. Health boards must investigate and record how they investigated. They must record the action they took, and they must show any improvements that they developed from that investigation. Statistical analysis will be part of an annual report by the board every year, which will look for themes, trends and patterns. This is—and I welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman recognises it—an attempt to make this work by having an independent office.

The results of a survey of health and social care staff in Scotland—and they are health and social care staff now—showed that two thirds felt they would have the confidence to speak up and raise a concern. That is contrary to the fact, as Members have said, that approximately a quarter of staff in England would have the confidence to speak up. As a doctor, I would like to see the figure an awful lot closer to 100%.

The Independent National Whistleblowing Officer will have among their statutory powers the ability to take disciplinary procedures against anyone who victimises a whistleblower. That is also critical because, at the moment, as we have heard, the whistleblower suffers, and the person who caused the suffering does not.

Regardless of how the different nations of the UK are trying to tackle whistleblowing issues within their own public services, particularly their NHS, we need to deal here with the financial and other UK regulation systems. In particular, the Public Interest Disclosure Act is the overarching legislation for whistleblowing, covering all sectors. It was actually 21 years old yesterday. It was a private Member’s Bill, so perhaps it did not really have the scrutiny it should have had. It was groundbreaking at the time, but the UK is now well behind the pack, including countries such as Ireland, and, frankly, it needs to catch up. As has been highlighted by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), it does not protect the whistleblower; it only allows them to go to an employment tribunal after they have suffered huge detriment, with only a 3% success rate, and the tribunal is often used to create more damage and victimisation.

The whistleblowers I have been working with have asked for an independent, free-standing public interest protection Act—not part of employment law, but free-standing—that should do a few things. It must ensure investigation of the concern, because the concern often disappears in all the fighting. The whistleblower should be protected from the point at which they raise their concern. It should cover all those who would be in a situation to report, including trainees or non-workers. It should prohibit detriment, and there should be the ability for civil wrong or criminal offence actions to be taken.

This requires an independent agency or body, and it should also cover regulators. This is not just about the FCA or the FRC, because the Care Quality Commission is in the frame for Whorlton Hall, in that it did a report that described it as not having a problem when people had actually raised issues. If we take the heat out of whistleblowing and make reporting normal, as we have done with Datix systems in the NHS—making this not whistleblowing, but just part of normal duties—then we can change this. Whistleblowers must be valued. In the NHS, it is a matter of patient safety, and that is critical.
Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): What an interesting debate this has been. I, too, would like to congratulate all those brave people who have come forward as whistleblowers. There has been so much agreement in this Chamber and that is not just because there are so few of us here; it is because this is a serious issue that we all have a willingness to try to redress.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on applying for and being successful in securing this debate. His speech went to the very heart of the question: where people have done a very brave thing in reporting abuse, they are then subject to serious detriment. This is what I have been amazed by in this debate: rather than us concentrating all our energies and efforts on how the process can work best and how swift investigation can take place, they have been spent thinking about whistleblowers using their energies to fight to save their job, their relationships, home and mental health. The important point is the corrosive, knock-on effect on how everybody else feels about the system and their willingness to come forward and blow the whistle.

The case of Dr Day and the numerous other whistleblowing cases are illuminating. Nearly 10 years into austerity, the huge cuts in the public sector and the long-term societal shift towards privatisation lead to a couple of conclusions. First, the cuts need to stop—as a Labour Member, I would say that—because they often create dangerous working conditions, with staffing and skills shortages, and the privatisation of care is inappropriate. Secondly, we need much more robust legislation in the face of these conditions. A crucial theme that has been repeated throughout many hon. Members’ speeches is the unequal distribution of power in the workplace; as with so many workplace issues, legislation must redress that inequality.

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk and my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned the need for non-regression clauses in respect of EU directives that pertain to workers’ rights after our withdrawal from the European Union. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) highlighted an important trend that seems to occur when people whistleblow: rather than a thorough investigation being made of their claims, disciplinary procedures are used as a silencing mechanism. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) paid tribute to the whistleblowers and stressed their selflessness.

I think that there is probably a burden that those people wish to relieve selfishly, seeing that harm, but he is absolutely right that they are doing it to put an end to the harm or misconduct that they see.

There have been so many important speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) spoke about the complex picture for constituents trying to understand who the prescribed person is. If as Members of Parliament we find it confusing, imagine what it is like for people with very busy lives who are not navigating these systems all the time—it shows that there is a failure in the system.

For many years, whistleblowers were not given the protection that they need and deserve, and were left at the mercy of unscrupulous employers and state organisations. There are many victims of that negligence, so it is right that the balance started to shift from 1996 onwards, first with the Employment Rights Act 1996 and then with the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 and its revisions between 2013 and 2015. However, in this place, we must continuously ask whether our protections and support for whistleblowers are inadequate in an ever-changing work and political environment. I therefore welcome this debate and will shortly outline some of the principles behind my party’s approach.

There are currently three key protections for those who have made a protected disclosure: first, the right not to be subject to detriment as a result of whistleblowing; secondly, the fact that where the principal reason for dismissal is the fact that a worker has made a disclosure, that dismissal is automatically unfair; and, thirdly, the fact that where a provision in any other agreement seeks to prevent whistleblowing, that provision is void. However, while those protections are important, they do not address the current failures in the law—the gaps that allow many workers to fall outside the legislation’s scope. Nor do they address an issue that has been raised in all hon. Members’ contributions: the failure to encourage the cultural changes that will promote a culture of honesty and transparency in our workplaces, businesses and organisations—a culture where whistleblowers are celebrated as a public good that forces organisational change.

The failure to cover all workers, because of the definition of “worker” that is used, is a major flaw in the current legislation: it means that many self-employed workers are not covered, for instance. As we know, self-employment is a much abused and contested category. It cannot be right that, just because someone is employed on a contract that tries in the first place to absolve their real employer of responsibility for them, they are also denied protections with regard to whistleblowing. Also excluded are most job applicants, which means that whistleblowers can routinely suffer detriment through the recruitment process, without any redress, because they are known to be whistleblowers. Surely that is an anomaly, given that job applicants have the right to protection under the Equality Act 2010 from discrimination, harassment and victimisation.

The Government’s approach to whistleblowing makes little attempt to encourage a proactive culture that not only supports whistleblowers, but creates conditions in which the issues that they disclose are taken seriously in a timely manner and remedies are sought. Where is the requirement to investigate, and where are the mandatory and, importantly, enforceable methods of supporting good practice and cultural change? UK law needs to be much more proactive, and early intervention should be prioritised to protect both the whistleblower and the public.

It is clear that, in recent years, we have fallen well behind other countries on this issue, which is hardly surprising, given the Government’s anti-worker stance on most issues. That was thrown into sharp relief by a recent EU directive that provides protection for the self-employed, and requires organisations with over 50 employees to establish reporting channels.

I would like to say a few words on the principles that will guide a future Labour Government, which hopefully is not too far off, when it comes to whistleblowing. Our key objectives in government will be to encourage people to raise concerns about wrongdoing; to ensure
that concerns are investigated in a timely fashion and appropriately; to ensure that wrongdoing is rectified; to protect whistleblowers and others affected by whistleblowing; and, importantly, to require employers to maintain procedures that facilitate whistleblowing.

A Labour Government would like it to be the legal duty of employers to protect whistleblowers, and would like that to be enforced. That would apply to all workers, irrespective of the nature of their position and whether they are paid; for example, it would include interns and volunteers. Protections would apply to those making the disclosure, whether they were a worker, a former worker, or were seeking work or undergoing training. I think I am right in saying that there is quite a consensus on that.

I want to talk about the patterns. As shadow Minister, I have been thinking about the themes in the experience of the whistleblower. The feedback is that the typical journey of a whistleblower looks like this: if the worker is inexperienced at whistleblowing, there is uncertainty about what to do and who to tell, as has been said. They often go to their immediate manager. The system response may be poor, and include ignoring or minimising the issues, deliberate delays, hostility and intimidation. It may include reluctant, ineffective or biased, tokenistic investigations, and deliberate attempts to exhaust and discourage the whistleblower through excessively lengthy and complex processes.

Intimidation may increase in severity; there may be counter-allegations, formal disciplinary proceedings against the whistleblower, suspension and dismissal. This is not even the full journey; we have to remind ourselves that all the whistleblower has done so far is report wrongdoing, misconduct or harm, yet their employment prospects are in serious danger by this point.

The whistleblower then escalates concerns externally to regulators. The system response is likely to be a full attack by this stage. If the whistleblower has not yet been dismissed, dismissal is almost certain, perhaps on trumped-up grounds, but probably on the lawful grounds of breakdown of employment relationship under the “some other substantial reason” route. At this point, the whistleblower’s employment prospects are likely to be damaged beyond repair. They are unlikely to obtain equivalent employment in the same field again. Regulators, oversight bodies and Government Departments are often part of the problem, and may turn a blind eye to the whistleblower’s disclosure and the fact that they have been suppressed and victimised. Sometimes they will even, outrageously, orchestrate the harm and suppression.

The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 kicks in only after the whistleblower has been harmed and, as has been mentioned, it allows the whistleblower to sue only for limited compensation, long after the event, and long after the public interest matters have been buried.

The Government continue to say that a review of whistleblowing legislation would be premature. Quite the opposite—it is well overdue. That is what those who have been affected by the failures of the legislation tell us, and it surprises me that some Members, on the Opposition and Government Benches, think that we know better than them. Whistleblowing legislation is about preventing disaster—preventing death or wrongdoing—so the legislation should be equally serious, and should provide appropriate pre-detriment protections for those who blow the whistle, and appropriate sanctions for those who are determined to punish and discount the voice of the whistleblower.

I end with a question. The motion refers to “protection for a broader range of people”, and widening the scope of the legislation. Job applicants, volunteers, interns, non-executive directors, public appointees, priests and ministers of religion, foster carers and members of the armed forces are not afforded protections for whistleblowing under the current regime. Have the Government any plans to extend the definition of “worker” to include people in those categories?

6.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk ( Norman Lamb) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for securing today’s important debate. I should also like to congratulate the right hon. Sir Norman Lamb on his knighthood, in recognition of his commitment to public service. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions today, and for the passion that they have expressed in voicing the concerns and putting their arguments on UK whistleblowing policy.

The Government recognise how valuable it is that whistleblowers are prepared to shine a light on wrongdoing. That is important at an organisational level but also, more broadly, for society, so that issues such as abuse of power are brought to light. This afternoon, stories have been shared in the House of people who, having acted as whistleblowers, have been disadvantaged and experienced severe detriment.

Effective whistleblowing policies enable workers to speak up, to prevent wrongdoing and fraud. That helps to protect employers from financial loss and reputational damage, and builds their trust with customers. Those who blow the whistle should be able to do so without fear of retributions. Employment protection enables workers who have blown the whistle to seek redress if they are dismissed or suffer detriment at the hands of the employer because they have made what is called a “protected disclosure” about wrongdoing that they have witnessed at work.

I can assure hon. Members that over recent years the Government have taken steps to support a cultural change in relation to whistleblowing in all sectors. A number of statutory and non-statutory improvements have been made. Those include the publication of guidance for whistleblowers on what they need to do to make disclosures while preserving their employment protections; and guidance for employers, including a non-statutory code of practice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling and the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) mentioned guidance. The hon. Lady spoke about the extent to which MPs have clarity in dealing with people who come to them for advice. I would like to go away and see whether there is any kind of guidance that we might publish, particularly for MPs, to improve our ability to help our constituents.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Minister heard some of my comments about the Financial Conduct Authority and its, at best, quite tepid approach to whistleblowers.
What are we to do when, effectively, an agency that is commissioned by the Government does not follow through on its whistleblower obligations?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend. I was preparing to come on to that, but he is absolutely right—the FCA falls under the control of Her Majesty’s Treasury. I shall go into greater detail later, but I want to meet HMT to raise with it some of the concerns that have been voiced today in the House about the FCA and whistleblowing policy.

Norman Lamb: I thank the Minister for her very kind comments. I am sure she will come to this, but would she agree to meet us to discuss the case for a review, because I think a review of the legislation—not just guidance—is absolutely necessary? It was a Conservative who introduced the private Member’s Bill, and it could be a Conservative Government who modernise it and ensure full protection for all whistleblowers.

Kelly Tolhurst: I am happy to meet colleagues to talk about things they would like done in this area, and I note that the right hon. Gentleman distinguished between guidance and a review, which I will come to.

I want to outline what the Government have done and what steps are being taken, though I understand that for some colleagues these have not gone far enough. We have increased the scope of the protections in whistleblowing legislation by extending them to NHS students, nurses, midwives and job applicants in the health sector. We have also fulfilled the commitment to keep the prescribed persons list up to date. In response to the recommendations from the Women and Equalities Committee, we have committed to adding the Equality and Human Rights Commission to the list of prescribed persons at our next annual update. It will be subject to parliamentary time, but we aim to present that to the House before the end of the year. As I outlined earlier, I will consider whether there are things we can do within that to make it clearer.

We have also introduced guidance for prescribed persons and employers to help them to support whistleblowers. The most recent reform was a new legislative requirement for most prescribed persons to produce an annual report on whistleblowing disclosures made to them by workers.

Justin Madders: I appreciate all the work that has been done, but, as I said earlier, does the 3% success rate at tribunals not tell the Government that the legislation is not working?

Kelly Tolhurst: The whistleblowing legislation at the moment is regarded as proportionate, but as new evidence comes to light and as things change, it is right that we keep these policies under review, and it is right that we have these debates in the House of Commons so that the Government can be challenged over what is happening now and how we can improve.

Dr Whitford: It has come out clearly from this debate that PIDA only allows 3% of people to get some redress—it is only some redress—so surely we require legislation that protects the whistleblower right at the start of the process, rather than trying to mop up afterwards.

Kelly Tolhurst: I understand the passion and concerns, and the statistics, but we need to implement a framework that works across all sectors, and actually in particular sectors some of the challenges are not easy. It is absolutely right that we do what we can at pace but that we also review and look at what happens in the future. That said, I take the hon. Lady’s point.

The relevant prescribed persons were required to publish the first of their reports by the end of September 2018, and those were placed in the parliamentary Libraries. The second annual reports will be due by the end of this September and will also be available in the House Libraries. The reporting duty increases confidence in the actions taken by the prescribed persons, because it enables greater transparency about how the disclosures are handled. With these improvements, we believe that the whistleblowing framework is proportionate, though I accept that as new evidence and practices come to light we will need to keep the legislation under review.

Hon. Members will be aware that the EU has developed a whistleblowing directive that we expect to be approved this summer. It is very wide-ranging and comprehensive, and we will have to consider how we take it into UK law. It could fall within the implementation period agreed under the terms of the withdrawal agreement, but, as we know, there are questions marks over that. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned workers’ rights. As colleagues know, the Government were clear throughout the EU negotiations that we would not reduce workers’ rights when we left the EU. Whistleblowing and how we proceed in that regard is covered by the overall provision for the protection of workers in employment. I hope that Members will take that as some kind of commitment from me, at least. As for more formal reviews, it is right and proper for us to review the Government’s whistleblowing framework. It would be premature to do so now, but that does not mean that it will not happen.

I welcome the ongoing work of the all-party parliamentary group on whistleblowing, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling and vice-chaired by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk. Officials are hoping to meet members of the APPG soon to discuss, in particular, the legislative framework and protections for workers, and to feed the results of those discussions into their internal work. I hope that my hon. Friend and the right hon. Gentleman have been able to speed up that process.

Many issues have been raised today, and I want to deal with as many of them as possible. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk talked about foster carers, and that is an issue about which I am particularly passionate. I understand the challenges faced by foster carers, and the importance of protecting people who are doing a fabulous job in looking after young people who desperately need help. Fostering services are required to have a complaints procedure and a whistleblowing policy. In addition, foster parents whose approval is terminated, or whose terms of approval are amended, have a right to challenge the decision, and the right to a review by means of the independent review mechanism. I understand that the right hon. Gentleman is to meet a representative of the Department for Education to discuss some of those challenges in more detail, and I shall be interested to hear about the outcome.
As the House will know, the Government embarked on a consultation earlier in the year. That has now closed, and we are ourselves consulting on the various elements. I know that there are certain opinions in the House. We will issue our response to the consultation very soon, but, as I have said before at the Dispatch Box, the use of NDAs in an attempt to cover up wrongdoing is unacceptable. We have made it clear that no NDA will prevent the protection of whistleblowers.

Many Members, including the right hon. Member for North Norfolk and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), have expressed concern about whistleblowing in the health sector. In 2016, the National Guardian’s Office was created, and there is now a network of “freedom to speak up” in every NHS trust so that staff can speak up and be given advice on raising concerns with their local guardian. There is also a national helpline. Following the independent inquiry into Gosport War Memorial Hospital, the Government responded by announcing they would legislate, subject to parliamentary time, for NHS trusts in England to report annually on the number of staff who speak up, thus increasing transparency. The Department of Health and Social Care is still considering further ways of strengthening protections for NHS workers.

I am very conscious of the time, Mr Speaker, but let me touch briefly on financial regulation. My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) mentioned the work that he does in his role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance. I have had many conversations with my hon. Friend about a number of issues. I understand that the Financial Conduct Authority is currently conducting two investigations of the activities of HBOS, including its communications with regulators, following issues relating to misconduct. I look forward to seeing the FCA that have been raised by Members on both sides

the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance. I have had many conversations with my

I am prepared to meet Treasury Ministers to take the matter further. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) mentioned his constituent Ms Davey. I shall be happy to meet Treasury Ministers to discuss that as well. I understand that it is a live case, and I shall be more than happy to speak to the hon. Gentleman after the debate. I understand all the concerns about the FCA that have been raised by Members on both sides of the House, and I hope they accept my assurances that I will take them forward.

On blacklisting, the Information Commissioner is opening a call for evidence on the implications of modern employment practice and recruitment and selection, and hopefully that will shed further light on what can be done. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) knows, we are undertaking reform of the FRC after the independent review by Sir John Kingman.

I hope I have given some reassurance to the House in the time I have had that I am taking this issue seriously. I cannot stand here and promise Members exactly what they want, but I am prepared to promise that while I am in this post I will do what I can to work with them and address as many of their concerns as possible.

Once again I thank all those whistleblowers, some of whom might be watching our debate, who feel that they have suffered detriment for what they have done, and I also thank those Members who have made sure their voices are heard in this Chamber.
already, with many signatures still coming in. I thank all those who signed, shared and promoted the petition, and this shows the strength of feeling in the community.

The petition states:
The Humble Petition of residents of the United Kingdom, Sheweth,

That Lloyds Bank have proposals to close their Yateley branch on 29 August 2019; further that this high street branch is particularly highly valued, especially by older residents and small business owners who often pop in to manage their finances; further that there has been an increase of branch usage in the last year by businesses, proving the demand for a high street branch; and further that if accounts are moved to Camberley or Fleet, this becomes between a one- and two-hour journey by public transport, which is clearly not in the best interests of our community.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges HM Government to take all possible steps to urge Lloyds Bank to reconsider this decision and to make sure that the banking industry considers the social implications of their actions.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

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Schools in Winchester

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

6.54 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): The title of this Adjournment debate is “Schools in Winchester”; it has therefore been drawn fairly wide, and deliberately so. Supporting schools in my constituency, which for the record is Winchester and Chandler’s Ford during this debate, is a key focus for me. Winchester is my home; it is the place where my wife and I choose to live and bring up our children, Emily and William. They both attend local state schools, in primary right now, with my daughter about to make the transition to “big school”, as it is culled, in September.

Like every MP, I get into my schools regularly—I was in one just on Friday—and this means that I see the system as a parent and as a local representative. Here is what people say where I come from:

“The schools in Winchester are excellent.”

“House prices are driven up by the quality of the schools here.”

“You can’t go wrong whichever school you go to.”

There is a lot of truth in each of those statements.

Across Hampshire for year R admissions, 92% of parents are offered their top choice of school. In the county, 91% of children attend schools that are rated good or outstanding—that was 69% when the Government came to office in 2010—and 68% of pupils in the county reached the expected standard in reading, writing and maths at key stage 2, compared with 65% across the country as a whole. In my Winchester constituency, we are ahead of the national average in the year 1 phonics check, in outcomes in reading, writing and maths at the end of primary and in the key progress 8 calculation, which takes primary school outcomes and measures them against a child’s GCSE outcomes five years later.

In my constituency, every school bar one is Ofsted rated good or outstanding, and that applied to every school until quite recently. Yes, there is a plan to turn around Stanmore Primary School, which requires improvement right now, but it is a lovely school with a huge amount going for it, and I hope it knows that we in Winchester are right behind it and supporting it under the new leadership to come. As well as some 30 primary or junior schools in the constituency, we have three secondary schools in the city: Westgate and Henry Beaufort, which are ranked good, and Kings’, which is excellent. We have two secondaries down in Chandler’s Ford: Toynbee, which is good and very much the rising star, and the excellent-ranked Thornden Academy, which is one of the top-ranked schools in the whole country. Finally, we have the Perins Academy over in Alresford. Perins is worthy of further mention because it heads up the Perins multi-academy trust, or MAT, which I know the Minister will be pleased to hear, primarily created to bring under its wing the previously failing Sun Hill Junior School in the town.

We also have some strong leaders in Winchester’s schools. They are committed individuals who are always professional and who always engage sensibly and helpfully with me, for which I am grateful. On leadership, I just want to pause and pay special tribute to a lady called Fey Wood from Oliver’s Battery Primary School in Winchester.
She retires later this month after a long career in teaching and a recent cancer battle, which she has come through with her trademark toughness and a lot of love from the city. When she came to the school in 2015, just 12 pupils applied to join the reception year. This year, there will be 34 who want to go to the school. I wish Fey a very happy and healthy retirement and thank her for everything she has done for the children and parents of Oliver’s Battery during her five years with us.

So we have got it all going on, as they say, and I cannot claim, as a constituency MP, that my mailbag is consistently full of complaints from parents about the quality of the education their children are receiving or from teachers about the policies of Her Majesty’s Government. The Minister will be pleased to hear that. I first became the MP for Winchester nine years ago, and in the early years of the 2010 Parliament we had major capacity problems, especially in the city of Winchester. The baby boom that strangely coincided with the financial crash of 2008 had rather predictably by 2012 led to demand outstripping supply for us. If I am honest, Hampshire was very slow to plan for this, but in the face of a pretty concerted campaign by me and local parents, its scope was first class.

One of my proudest achievements so far as Winchester’s MP was to deliver a £10 million investment plan that brought 420 new primary places across the city online for September 2014 and included expansions at Saint Peter’s—the Catholic school in Winchester—all Saints, St Bede and Weeke, plus the creation of Hampshire’s first all-through school at the Westgate, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) visited when she was Secretary of State.

So when it comes to schools in Winchester, capacity is in a good place now. Like many areas, we have major housing development taking place, including the new Kings Barton community, which will host the new Barton Farm Academy, sponsored by the excellent University of Winchester. I am thrilled to be a trustee of that school-to-be. We were on site last month for the groundbreaking ceremony for what will be a 420-place academy when full. Pupils will benefit from the university’s value-driven ethos, evidence-based learning and teaching and a passionate commitment to social justice. It is also an eco-school, and we are already incredibly proud of it.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)). Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr Freer.] Steve Brine: Ahead of this debate, I asked constituency heads for their thoughts on their school’s current funding position and whether they had had to make any reductions in teaching or other staff for the current 2019-20 financial year. I wanted to get a view on the teachers’ pension scheme, which the Minister will know is the source of much concern in the profession. I wanted to get from the heads themselves the current view, and it is fair to say I certainly got that.

There is an understanding across the board among schools in my Winchester constituency that per-pupil funding has risen, but there is also frustration at the reduction in the lump sum in Hampshire to bring it in line with the national funding formula, which was a decision taken by the schools forum a few years back. The truth is that has created winners and losers, depending on the size of the school, a point to which I will return. Concern is unanimous within the schools about the rising cost base, including the unpopular apprenticeship levy. I would therefore welcome comments from the Minister on what procurement help the Department can offer to help schools meet the challenge of rising costs.

Three of my secondary schools have told me that they have regrettably made staffing reductions in the past two years. Several told me about support workers, librarians and business managers not being replaced and about increasing science and maths class sizes. Kings’ School, which is ranked excellent, increased its intake by 24 pupils this year without increasing the number of classes, so tutor groups now have 30 pupils instead of 28. That increase in numbers has understandably undermined trust between the Winchester schools, putting something that we have called the Winchester schools teaching alliance in a fragile position and leading one secondary school to pull out of it altogether.

Several heads made the point that they have had no choice but to cut back on continuing professional development in recent years, which is inevitably going to hit staff recruitment and retention—if it is not hitting it already—in Winchester and central Hampshire, which is already an expensive part of the world to live in.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman’s permission to intervene and talked to him about the matter that he is bringing to the House. Does he agree that the Government need to refocus on the point of the schooling system, which is to educate children, prepare them to reach their potential and help them to find a job that makes the most of what they have? Instead, there is a fixation on micro-management, which ignores our duty to ensure that schools are funded correctly and given enough to operate to an acceptable standard.

Steve Brine: The hon. Gentleman and I have danced in this Chamber many times during Adjournment debates—usually with me at the Dispatch Box—so it is good to see him in his place. I agree with some of what he says, but I do not think that schools are micro-managed by this Government. The Government have a focus on rigour for some of the key outcomes, and the Schools Minister has been absolutely laser-focused on that, as he should be. A good school looks at the whole person, and my schools in Winchester do that, but they are finding that a challenge right now, and I will come on to the reasons why.

Finally on funding, I have my fair share of small rural primaries in Winchester, and the fair funding formula has not been good news for them all. For obvious reasons, the schools forum decision that I mentioned earlier has not created winners out of schools with a small role. Compton All Saints’ Church of England Primary School tells me that the new formula has left it operating with about £20,000 less than in previous years. That, as the Minister will appreciate, makes a massive difference in a school with only four classes.

As the Minister will know, the Government have now published their response to the recent consultation on funding the changes to the teachers’ pension scheme employer contribution rate. This welcome announcement confirms that the Government will fund all state-funded
schools, further education and sixth-form colleges and adult community learning providers to cover their increased costs from September 2019, when the rate for employer contributions is due to increase to 23.6%.

The letter to me from the Secretary of State for Education, dated April 2019, said the grant will be accompanied by a “supplementary fund” to which schools facing unusually high pension costs—typically, I suppose, where a school faces a shortfall between its grant allocation and its actual increase in pension costs—will be able to apply for additional support. Ministers said they planned to announce details of how schools can apply to the supplementary fund in the autumn of this year, so will the Minister please update us on progress?

More generally, the message I got is obviously one of relief that the TPS employer contribution has been fully funded for 2019, but schools need a lot more certainty—I am sure the Minister hears this a lot on his travels, and I know that he travels a lot—if they are to plan properly. Rolling one-year settlements are just not good enough.

One of my schools tells me that it is part way through a four-year deficit recovery plan and that it aims to balance in 2020-21, but the great unknown in its projections is staff costs. Governing bodies urgently need to take a long view of financial planning, and I urge the Minister in that respect.

Other themes running through the responses centre on help for children with additional needs and for parent teacher associations, and I am sure we have all engaged with PTAs in our constituencies. I hear that PTAs in my patch—I know that other people hear this, too—are increasingly being asked to step up for major capital projects in the absence of any chance that schools in my constituency will be eligible for external funds.

Will the Minister touch on what resource schools in places like Winchester can tap into when they need to make capital improvements to their site? I understand there is a capital maintenance grant, but Hampshire County Council tells me that it is calculated liabilities—in other words, what needs doing—are currently around £370 million, whereas the grant received this year is around £18 million, which is obviously a big gap.

I am very concerned by what I am hearing about children with special educational needs or additional needs, a subject about which you and I care passionately, Mr Speaker. If I am honest, this is the issue that brings together all the pressures, funding and otherwise, being communicated to me by headteachers in my constituency and by the local education authority.

I am getting a consistent message from heads that they are seeing a marked increase in the needs of children, especially with regard to social, emotional and mental health. As one head put it to me:

“Schools seem to be having to cope with increased levels of violent behaviour—not because the children are naughty but because we are unable to provide for their needs. Special school places are at a premium and children who need this specialist and therapeutic provision are having to be ‘held’ in mainstream school. This not only means their own needs are not being met—but also disrupts the learning of others. Teachers find working in this environment stressful and I have experienced good staff leaving because of it.”

This familiar view has been expressed to me by several of my headteachers.

Funding pressures at local authority level, for which I appreciate the Minister and the Department for Education are not responsible, have left social care and children’s services under pressure, and schools are increasingly finding themselves plugging the gap. Teachers are becoming involved as lead professionals in supporting families and home life.

Teachers have always done much more than teaching, of course, but right now it feels like they are expected to be housing officers, mental health professionals and even nutritionists to boot. I have spoken warmly of the teachers at my schools, and they are resourceful people, but that is pushing it. As one headteacher in Winchester put it to me recently, a small group of pupils are taking a very large slice of support and time, which obviously is then having an impact on the other children, but it is also having an impact on the children with less complex education, health and care plans, who then miss out as a result.

I thought that IDACI—the income deprivation affecting children index—on the proportion of people under the age of 16 who live in low-income households could be a place to turn, but sadly it is not, because my constituency will always fall short of that measure, even though there are pockets of deprivation in Winchester; these are nothing special just because they have a fantastic view of the south downs or the city of Winchester from the playground. If we add in how stretched child and adolescent mental health services are and how stretched the supporting families programme is in my area, we have a perfect storm, which says clearly that we need so much more support in our schools, to stand with these often highly vulnerable children and their families.

Clearly, we as a country are at a crossroads in our political life at this time. As we pause for breath before the new Prime Minister takes office later this month, I make this plea to my right hon. Friends the Members for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) and for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), as well as to the outgoing occupant of No. 10, who I know will hear these words acutely. When I was a Minister at the Department of Health and Social Care, as I was until recently, I was fortunate to work alongside two Secretaries of State as we landed a very healthy long-term financial settlement for the NHS and subsequently a long-term plan for how it would deliver the improved outcomes we wanted to see across the acute sector, public health and all the things I am passionate about. We clearly need a long-term plan for schools, backed by significant new investment—the first bit may be easier than the second—just as we did for the NHS.

As the Minister knows, I have long been a member and supporter of the f40 campaign group and we have had some success. I pay tribute to the Minister because I know that he has personally done a huge amount with f40 and to push the fairer funding agenda within government, during a time of difficult financial constraint. It is a fact that over the two years 2018-19 and 2019-20, per-pupil funding in Hampshire is going up by £167, which represents 4% compared with the national average of 3.2%, and when changes in pupil numbers are taken into account, total funding rises in my county by £42.5 million. But when the dedicated schools grant for 2019-20 is divided by the number of students in Hampshire, each pupil is worth £5,523, which is the fourth lowest figure in England.
Although we have received an additional £6 million over two years in high needs block funding, we clearly cannot keep up with demand. Let me give an example. In 2014, there were 5,500 pupils with a statement across Hampshire, but in 2019 there are 8,300 pupils with EHCPs. It does not take a genius to work out that this has led to a big deficit—a £10 million in-year deficit at the LEA. I know from independent studies that the UK is a high spender on state primary and secondary education by international standards, and real spending per pupil is half as much again higher than it was in 2000, during the so-called Blair years of plenty, but we still have all that I have set out in this debate and schools facing very real financial constraints, which I know, from his letter in April, that the Secretary of State and the Minister do not duck.

The long-term plan for schools must be part of a properly funded settlement that recognises the reductions in lump sum that have done so much to aid the current situation, enters into a new long-term deal with the profession on pay and pensions and, like the NHS long-term plan, takes seriously the wider services in society, such as CAMHS and social services, because when they fall down they significantly affect our schools.

I would say, with the benefit of my experience in the Department of Health and Social Care, that we did bring in a long-term settlement for the NHS and we did bring forward a long-term plan for the NHS, but we did not, at the same time, bring forward the people plan of the workforce or a funded public health settlement. That weakened the NHS long-term plan, and those two elements are now playing catch-up. We must not make that mistake again with a new long-term plan for schools.

We have much to celebrate in my constituency. I have given many figures in support of that and tried to be balanced in the way I have presented the schools in Winchester. We have strong leadership at the LEA, and I have given some stats relating to that, and very strong leadership in the schools themselves. Generally, we have a well-engaged parent body. However, there are signs for me, as a constituency MP for nearly a decade, that we face on high needs.

Above all, we need that long-term plan. We need a long-term financial settlement for schools in Winchester and throughout the country. I would be grateful if the excellent Minister and the rest of his team at the Department left a note to that effect when, or if—although I hope not—they leave office in a few weeks’ time.

7.15 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) on securing this debate and on his excellent and well-informed speech. He is particularly passionate about supporting schools in his constituency. We have many conversations around the building—in the Library and elsewhere—about his support for his local schools and his concerns about particular schools, and I do enjoy those conversations.

My hon. Friend shares the Government’s ambition that every state school should be a good school that teaches a rigorous and balanced curriculum and offers pupils world-class qualifications. Since 2010, the Government have focused on driving up academic standards, and I note that all but one of the state schools in the Winchester constituency are graded good or outstanding. I wish Fey Wood, the headteacher of Oliver’s Battery Primary School, a happy retirement after a long and successful career in teaching.

It is only by continuing to have the highest standards across the board that we can ensure that every school ensures that all children and young people are able to fulfil their potential. High standards, which are exemplified by many Winchester schools, have been a key focus of our radical reforms since 2010, but we recognise that there is still work to be done and remain committed to ensuring a sustained improvement in standards.

As part of our aspiration that all children should experience a world-class education, we reformed the national curriculum, restoring knowledge to its heart and raising expectations of what children should be taught. This is being delivered by all maintained schools and sets an ambitious benchmark for academies that we expect them at least to match. Too many pupils, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, were being entered into low-quality qualifications, so we also reformed GCSEs to put them on a par with qualifications in the best-performing jurisdictions in the world. The result is a suite of new GCSEs that rigorously assess the knowledge and skills acquired by pupils during key stage 4, and are in line with the expected standards in countries with high-performing education systems.

I note that for Winchester the average attainment 8 measure, which shows the average score of a pupil’s eight best GCSE grades, is well above the national average. Clearly, secondary schools in my hon. Friend’s constituency have adapted well to the new, more demanding GCSEs.

The Government also introduced the English baccalaureate school performance measure, which consists of English, maths, at least two sciences, history or geography, and a language. Those subjects form part of the compulsory curriculum in many of the highest-performing countries internationally, at least up to age 15 or 16. The percentage of pupils in state-funded schools who take the EBacc rose from 22% in 2010 to 38% in 2018, but we want that to rise to 75% by 2022 and to 90% by 2025. I recognise the challenge that presents, but it is right that we should aim to provide the best possible education and therefore more opportunity for young people.

Again, Winchester has risen to the challenge: in 2018, some 55.3% of pupils in the constituency’s state secondary schools entered the EBacc. My hon. Friend will be pleased that Winchester is leading the way.

The Westgate School in Winchester is doing particularly well, with 66% of pupils entering EBacc—well above national and local authority averages. Having young people learning languages is vital if Britain is to be an outward-looking global nation, so it is excellent that 74% of Westgate’s year 11 pupils studied a language GCSE in 2018.

Literacy is hugely important, Mr Deputy Speaker—sorry, Mr Speaker. You have been there long enough; I should know by now that you are not a Deputy Speaker. Children who are reading well by age five are five times more likely than their peers to be on track by age 11 in reading, and 11 times more likely to be on track in mathematics. Ensuring that all pupils in England’s schools
are taught to read effectively has been central to our reforms, and we are now seeing the fruits of that work. By the end of year 1, most children should be able to decode simple words using phonics, and once they can do this, they can focus on their wider reading skills and develop a love of reading.

In England, phonics performance has improved significantly since we introduced the phonics screening check in 2012. At that time, just 58% of 6-year-olds correctly read at least 32 out of the 40 words in the check. In 2018, that figure was 82%. In the district of Winchester, 84% of pupils—I think my hon. Friend mentioned that figure—passed the year 1 check. While that is just above the average, I am keen that we are ambitious and that the percentage of pupils meeting this standard continues to rise.

We can see that this focus on phonics is having an impact. In 2016, England achieved its highest ever score in the reading ability of nine and 10-year-olds, moving from joint 10th to joint eighth in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study—PIRLS—ranking. That follows our greater focus on reading in the primary curriculum, and the particular focus on phonics. At key stage 2, Winchester again does well, with 74% of pupils meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths in 2018, compared with 64% nationally and 68% in Hampshire—a figure that my hon. Friend also cited.

Thornden School is a highly successful academy in my hon. Friend’s constituency—an example of the freedom we have given frontline professionals through the academies and free schools programme. Since 2010, the number of academies has grown from 200 to over 8,500, including state-funded primary and free schools. Four out of ten state-funded primary and secondary schools are now part of an academy trust. Converting to being an academy is a positive choice that governors, trustees and clerks play in supporting our education system, and especially the additional reach and capacity that a multi-academy trust can bring to improving the education of even more children.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of capital funding. Core funding for schools and high needs has risen from £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion in this financial year. This year, all schools are attracting an increase of at least 1% per pupil, compared with their 2017-18 baselines. Those schools that have been historically underfunded will attract up to 6% more per pupil, compared with 2017-18—a further 3% per pupil on top of the 3% they gained last year—as we continue to address historic injustices. In Winchester, the per pupil percentage increase in this financial year is 6.5%, compared with 2017-18.

We are well aware, of course, that local authorities and schools are facing challenges in managing their budgets in the context of increasing costs and rising levels of demand. We will be making the strongest possible case for education at the spending review and pushing for maximum levels of visibility for the education sector. I hope my hon. Friend will be reassured by that. The Secretary of State has made it clear that, as we approach the spending review, we will back headteachers to have the resources they need to deliver a world-class education.

My hon. Friend asks how we are helping schools to meet cost pressures. We have announced a strategy to help schools reduce their costs and make the most from every pound. This strategy includes recommended deals covering energy, water, IT and photocopying. Our Teaching Vacancies site, which is now available across the country, is a free job listing website that will drive down schools’ recruitment costs. We have also launched a new price comparison site called School Switch to help schools lower their energy price by comparing tariffs.

My hon. Friend raised the important issue of high needs funding. We recognise that local authorities, including Hampshire, are facing high-needs cost pressures. That is why we allocated an additional £250 million of funding towards high needs over this year and next year, on top of the increases we had already promised. Hampshire will receive £6 million of this additional funding.

Our response to these pressures cannot simply be additional funding. That is why in December the Secretary of State wrote to local authority chief executives and directors of children’s services to set out our plans. Those plans include reviewing current special educational needs content in initial teacher training provision, and ensuring a sufficient supply of educational psychologists, trained and working in the system. We will continue to engage with Hampshire County Council and other local authorities, along with schools, colleges, parents and health professionals, to ensure that children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities get the support they need and deserve.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of capital funding. Regrading capital funding for improvements, for financial year 2019-20 we have allocated £22.7 million to maintained and voluntary-aided schools under Hampshire County Council. This includes a school condition allocation of £18.98 million for Hampshire to invest in maintaining and improving its schools, as well as a total of £3.7 million in devolved formula capital for individual schools to spend on their own priorities. In 2018-19, maintained and voluntary-aided schools in Hampshire also benefited from an extra allocation of £6.5 million from the additional £400 million announced at last year’s Budget.

Six schools in Hampshire are included in the priority school building programme, which is rebuilding or refurbishing buildings in the worst condition at over 500 schools. Hampshire has been allocated £231.2 million to provide new school places between 2011 and 2021, which they can invest in all types of schools, including academies. The latest available data shows that there are 10,700 more school places in Hampshire today than in 2010.

I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue of teachers’ pensions. The teachers’ pensions scheme is an important one for this country. It is one of only eight that are guaranteed by the Government, because we believe that
it is important that we continue to offer excellent benefits in order to attract and retain talented teachers. The employers’ contribution rate to the teachers’ pension scheme will increase from 16.4% to 23.6% in September 2019, as my hon. Friend pointed out. As confirmed in April, we will be providing funding for this increase in 2019-20 for all state-funded schools, further education and sixth-form colleges, and adult community learning providers. This includes local authority centrally-employed teachers, teachers at music education hubs and funding to local authorities for pupils with EHCPs who are educated in independent settings.

My hon. Friend mentioned the supplementary fund. We have published how we are distributing the pensions funding to schools, but in order to match the funding as closely as we can to the actual cost that individual schools will face, we are allocating the funding using a per-pupil formula. That means we need a supplementary fund, to ensure that no school is placed in financial difficulty by the pension changes. It will mean that no school faces a shortfall of more than 0.05% of their overall budget. We are currently working with stakeholders on the specifics of the fund, with a focus on ensuring that the processes involved are as efficient and streamlined as possible for schools. We will announce details of the supplementary fund in October, including how schools can apply, alongside publishing school-level grant allocations.

I want to congratulate my hon. Friend on the success of many schools in his constituency at improving and maintaining the high standards that our children deserve. I have set out the range of reforms that the Government have introduced since 2010 with the sole focus of raising standards. I thank him for raising his concerns about funding, and I hope I have reassured him that we will be making the strongest possible case at the spending review and pushing for maximum levels of visibility for the education sector.

Question put and agreed to.

7.29 pm

House adjourned.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): We are pleased to announce that we will be reviewing the guidance as part of the civil society strategy published last year, and we still anticipate launching the review before the summer recess. In fact, I hope to do it next week.

Alex Norris: Up and down the country, there is less and less for our young people to do. The Government’s own civil society strategy says that youth work and youth services can be “transformational”, so why has funding for them fallen by 70% since 2010?

Mims Davies: This Government are committed to supporting youth activities and our young people. In fact, I have had several meetings just this week on the youth charter and our vision for young people over the next 10 years. The National Lottery is supporting positive activities for our young people through £80 million of funding, and of course we have the National Citizen Service.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Government’s serious violence strategy rightly places programmes for young people at its heart. Will the Minister assure the House that that strategy is going to start delivering those projects on the ground, to divert young people away from gangs and crime?

Mims Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. The Secretary of State and I were part of the Prime Minister’s summit on serious violence in April this year. It is right that we take a multi-agency approach to tackling knife crime and serious violence. The Government are investing £200 million in the youth endowment fund to support interventions with young people, and particularly those who are at risk.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On Independence Day, may I congratulate all my American cousins on this fine day when they broke away from Britain? I still have my green card from when I emigrated.

Youth services should learn from what is done in the best cities in the United States. It is high time that we put proper Government resources into youth services and stopped relying on charities, although partnerships are good. The fact of the matter is that in most constituencies, youth services are on their knees.

Mims Davies: I thank our charity sector for the work that it does in this area. The hon. Gentleman is right that we should not rely on charities, although we must learn from and listen to them, and listen to young people. In terms of lessons from America, one issue that came up in the knife crime summit was that particular social media platforms are allowing groups to come together, organise and cause more problems on our streets. This Department is determined to ensure that we work together, in both my sector and that of my hon. Friend the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries, to support and keep our young people safe.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I agree that local authorities have a role to play in youth services, as well as the charitable and voluntary sector, but does the Minister agree that the private sector also has a role? In my neighbouring constituency of Grimsby, a youth zone is being proposed, funded by local entrepreneurs. Does she agree that that is one way forward?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for raising entrepreneurship, which seems to be a theme in our party at the moment. Looking again to America, we can and must learn from altruism and philanthropy. I thank people for giving directly back to their community, which we encourage in the civil society strategy.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I am delighted to see so many of my former Whips Office colleagues, including the Chief Whip, in the Chamber to hear me speak at the Dispatch Box for the first time—no pressure.

UK Youth, a leading national charity, estimates that the National Citizen Service underspent by more than £50 million this year. Many organisations are desperate to support our young people. Will the Minister explain what plans the Government have to reallocate the underspend to the many fantastic charities that support our wonderful young people?

Mims Davies: I welcome the hon. Lady to her post. I know that she is very passionate about this area and was part of our knife crime summit in April. I met UK Youth and the NCS yesterday as part of our youth charter work. Work is going on with the Treasury to ensure that all our youth sector is supported, including through the underspend of the NCS.

Superfast Broadband: Rural Areas

2. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on increasing access to superfast broadband in rural areas.
The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The Government’s superfast broadband programme has met its target and is now providing superfast coverage to 97% of premises, including 94.8% of premises in my hon. Friend’s constituency. In addition, we have just launched the rural gigabit connectivity programme, with £200 million of funding, to begin to deliver even faster, gigabit speeds to the most remote and rural parts of the UK.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Clearly, improved access to superfast broadband in places such as Shropshire will reduce the number of car journeys needing to be made. What assessment has her Department made of that improvement in helping us to reach the net zero carbon contribution target we have set?

Margot James: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Although we have not conducted a specific study on the environmental impact of faster broadband speeds, we have considered it as part of a wider evaluation. We have found that the use of cloud computing has an effect in reducing commuting time, and we will be exploring this more specifically in our superfast broadband programme evaluation next year.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): May I ask the Minister, in using the word “rural”, not to forget communities in the south Wales valleys that can be quite socially isolated? Will she set out what funding she will put in place to deal with the geography of some of the south Wales valleys, which are still suffering with painfully slow broadband?

Margot James: I think the hon. Gentleman asked me a similar question last summer, and I am delighted to say that his intervention last year led directly to my recommending to the Chancellor that he include the Welsh valleys in the first pilot of the roll-out of the rural gigabit connectivity programme, so the hon. Gentleman can hold us to that. I also want to mention that the voucher scheme has been enhanced, so that small and medium-sized enterprises in the Welsh valleys will now get access to a voucher worth £3,500 and residents a voucher worth £1,500 to connect on to the public buildings that the programme will connect.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): In my hon. Friend’s excellent work in rolling out broadband to rural areas, will she ensure that we do not inadvertently neglect urban and semi-urban areas in the London borough of Bromley? Areas around Down and Farnborough village have woeful access and, sadly, BT does not have plans to roll out the fibre needed to upgrade it. Could she possibly help?

Margot James: I will certainly help my hon. Friend. He points out that suburban and urban areas have a really worrying lack of access not so much to superfast, but certainly to decent speeds. We are incorporating those via incentives to the private sector to connect. That is now going very well indeed, with Openreach alone connecting 20,000 premises a week.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): As more and more of our banks are closing branches across the country, it is becoming vital for people, particularly in rural areas, to have access to online facilities and good broadband. The way this has been rolled out, particularly in Scotland, has not suited rural communities. Can the Minister assure me that there will be discussions with the Treasury, the Scottish Government and the local authorities that will be involved in the future to ensure that our communities in Scotland actually get a better service and are able to access finances?

Margot James: I sympathise with the hon. Lady. Unfortunately, there have been appalling delays to the procurement system underpinning the Scottish Government’s R100—Reaching 100%—programme. I am reliably informed that they are almost at the end of that process and that they are about to award contracts this autumn. It has been a painful process, but my officials have been discussing it with the Scottish Government, and I am confident that it will be improved. We also have programmes from my Department that are already rolling out in Scotland.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister will be aware that, under the confidence and supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist party, the Government have set aside some hundreds of millions of pounds for rural broadband across all of Northern Ireland. What discussions has she had with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in Northern Ireland to ensure that that rural broadband roll-out is completed?

Margot James: I know that in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency and in the rest of Northern Ireland there has obviously been a delay in deploying that budget on account of there being no Government in Northern Ireland. My officials are in discussions with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ameliorate that situation, and I will write to him with the latest details.

3. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle the potential inappropriate use of algorithms in the (a) public and (b) private sector.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): We have asked the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation to review the potential for bias in the use of algorithms, and it is considering usage in both the public and private sectors on crime and justice, financial services, recruitment and local government. The centre will publish an interim report later this month, and it will make recommendations to the Government early next year. We will then decide how to proceed.

Chi Onwurah: The past 10 years have seen the most revolutionary and rapid changes in how technology is used in public services, politics, work and leisure, yet the Government have had to be dragged kicking and screaming to implement the most basic digital protections, and they are behind even Google and Facebook in calling for regulation. The Secretary of State talks about another review, but algorithmic bias is a threat to all our citizens in the form of algorithmic rule. Will he take the opportunity to get on the front foot and put in place regulations to protect our citizens?
Jeremy Wright: We are on the front foot, and the hon. Lady’s characterisation is entirely wrong. The world looks to the UK as a leader in this field. I talk to counterparts across the world about the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation, and they are interested in a move that we are making that no one else has yet made. As the hon. Lady knows—she has looked carefully at this issue—the online harms White Paper will deal with a range of issues and produce regulation that is, once again, world leading.

TV Licences for Over-75s

4. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): If he will support the maintenance of free TV licences for the over-75s after 2020.

8. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to maintain free TV licences for the over-75s after 2020.

9. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): If he will support the maintenance of free TV licences for the over-75s.

11. Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to maintain free TV licences for the over-75s after 2020.

13. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to maintain free TV licences for the over-75s after 2020.

14. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to maintain free TV licences for the over-75s after 2020.

Jeremy Wright: Nobody is hiding behind the BBC. Legislation has now provided that this decision should be for the BBC to take, and if the hon. Lady listens to the BBC, that is exactly its message—it is its decision and responsibility. She makes a good point about veterans, and I have raised that issue with the BBC. I expect it to be able to do more for veterans, and it should.

David Linden: In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) the Secretary of State referred to 2017, but in that year his party’s manifesto stated that there would be no cut to free TV licences. On Monday, people in Duke Street were infuriated by that move. There are 6,500 over-75s in my constituency. Will the Minister come and visit and tell them why he is planning to cut their free TV licence?

Jeremy Wright: I am happy to send the message that I share their disappointment, and I have made that clear on a number of occasions. In fact, we can go back further than 2017, because in 2015 the arrangement was made with the BBC that this responsibility would transfer to it as part of the charter settlement. The BBC has known about this for some time, and it had the opportunity to prepare for it. In our view, it needs to do better.

Rosie Duffield: In my constituency of Canterbury, there are some 6,250 households at risk of losing their free TV licence. Why are the Government failing to live up to their responsibility to older residents? Is it simply the case that they are entirely complacent about receiving their support in any upcoming general election?

Jeremy Wright: No, I do not accept that for one moment. The Government’s record on support for older people has been remarkable. We have been able to provide £1,600 more per year for those on the state pension than was managed in 2010 under a Labour Government. We have done more on loneliness than any Government before us. We introduced a Minister with responsibility for tackling loneliness. For the first time, we have a strategy on loneliness and we have put our money where our mouth is with £20 million of investment. I am afraid the Labour party in government did none of those things.

Mr Jim Cunningham: If it was a decision for the BBC, why did the Government put it in their manifesto? Does the Minister not think he has a moral obligation to make up the difference if the BBC has a problem? Many pensioners suffer from loneliness and for them the BBC is a lifeline to the world.

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of loneliness, and I will repeat the points I have just made. The Government have done a huge amount to combat this very substantial social problem. The truth is that we still expect the BBC to do better in this area, but it is the BBC’s responsibility. The responsibility
was transferred to the BBC in 2017, after it was agreed with it in 2015. The BBC itself has made it clear that this is now its responsibility.

Daniel Zeichner: In the London Evening Standard on 11 June, there was a very interesting headline on page two, stating: “Tax campaigners defend axing of free TV licences for wealthy OAPs”.

Wealthy old-age pensioners? Will the Secretary of State join me in condemning the slippery language used by the editor of the London Evening Standard, an architect of this debacle? My 5,000 pensioners who risk losing their free TV licence in Cambridge are not wealthy.

Jeremy Wright: As the hon. Gentleman says, wealthy pensioners are not the only ones who will lose their TV licence. That is certainly right. That is exactly why we continue to say to the BBC that it needs to do better than it is doing at the moment.

There are some very interesting statistics that I should perhaps share with the House at this point. Last year and this financial year, the BBC has been sharing with the Government the cost of the over-75 licence concession. Last year, the cost of the concession was £677 million. The Government paid £468 and the BBC paid £209 million. This financial year, the cost is £700 million. The Government paid £247 million and the BBC paid £453 million. The cost of the concession as the BBC intends to operate it from 2020 onwards is, by its estimate, £260 million. That is substantially less than the BBC is paying towards to the concession this financial year. The BBC would say, and I would agree with it, that it is able to supply a good service this year while still paying £453 million towards that concession. That seems to be an interesting statistic.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Why not get rid of TV licences altogether for everyone and force the BBC to compete for its revenues like every other broadcaster? The supermarket equivalent would be forcing everyone, under threat of criminal sanction, to spend £150 in Tesco even if they shop at Aldi, Sainsbury’s, Co-op or elsewhere.

Jeremy Wright: I cannot agree with my hon. Friend. In previous years we looked carefully at whether this is the right way to fund the BBC, and the conclusion reached was that it is. The Government have no plans to change that fundamental funding model.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Does the law allow the BBC to discriminate? If it does, should it not be the BBC that is responsible for bringing prosecutions, not the state?

Jeremy Wright: My right hon. Friend raises an interesting point. As I have said, it is of course a matter for the BBC to decide how this concession should be structured. It is open to the BBC, as it has demonstrated, to choose a model that does not offer a free TV licence to every over-75 year old. The question of enforcement is an interesting one that we will go on considering. I would hope very much that the BBC will take seriously the comments of my right hon. Friend and others about how this obligation should be properly enforced in the future.

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Perhaps the most difficult part of growing old is the loss of a husband, wife or partner—the person you have shared your every joy and every thought with, often over a lifetime. There are nearly 600,000 widowed men and 1.5 million widowed women over the age of 75. An estimated seven out of 10 widows and widowers will lose their free TV licence. That is nearly 1.5 million people who have lost their life partner who will now be stripped of the comfort of their television by this Conservative Government. Can the Secretary of State live with that?

Jeremy Wright: The decision that has been made is to transfer that responsibility to the BBC. How the BBC chooses to exercise its responsibility is, as it and we say, its responsibility. The point that the hon. Gentleman makes is a fair one, and it needs to be heard by the BBC as it decides what more it can do to help those who are in particular need or are particularly vulnerable. That is exactly the conversation that I am having with the BBC at the moment, and that we will continue. The decision for the hon. Gentleman is how he intends to back up the pledges that he has so far made to take that responsibility back to the taxpayer, and how he intends to fund that change.

Youth Services

5. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What recent steps has he taken to improve the quality of local youth services. [917744]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I am excited and proud to be working cross-Government, with this Department leading, on developing a new youth charter for our young people—the Government’s vision for the next 10 years—and that work has continued this week. The Government invest in the Centre For Youth Impact to support sector-led evaluation and to build evidence of the impact of local youth services, and we are working with the National Youth Agency and partners to renew the youth worker qualifications and review that curriculum.

Tim Loughton: “Positive for Youth” was the Government’s last comprehensive youth policy document. It contained many good examples of joint project working between local authorities and charities and philanthropic businesses, a pledge to youth-proof Government policy, and a pledge to publish annually a set of national measures to demonstrate progress in improving outcomes for young people. When does the Minister plan to update the House on that progress?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for his pertinent reminder to the Government and the House to focus on our youth. I believe that the youth charter will reaffirm the Government’s commitment. It will state that our young people should have a strong voice, and that we must listen to it and take note of the issues that they care about. It will set out how we should act on what they tell us and, more importantly, it will state that we are actively involving them in key policy making. It is vital that we do that. I had the youth steering group in with me just this week. So the sector is very much being heard, and will be reported back and listened to.
Commercial FM Radio

6. David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): What steps he plans to take to increase the provision of FM frequencies for commercial radio in (a) the UK and (b) Morecambe Bay.

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The UK’s independent broadcasting regulator, Ofcom, is responsible for radio spectrum planning, and Ofcom’s view is that due to the general scarcity of FM spectrum, the scope for additional frequency resources to be made available to commercial radio is extremely limited. Ofcom’s current priority for the use of remaining FM spectrum is community radio, and I hope that will be of benefit to Morecambe Bay.

David Morris: Will the Minister carry out an investigation of the audit suitability for FM spectrum in the north of Lancashire as soon as possible, to free up any spectrum service that should be licensed, to facilitate a new local service, as we need more local services in that region?

Margot James: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need more local services, but there is more than one route to that. I cannot undertake to commence a review of the north-west specifically, and it is for the independent regulator Ofcom to distribute remaining FM frequency, but I would like to reassure my hon. Friend that the development of small-scale DAB multiplexes will provide many opportunities for community radio stations, not least in the Lancaster and Morecambe area.

Tackling Loneliness

7. Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help tackle loneliness.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): As we have heard this morning, the UK is a world leader in tackling loneliness, and the first Government loneliness strategy was launched last October. It has been globally recognised, and includes the £11.5 million building connections fund, announced over Christmas, which is a partnership between the Government, the National Lottery and the Co-op Foundation. The first progress report is due later this year will have a youth focus.

Mims Davies: I particularly remember that meeting and I welcomed the opportunity to join her. We currently have 60 different policies across nine Departments, but I would like to point out that loneliness and isolation can affect people at any age and at any time—including young carers and care leavers. We need to support everybody of every age and every gender. I hope that the new policies that we are working on and will announce later this year will have a youth focus.

Commercial Local Radio

10. John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the regulation of commercial local radio.

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The regulatory framework for commercial radio on FM and AM set nearly 30 years ago has not kept pace with market changes, and we have taken steps to address that. I welcome Ofcom’s October 2018 changes to the localness guidance, which will reduce the burdens on commercial radio while maintaining requirements for local stations to provide local news and other content.

John Grogan: Given that media giant Global has cut no fewer than 11 local radio studios in England, despite making massive profits, is there not a danger that under those weaker Ofcom regulations commercial local radio will increasingly lose its localness, and broadcasts will be made from London or several regional centres?

Margot James: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s concern, but the localness guidelines are strict and tough, and will require large commercial radio corporations to have local studios. They will have to provide a serious amount of local news content, weather, driving information and so on, so I do not share his concern. It is up to Ofcom to police this, and it is doing a good job. We must remember that for local commercial radio, and indeed community radio, to be sustainable, they needed a lighter touch regulatory regime.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May I briefly beg your indulgence, Mr Speaker, to congratulate St Fagans Museum in my constituency on winning the museum of the year award, which was presented last night in a ceremony at the Science Museum?
The hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) said earlier that we needed more local radio, but the results of this deregulation have been job cuts and fewer stations in what is a profitable commercial sector. Is it not time for the decision to be reviewed to assess its impact on localness, and to ensure that local radio does not just become national commercial radio?

Margot James: The localness guidelines were published as recently as October last year, so I think it would be premature to announce a review of their impact, but I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that they were welcomed by both commercial and community radio stations. Ofcom has received about 700 expressions of interest in the small-scale DAB multiplexes for which we legislated last month. We hope to be able to complete that legislation by the end of the year so that Ofcom will be able to start issuing licences to hundreds of community radio stations up and down the country. I think that we will see a great growth in this fantastic sector.

2022 Commonwealth Games

12. Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham benefit (a) neighbouring boroughs and (b) Walsall.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): The Commonwealth Games in Birmingham will be the biggest sporting event ever held in the west midlands. Last week the Government announced that the region would benefit from nearly £800 million of investment. The venues for the games will extend from Royal Leamington Spa to Coventry and to Cannock Chase. There will be 11 days of sport across the west midlands, along with cultural and business engagement, trade and volunteering. The hon. Gentleman should keep his diary clear, because the event will be showcased at the Walsall shopping centre on 20 July.

Eddie Hughes: I understand that the training venues will be announced later this year. Will the Minister put in a good word for the British judo Centre of Excellence in Walsall?

Mims Davies: The available training venues are currently being reviewed. I understand that there has already been an initial meeting with representatives of the British judo Centre of Excellence and the University of Wolverhampton regarding the possible use of their facilities. Many great sporting facilities in the west midlands and, indeed, across the United Kingdom will want to host training events, and I am sure that they will receive a very warm welcome from my hon. Friend.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Five junctions up the M6 from Walsall is the great city of Stoke-on-Trent, which stands ready to play its part. How will the Minister ensure that the benefits to which she has referred are felt throughout our region and not just in the conurbation, and what strategy does her Department have for a long-lasting legacy programme so that those benefits do not disappear once the games have ended?

Mims Davies: The hon. Gentleman has made an important point about the joy that will be felt not only in the west midlands but in the whole of our country. We should bear in mind the economic impact of the games in Glasgow in 2014, which brought more than £740 million to Scotland’s economy, and the £1.3 billion boost for the Gold Coast following the games in Queensland. We expect the Birmingham games to bring jobs and opportunities such as volunteering, with up to 45,000 people involved in delivering the event. This is a catalyst for a legacy in terms of facilities and on the ground, and I am working towards that result as we head towards “three years out”.

Topical Questions

T1. [911754]Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): Semi-finals are dangerous places for England’s sports teams. I am sure that the whole House will wish to offer its commiserations to the Lionesses following Tuesday’s result, but also our huge congratulations on their performance throughout the World cup competition. Although it did not produce the result that we wanted, Tuesday’s match attracted the largest live television audience so far this year, and the team has sparked a significant change in the visibility of, and support for, women’s football and women’s sport generally. That in itself is a fantastic achievement. We also send our best wishes to the England men’s cricket team for their semi-final next week in a world cup that has given people around the world another good reason to visit the United Kingdom this year.

Tourism is a significant but often overlooked part of our economy, and last week we launched the tourism sector deal, the first of its kind. The coming together of industry and Government will mean more investment in accommodation, skills and apprenticeships and data to ensure that we attract even more tourists and business visitors. We also intend to ensure that everyone can visit by making the UK the most accessible tourism destination in Europe by 2025. Tourism matters greatly in many of our constituencies, and the sector deal will give it the long-overdue Government recognition that it deserves.

Thangam Debbonaire: May I associate myself with the remarks of the Secretary of State about the Lionesses, and also of course wish good luck to the England cricket team?

The epidemic of appalling online bullying demonstrates that the online world is effectively not abiding by the same rules as the offline world, and people are suffering right now, so now that the consultation on the White Paper on online harms has closed, will the Secretary of State urge the new Prime Minister to prioritise legislative time so that we can sort this law out and protect people who are suffering right now?

Jeremy Wright: Yes. I believe that this is a priority, and I believe that the next Government should see it as such, and I believe that we should see legislation coming forward in the next parliamentary Session. The hon. Lady is right: the consultation on the White Paper concluded yesterday, but as she will have heard me say
before, I believe that this is a groundbreaking change that we need to get right, so the Government intend to continue to listen, notwithstanding the fair point she makes about the urgency of the situation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to take this opportunity—I hope the House will join me as I do so—to congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) and the other three members of the string quartet known as Statutory Instruments on their magnificent performance in Speaker’s House on Tuesday lunchtime; it was a virtuoso display of outstanding music—stirring, inspiring and admirable in every way. If you haven’t heard them, you haven’t lived.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Particularly the cellist.

Mr Speaker: Yes, particularly the cellist, as the Government Whip on duty chuntered from a sedentary position to very considerable public benefit.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Will the Minister update the House on the prospect of the Bayeux tapestry coming to this country on loan after the Bayeux museum is temporarily closed after 2020?

Jeremy Wright: We very much look forward to that prospect. Of course, as my hon. Friend will recognise, there are some technical challenges to be overcome to ensure that the tapestry can be properly displayed and protected, but this is an example of Anglo-French co-operation of which we expect to see a great deal more in the future.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): More than 6 million people watched England take on Scotland in the women’s World cup and, as the Secretary of State just said, nearly 12 million people watched England take on the USA, and we send our condolences to the Lionesses. We have had some iconic and memorable moments. Hayley Lauder from my Livingston constituency got her 100th cap, and none of us will forget that magnificent celebration from Megan Rapinoe that made women everywhere say, “You can take up space; you can celebrate and you can be in sport.”

However, a recent study found that 65% of broadcast sport in Scotland was taken up by men’s football alone, and, as the Secretary of State knows, only 2% of print media is about women’s sport. We must do more to capitalise on the incredible results from the women’s World cup to make sure that women’s sport, and particularly women’s football, continues to be recognised in the way it has been.

Jeremy Wright: I agree with the hon. Lady; she has been a passionate advocate for this for as long as she has been in the House, and I am sure long before, and she is right. But I think we should recognise that some significant progress has been made over the last few weeks and months; even six months ago, if we had said in this House that we expected a women’s football match to have the largest live TV audience of the year so far, standing as we are in July, I do not think any of us would have believed it. So significant progress is being made. It was great to be able to see that match on the BBC on Tuesday and feel there to be such a large audience for it. It is, as the hon. Lady says, inspiring girls and women to play more sport, and that is exactly what we want to see more of.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Does the Minister agree that one of the crucial aspects of tackling loneliness is raising awareness of the services, support and activities that are available in local communities, and what are the Government doing to achieve this?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this point, because it is so important. Nobody walks around with an arrow on their head saying that they are lonely. There are times in our life when we feel lost or isolated and we need someone to turn to, so the 1,000 social prescribers will be very helpful. I know that my hon. Friend has done something directly in his own constituency with an older people’s fair—an event around loneliness—to do just that, and I welcome all constituencies doing this.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): On behalf of all my colleagues on the Benches behind me, I would like to wish the very best of luck to the England cricket team. We also wish the best of British to all our British tennis players at Wimbledon, and we would like to thank the Lionesses for inspiring a generation.

Our children are facing a deadly obesity crisis. Obesity is rivalling smoking as a leading cause of cancer. Being healthy is about keeping fit and having a healthier diet, but the sugar tax has also been very welcome in promoting a healthier lifestyle, especially for children and young people. The Sports Minister has been an ardent role to play in tackling obesity, so will she today publicly commit to resisting any call to scrap the sugar tax, even from her favoured candidate for Prime Minister?

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Lady. For raising this issue. She and I share a great passion for getting and keeping our young people active. I hope to announce the school sports action plan, alongside colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education, before the summer recess. We are very close to this. All money that comes into PE and sport from the premium—the levy has doubled this—is important. I hope to see Government investment in school sport continue in any way, shape or form.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): As this is 4 July, Independence Day, and despite this week’s football result, will the Secretary of State, who like me has an American spouse, comment—positively, of course—on the very many benefits of our special relationship with the US?

Jeremy Wright: Neither my hon. Friend nor I would dare to do anything else, today or on any other day. He is right to suggest that this remains a very special relationship, not just in our households but across the nation.

T2. [911755] Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I welcome this week’s announcement from the big five gambling companies that they will pay towards treatment and the other three members of the string quartet known as Statutory Instruments on their magnificent performance in Speaker’s House on Tuesday lunchtime; it was a virtuoso display of outstanding music—stirring, inspiring and admirable in every way. If you haven’t heard them, you haven’t lived.

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Jeremy Wright: I agree with the hon. Lady; she has been a passionate advocate for this for as long as she has been in the House, and I am sure long before, and she is right. But I think we should recognise that some significant progress has been made over the last few weeks and months; even six months ago, if we had said in this House that we expected a women’s football match to have the largest live TV audience of the year so far, standing as we are in July, I do not think any of us would have believed it. So significant progress is being made. It was great to be able to see that match on the BBC on Tuesday and feel there to be such a large audience for it. It is, as the hon. Lady says, inspiring girls and women to play more sport, and that is exactly what we want to see more of.

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in acknowledgement of the harm that they have caused, but given the industry’s track record, I am sceptical about their reliability. Will the Minister please look at a “polluter pays” mandatory levy?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Lady passionately believes, as do I, in ensuring that help gets to those who need it. Those who are affected by problem gambling, and whose lives are ruined thereby, need help as quickly as they can get it. The reason that I think it appropriate to welcome the moves that have been made by those five companies, as she has done, is that this will deliver help quickly and in the sort of amounts that a mandatory levy was always designed to deliver. Having said all that, if those voluntary commitments are not met, the Government will reserve the right to pursue a mandatory route instead. But let’s get the help to those who need it as quickly as we can.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Manned by local volunteers, the local heritage centres in Desborough, Burton Latimer and Rothwell in the borough of Kettering do much to encourage an interest in local heritage in small communities that have seen much change as a result of new housing developments. What importance does the Department attach to the promotion of such venues?

Jeremy Wright: The answer is huge importance. My hon. Friend makes the important point that heritage is local as well as national. We can transform our communities in a number of ways, one of which is to give people clearer insights into the wonderful heritage around them. The heritage high streets fund will do that, as will many of the other measures that have been referred to.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that Coventry will be the city of culture in 2021. However, the Priory Visitor Centre in Coventry has closed through lack of funding. Will he talk to the relevant authorities to ensure that the Priory centre is adequately funded?

Jeremy Wright: I will certainly look at what is happening at the Priory centre, but I know that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, as I do, that £8 million was found in the Budget to support Coventry city of culture, and we both look forward to it being a tremendous success.

T3. [911757] Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that Coventry will be the city of culture in 2021. However, the Priory Visitor Centre in Coventry has closed through lack of funding. Will he talk to the relevant authorities to ensure that the Priory centre is adequately funded? Equally importantly, the House must remember that, at the time of the Wars of the Roses, the Parliament of Devils was held in Coventry.

Jeremy Wright: I will certainly look at what is happening at the Priory centre, but I know that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, as I do, that £8 million was found in the Budget to support Coventry city of culture, and we both look forward to it being a tremendous success.

T4. [911759] Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): As we head towards the long summer holidays, sports centres are becoming increasingly important for families. Two years ago, Staffordshire County Council pulled the plug on my pool at the Kidsgrove Sports Centre. After lots of false starts and undelivered promises, we are still without a swimming pool. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can actually deliver a pool for my constituents?

Mims Davies: I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady. Sport England is active in communities to ensure that nobody is barred from getting involved in sport, and swimming is crucial as we come to the summer holidays.

T5. [911760] Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Ministers are aware of the nervousness about Brexit in the creative industries. What assurances can they give that the copyright protections in the European directive will be fully preserved?

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): We applauded the decision to pass the EU copyright directive, and I have met with bodies from the creative industries to discuss how best to implement it in the UK. That will take a certain amount of time, but we will be looking to protect the intellectual property and artistic creations of our designers and this country’s brilliant creative industries.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Victims and Witnesses in Court

1. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to support (a) victims and (b) witnesses giving evidence in court.

[911724]

The Solicitor General (Lucy Frazer): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about how the justice system supports those who come before it, and victims and witnesses are an important part of that. One way in which the CPS supports victims and witnesses is through the pre-recording of cross-examination evidence, which takes considerable pressure off vulnerable witnesses. Following a successful pilot in three locations, the scheme was rolled out last month to a further six courts, including in Chester.

Justin Madders: The latest Home Office figures show that only 1.7% of reported rape cases even reach the charging stage, so what measures has the CPS put in place to support rape victims giving evidence? What is being done to support the other 98.3% of victims?

The Solicitor General: The CPS takes seriously its role in ensuring that prosecutions do come before the courts. As the hon. Gentleman will know, a cross-governmental review into rape and sexual offences is under way and has already completed its first stage of collecting evidence. We are now looking at the whole system for rape and other serious sexual offences to see how we can improve every stage, including getting more prosecutions and convictions.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I will not go into the details, but we have had a sensitive local case in which a victim of child sexual exploitation was not supported. A trial did not take place, through no fault of her own. What further action can the Solicitor General take to ensure that victims are supported at all stages of the process?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Last month, I visited the CPS areas of London North and London South and talked about those very issues. I also visited SurvivorsUK, a charity
that deals with male victims of sexual abuse, to talk about how we can support people before, during and after the process, which is a critical time.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is indeed shocking that 98.3% of reported rapes are not even charged. In a significant number of those cases, further evidence is sought from the police by the CPS, but it simply is not provided. Has the Solicitor General asked the police and her colleagues at the Home Office why that is happening?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the importance of collaboration between the CPS and the police. I know that they work closely together, because I regularly meet the Director of Public Prosecutions, who is working with the police on matters across the board, including several relating to disclosure. I recently met Assistant Commissioner Nick Ephgrave to ensure that we get people to come forward. The number of recorded serious sexual offences is going up, to ensure that we get people to come forward. The number of recorded serious sexual offences is going up, but we need to improve on that, and steps are being taken by the CPS.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: With the greatest respect to the Solicitor General, this is an urgent situation and that is not an answer to the specific question. The reality is that the Crown Prosecution Service is referring matters back to the police, and the police are not coming back to the Crown Prosecution Service with that further evidence.

The Solicitor General mentioned a review in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), but something has to be done about this now. Will she undertake a forensic analysis of why these statistics are so bad, and will she do something about it?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point that shows how the CPS and the police are working better together. The CPS is sending cases back to the police because it is reviewing those cases to ensure they are ready and will not fall when they go to court. Having spoken to the assistant commissioner, I know that 93,000 police officers have undertaken disclosure training to ensure they are better trained so that these cases are ready for trial and will secure successful prosecutions.

Unduly Lenient Sentence Scheme

2. Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): If he will extend the list of offences included in the unduly lenient sentence scheme.

The Solicitor General (Lucy Frazer): I know my hon. Friend takes very seriously the importance of getting appropriate sentences for those who are convicted, and he worked closely with my predecessor on extending sentences for those who had received lenient sentences. The ULS scheme remains an important part of the justice system to ensure justice for victims’ families.

I can tell my hon. Friend that, in 2018, the Law Officers referred a fifth of all eligible cases to the Court of Appeal and, of those, 73% were found to be unduly lenient. In answer to his question, we are looking carefully at the ambit of the scheme.

Philip Davies: It has been a long-standing promise of this Government to extend the unduly lenient sentence scheme to other offences. Apart from a bit of tinkering, they have basically done very little. May I urge the Solicitor General to get on with it and extend the unduly lenient sentence scheme so that we can have appropriate sentences? That would be good for victims and for restoring people’s faith in the criminal justice system.

The Solicitor General: I assure my hon. Friend that I am looking at this with the Ministry of Justice, but the increase in the number of offences is more than just tinkering. For example, since its inception, the ULS scheme has been extended to some sexual offences, child cruelty, modern slavery and, in 2017-18, a number of terror-related offences. This is something we are looking at.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Can we have clarity on how the scheme works? I have written to Ministers complaining about too lenient sentences and about too severe sentences, and I never hear back. Can we have an explanatory memorandum on how the scheme works and what the follow-up should be?

The Solicitor General: I am happy to do so. A few hon. Members have referred cases to me, and I always write back, so I apologise if that has not happened. If any cases to do with my responsibilities come to him, I would like to know about that. We can discuss how the system works in more detail outside the Chamber but, in brief, a large number of people write to us about cases, which have to satisfy a number of thresholds. The cases have to be referred within 28 days, the sentences have to fall within the scheme and they have to be unduly lenient, not just lenient. There has to be a prospect of the Court of Appeal considering this to be outwith the range. I am happy to discuss these issues with him in more detail.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Many of my constituents were shocked when a fatal stabbing occurred on a quiet residential street in east Barnet. Will the Government consider whether it is time to introduce a tougher sentencing regime for knife crime?

The Solicitor General: The Government have taken a number of measures in relation to knife crime, not only on which weapons can be carried but on the consequences of such offences, including restrictions on the use of the internet and curfews. The Government take this issue seriously, and I am sure the Ministry of Justice, which is in charge of sentencing, is considering these issues.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Solicitor General believe this scheme is effective enough? We see that, of 943 applications under the scheme in 2017, only 143 were successful in seeing a change to a sentence. Is she prepared to review the scheme in the light of that?

Mr Speaker: I admire very much the hon. Gentleman’s American tie. He is auditioning for a new role as a fashion specialist.
The Solicitor General: I point out to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that 73% of the cases that were referred by the Attorney General’s office resulted in an increase in convictions. The reason for the disparity between the number of cases that are referred to my office and the number that go to the Court of Appeal is that a large number of them do not fall within the scheme in the first place, either because they are out of time or because the offences do not fall within the scheme. We must always remember that the judge has heard the trial, heard the evidence and read the pre-sentence report. Judges up and down the country are doing an outstanding job to ensure that, when crimes have been committed, perpetrators get the sentences that they deserve and victims get the justice that they deserve.

Drugs Gangs

3. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What recent progress the CPS has made in prosecuting drugs gangs in (a) Northamptonshire and (b) England. [911727]

7. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the performance of the CPS in prosecuting drugs gangs operating in the UK. [911734]

8. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the performance of the CPS in prosecuting drugs gangs operating in the UK. [911735]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The Crown Prosecution Service is working closely with the police and other Government Departments to prosecute these increasingly complex crimes. In that great county of Northamptonshire, in which the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) is situated, the Crown Prosecution Service prosecuted no fewer than 337 defendants for drugs offences and secured 305 convictions in the year to 2018. The conviction rate for drugs offences in England is over 90%, and last year alone 39,000 convictions were secured by the Crown Prosecution Service for these offences.

Mr Hollobone: Northamptonshire police have done much good work in recent weeks in raiding local cannabis farms and breaking up county lines drug operations linking London with Kettering and other parts of Northamptonshire. Does the Attorney General agree that, when the police catch people doing these awful things, it would help if the Crown Prosecution Service pressed for exemplary sentences to be awarded?

The Attorney General: I strongly agree that it is necessary for us to bear down on drugs gangs, and on county lines drugs gangs. My hon. Friend will know that the Government’s serious violence strategy makes that a priority. In just one week in May, in a targeted effort of co-ordinated law enforcement activity, there were 586 arrests in connection with county lines drugs gangs, and 519 adults and 364 children were entered into safeguarding measures. That is a particularly fine record. I also agree that sentencing must be commensurate with the gravity of the crimes. We will continue to monitor and follow the drugs sentencing guidelines that are connected with these crimes.

Nigel Huddleston: The Attorney General is well aware that drug trafficking is an issue not just for urban areas, but for rural areas, villages and towns. How is he assisting more rural agencies, the CPS and, for example, West Mercia police in tackling drug trafficking?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend asks a good question in relation to rural crime. We must not forget that drugs offending extends into rural areas—quite often from the larger cities—and particularly into coastal communities such as those that I have the honour of representing. It is important that we do not lose sight of the rural dimension of drugs offences. I can assure him that we will be vigilant about ensuring that in the strategies of the Government, the police and the Crown Prosecution Service, rural drugs offending is not omitted from our considerations.

Vicky Ford: In Chelmsford, we have found that the increased number of police on the ground, coupled with the firm use of stop and search, has led to a large number of arrests and then prosecutions. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is vital that all law enforcement agencies work together to tackle drugs gangs?

The Attorney General: I completely agree with what my hon. Friend has said, and it applies, if I may say so, not only to law enforcement agencies, but to other agencies as well. We cannot forget that, particularly in county lines offending, there is a wide range of other dimensions at play and safeguarding agencies are also very important.

Leaving the EU

4. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU without a deal on the priorities for his Office. [911730]

5. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the UK leaving the EU on the priorities for his Office. [911732]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The priorities of my office are set out in the published business plan for this year. In relation to the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union, my priority continues to be to support the successful delivery of the Government’s objectives by giving legal and constitutional advice within the Government. I am of course also engaged in the support of preparations for future international co-operation between the Law Officers’ departments, and with prosecution and other criminal justice operations.

Stuart C. McDonald: I am pleased to hear that the Attorney General is committed to continuing to provide sound legal advice in the face of fantasy politics, which he has a good track record in. Will he confirm that it is the Government’s position that after a no-deal Brexit, article 24 of the general agreement on tariffs and trade cannot be unilaterally invoked to ensure a standstill in current trading arrangements, and that the EU cannot and will not be compelled to trade on that basis?

The Attorney General: Yes.
David Linden: If, as appears to be the case, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), of whom the Attorney General is a supporter, does become the next Prime Minister, will the Attorney General support the right hon. Gentleman’s refusal to rule out a Prorogation of Parliament for a no-deal Brexit? Does he agree that that would surely be an act of constitutional vandalism?

The Attorney General: That question will be reviewed at the time. The circumstances of any application for Prorogation are a matter not for me but for the Prime Minister and Her Majesty.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Will the Attorney General confirm that, with or without a deal, British citizens will still be able to assert their fundamental rights through the British courts after Britain has left the European Union?

The Attorney General: Of course, the United Kingdom, in all its jurisdictions, has one of the strongest records for the rule of law in the world. I have no doubt that that will continue.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Further to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), the Institute for Government has noted that if Parliament was prorogued to facilitate no deal, it would not be possible to pass any Bills or the remaining secondary legislation needed to prepare the UK statute book for such an outcome. Does the Attorney General therefore agree that leaving the EU without a deal and with no functioning Parliament would lead the country into a legislative black hole at a time when people throughout the country would be looking to the Government for emergency actions?

The Attorney General: The House has been given the opportunity of leaving the European Union with a deal on three separate occasions. I do not recall the SNP ever voting for one of them. The answer is quite simple: we can still pass a withdrawal agreement and leave the European Union in an orderly way, but it is now quite clear that the imperative to leave the European Union is overriding. We must leave, and in my view we must do so this year—on 31 October.

Sexual Abuse Conviction Rates

6. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to improve conviction rates in sexual abuse trials. [911733]

The Solicitor General (Lucy Frazer): Sexual offences, especially rape and child sexual abuse, are devastating crimes, and across Government we are looking into how we can improve conviction rates and prosecutions in this area of law. As part of the March 2019 violence against women and girls strategy refresh, we have been collecting evidence to help to inform the making of policy going forward. That collection of evidence is now complete and we are now looking across Government at how we can improve the criminal justice system in this area.

Tim Loughton: Court business continues to be dominated by historical sex abuse cases, while conviction rates for recent crimes remain depressingly low. Does the Minister agree that the securing of convictions needs more up-front working, with victims, witnesses, social services, Victim Support, the police and other agencies, to make it easier for victims to come forward and to make the court system more user friendly? What discussions does she have with ministerial colleagues to that end?

The Solicitor General: It is absolutely right that we need to investigate those cases and work closely with stakeholders and inter-agency partners at an early stage, and that is exactly what the CPS and the police are doing. There is an inter-ministerial group on this matter, on which I serve, and we met last month to discuss these issues. A large number of stakeholders are involved in the study we are doing, including Women’s Aid, Refuge, Citizens Advice, the Survivors Trust and the Victims’ Commissioner, and they are all inputting in this important policy area. I am due to meet the Victims’ Commissioner this afternoon to discuss these issues further.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Newcastle’s sexual exploitation hub brings together the police, victim support and social services to provide a wrap-around service for victims of these horrendous crimes, particularly for vulnerable young women who often cannot access the support available for children, which is something that the Spicer review said needed to change. But there is no statutory funding for the hub; at a time when police and local authority funding is under such pressure, it risks losing its funding and ability to provide this remarkable support. Will the Minister look at providing statutory funding for hubs of this kind?

The Solicitor General: I am very pleased that the hon. Lady has raised the important work that is going on in her constituency and am very happy to discuss that with her. I was very pleased to see some joint working when I went to Wales: I saw how the courts and all the inter-agencies were working together—I attended an inter-agency group that was working collaboratively. Collaborative working is essential. I am very happy to meet and to discuss the issue with her.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) is wearing an admirably bookish tie—presumably a commentary on his learning and scholarship.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): It is ambition, Mr Speaker.

Fantasists wrongly and unsuccessfully twice accused me of serious sexual offences.

When my hon. and learned Friend attends her inter-departmental group, will she please make sure that each person reads the book “Behind the Blue Line” by Sergeant Gurpal Virdi? It is a deeply shocking account of how one of Britain’s largest institutions brought the apparatus of the state to bear on a campaign to destroy the life of one of its own finest officers.

I would welcome the chance to meet my hon. and learned Friend, the Attorney General, or both, preferably with the Home Secretary there as well, to decide on an investigation into how the CPS and the police did such shocking things.
The Solicitor General: I am very happy to give a commitment to meet my hon. Friend. I cannot speak for others, but I am very happy to meet him and will look forward to reading a copy of the book that he mentions.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): In relation to conviction rates for sexual abuse trials, I would like to ask the Minister whether she can comment further and perhaps in more detail—perhaps in a meeting with me—on how she is pursuing prosecutions, or how she is helping the court to pursue prosecutions, for women who are trafficked here for the purposes of sexual exploitation. They are often among the most vulnerable and often the hardest to reach as witnesses, but often the ones suffering the most egregious and appalling abuse.

The Solicitor General: I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady. I was with the CPS in Canterbury last week, discussing some of the crimes in the Kent area. I am very happy to discuss this very important matter with her.
Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts and Measure:

Non-Domestic Rating (Preparation for Digital Services) Act 2019
Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) (Amendment) Act 2019
Church Representation and Ministers Measure 2019.

Serco Justice System

10.42 am

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on the role of Serco in our justice system following the decision of the Serious Fraud Office.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

We very much welcome the fact that, subject to court approval today, the Serious Fraud Office has reached a conclusion in its investigations of Serco. These historical contracts ended in 2014 and were awarded as long ago as 2004. The agreement allows the parties to draw a line under the matter. Following the successful conclusion of this process, we see no reason why Serco should not continue to be a strategic supplier to Government and to compete for Government contracts.

We conducted an investigation of the matters raised in the agreement announced yesterday, and we are content that matters were resolved in 2013-14, when Serco reached a financial settlement of £68.5 million with the Ministry of Justice and undertook an extensive self-cleaning exercise.

Although we deplore the wrongdoing identified in the deferred prosecution agreement announced yesterday, we have confirmed that, since 2013, Serco has thoroughly overhauled its management, governance and culture and that these changes continue to be effective today. Serco is, and will continue to be, a strategic supplier to Her Majesty’s Government, working across the defence, justice, immigration, transport and health sectors.

Richard Burgon: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

In 2013, evidence came to light suggesting that Serco may have been fraudulently charging the Government on its offender tagging contract, including for monitoring people who are dead. Serco had to pay back tens of millions of pounds to the Government and lost the tagging contract. A subsequent Serious Fraud Office investigation has seen Serco fined £19 million for fraud and false accounting linked to those prisoner tagging contracts. Does the Minister agree that this is just the latest scandal to hit our justice system involving the private sector in recent months? The private probation contracts were terminated early, HMP Birmingham private prison was returned to the public sector and new research shows disproportionate violence in private prisons. We have also seen the collapse of Carillion, meaning that prison maintenance works were brought back in house. Each time we are told it is an isolated case, so will the Minister finally admit that in reality it is a systemic failure?

Serco has £3.5 billion of current contracts with the Ministry of Justice. Given the findings of the Serious Fraud Office, will the Minister commit to a special audit of all existing Serco justice contracts? Those contracts include running prisons. The Government are currently receiving bids for a new generation of private prisons, so can the Minister assure me that Serco will not be allowed to run these new private prisons?
Finally, there is a current Justice Minister, not here today, who once worked for Serco as its chief spin doctor. Will this Minister guarantee that that Justice Minister has had no involvement in overseeing any current Serco contracts and will have no role in handing over any future lucrative contracts to his former employer?

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman behaves as though this is somehow a new piece of information that has come to light. In fact, this is a very old piece of news, dating back to 2013-14, that has a very long tail. The SFO has conducted a very complex investigation into the fraudulent aspects of this behaviour, but in 2013-14 there was a vigorous effort on the part of the Government to investigate what Serco was doing and how it was managing these contracts that led to significant cultural change.

I am afraid that all we have heard today is a predictable ideological tirade of hostility towards the role that the private sector plays within our justice system, and it simply does not stand up to scrutiny. The hon. Gentleman raises the spectre of Carillion once again. Carillion was a very different affair; it cannot be compared at all with what is going on with Serco.

The hon. Gentleman also makes a point about the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), who has no Serco contracts within his ministerial responsibility—that is a complete red herring. The Ministry has already begun an audit into the contract for prisoner escort and custody services that Serco currently holds. We took action back in 2013-14, and this has transformed not just how the Ministry of Justice conducts its private sector contracts, but Government as a whole. We are confident that the ongoing work will ensure that we continue to deliver high-quality services at the best value for the taxpayer.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Is the Minister aware of whether any of the people involved in the original wrongdoing are still associated with the company?

Paul Maynard: I am not aware of any potential individual prosecutions arising from this investigation. What I can say is that, since the point of this investigation commencing, Serco has had a complete overhaul of its senior executives; it has a new chief executive officer, a new chief financial officer, a new chairman and an entirely new board. Serco has had a thoroughgoing overhaul and now recognises what went wrong in the past.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I congratulate the shadow Minister on securing this urgent question. He is right that right across justice, home affairs and other Government Departments, ill-conceived and badly managed contracts—on tagging, prisons, secure units, probation, immigration removal centres and asylum accommodation—are leaving vital public services in disarray.

The Government finally saw sense on probation, but elsewhere all that seems to happen is that the same small group of companies keeps getting more and more contracts, based on a race to the bottom towards cut-price service provision. Is it not time for a fundamental review of how these contracts are awarded so that the Government are not fishing repeatedly from the same small pool of companies? Even the auditors in this debacle have been fined for their role, so what steps will the Government be taking to improve oversight of this type of contract?

Paul Maynard: I always have a regard for the hon. Gentleman, who is a diligent and effective Member of this House, but I have to disagree with him on this occasion. The Opposition seem to have a blind spot regarding the role that the private sector can and should play in the delivery of services within the public sector.

In December 2018, as part of the programme of audits across Government as a whole, the chief executive of the civil service wrote to all Government Departments asking each to include a contract of audit activity in the implementation of the general outsourcing review, focusing on gold contracts—that is, those of high value and high criticality—provided by strategic players. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be aware, even if he looks north of the border, that in many of these very complex areas of public procurement, the pool of potential companies that can bid for them will, by necessity, be small. That means that we, as Government, have to do our bit to make sure that we audit and assess the delivery of these contracts on the part of these suppliers.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What contingencies have the Government put in place for the risk that Serco ceases to operate, partly as a result of the fine?

Paul Maynard: We have absolutely no indication at all that the fine has had any impact on Serco’s ability to deliver its current contracts to the Government.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I think the Minister deserves a medal for coming here with such a positive outlook on what has been a major catastrophe. In the case of all these strategic suppliers, one of the really key issues is the Government’s oversight and management of contracts where things go wrong but the companies are too big to fail. What is his Department learning, and going to do differently, in making sure that the skills are there in the civil service to oversee these contracts and pick up the problems much sooner?

Paul Maynard: I am sure that there are few individuals in the House better qualified than the hon. Lady to assess the role of these contracts across Government as a whole, given her work on the Public Accounts Committee. Since 2010, one crucial change has been the introduction of Crown representatives in each of these business areas. That makes sure that Government have someone sitting inside the room making sure that decisions will be taken appropriately.

In my Department, we are reviewing all these contracts carefully, working with Serco and other private providers who work in the public sector to make sure that the quality of what they provide meets their contractual obligations.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): In the light of these rulings by the court, will the Minister undertake to review the wider operational
activities of Serco in the public sector, particularly in relation to its management of asylum seeker housing projects in the city of Glasgow? Will he write to his colleagues in the Home Office about that, particularly because of the issue of gross intrusions of privacy by Serco housing officers, which is a major problem in Glasgow?

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman raises an issue of which I personally have no knowledge within my own Department, but I am more than happy to offer to raise it with the relevant Government Department he mentioned, and I am sure that it will then get in touch with him to discuss it.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has been uncharacteristically defensive and quite strident this morning. Some years ago, I had a hand in using the round robin technique to try to explore just how many of these general service companies were being used by all Departments, and what came out of that involved billions of pounds. That started a real scrutiny of what was happening. Is it not the truth that not just at Serco but at many of these general services companies—I am not ideologically opposed to the private sector providing good services—there was a lack of control and a lack of independent checking? The Serious Fraud Office regularly looks at this company: surely he is not complacent about that.

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman accuses me of stridency. I think that is the first time that has happened to me in this Chamber—clearly, I must have had my Shredded Wheat for breakfast. I will have to revisit my breakfast diet, it is fair to say.

I am delighted to hear that the hon. Gentleman has no ideological objection to the private sector having a role; he might want to have a chat with his Front Benchers. We often hear the idea that somehow the private sector cannot play a role but the third sector certainly can. I find that very hard to understand given that they are often supplying exactly the same things. We have areas of social enterprise that sit across the two, for example.

I recognise the point that the hon. Gentleman is trying to make. He is a very diligent Member of Parliament, as Mr Speaker often observes. I look forward to future round robin parliamentary questions from him that will test the mettle of Government Departments yet further.

Mr Speaker: The expression “Be careful of what you wish for” springs to mind.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It seems that no matter what the specific wrongdoing or general incompetence of a private sector supplier, with a few warm words from the chief executive of the day, they have access to billions of pounds of contracts. Will the Minister put in place an analysis of the costs of private sector provision in terms of tendering, legal wrangling, profiteering and loss of skills versus the benefits of public sector provision? It seems as though it is simply public sector bad, private sector good.

Paul Maynard: It is never a case of “public sector bad, private sector good”. As I have just pointed out to Opposition Members, a broad range of potential providers—including many in the third sector, such as social enterprises—have a very important role to play in the justice system.

[Interjection] If the hon. Lady listened to the answer I am trying to give her, rather than speaking from a sedentary position, she would get an answer to her question. I never appreciate sedentary chuntering; it reflects badly on the Member conducting it.

The private sector continues to have a role to play, but as a Department we are very careful in inspecting what individual suppliers are doing through the Crown representative system and the work that our commercial officials in the Department do, to ensure that issues like this do not occur again. The hon. Lady acts as though it was all warm words back in 2013-14. It most certainly was not. As I pointed out in my response to the first question, there has been an entire leadership change at Serco. I often hear from the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) that in his own party, it is a case of new times, new management. It is the same with Serco.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): In the Public Accounts Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) and I have seen all too often good work by the Government, but only after an event has taken place. The Minister mentioned the Crown representative system. Is it not time for that system to be overhauled, so that Government are better at preventing these problems in the first place, rather than learning the lessons after? What is his Department doing across Government to lead on that work?

Paul Maynard: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. The role of the Crown representative is relatively new, having been introduced under this Government. It continues to take shape. It looks different in different companies. When I was a rail Minister, I worked with a number of Crown representatives who performed very different roles in the companies that they were involved in. I understand the point, and I will mention it to the Cabinet Office, which has responsibility for this wider policy area.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his responses to questions. Can he outline what discussions he has had with the Ministry of Defence, to ensure that the MOD will get service provision at an appropriate price and only for services that are required, to prevent a repeat of this?

Paul Maynard: The hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly valid point. I personally have had no contact with the MOD. However, I know that the chief executive of the civil service has contacted all Government Departments to ask them to review the contracts with the most “criticality”—that is the word used; it is not a word I like because it does not really exist. He is ensuring that all Departments are taking careful note of this issue.
Social Security Claimant Deaths

10.57 am

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if she will make a statement to clarify what documents concerning the peer reviews and coroners’ reports into social security claimant deaths since 2010 are held by her Department, and whether all of these were supplied to Professor Harrington and Dr Litchfield, the independent reviewers of the work capability assessment.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): The Department holds the original commission and final report for all peer reviews of disability benefit claimants’ deaths up to 2015. All these documents are kept for six years from the date of the final report. In October 2015, we moved from conducting peer reviews to internal process reviews. That change means we now hold more information, including the original commission, all emails relating to the case, the final report and any recommendations resulting from the internal review process.

As the House may be aware, the Welfare Reform Act 2007 committed the Secretary of State to publish an independent report on the work capability assessment each year for the first five years of its operation. In 2013 and 2014, Dr Litchfield led the fourth and fifth independent reviews of the WCA. The Department fully co-operated with the reviews and shared all relevant information as requested. To assist the WCA independent reviews and in response to a freedom of information request, we carried out a robust search to supply all necessary information to the reviewers. The record of the documents requested by or shared with the independent reviewers no longer exists, in line with the Department’s document retention policy.

We take the death of any disability benefits claimant very seriously indeed and always conduct an investigation into the circumstances where we are informed that the claimant committed suicide. As the review contains extremely personal information, it would not be appropriate to declare which individual cases were shared with the reviewers on this occasion.

Debbie Abrahams: Thank you so much, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

Let me refresh everybody’s memories following the point of order I raised about this yesterday. I have received a response to my letter of 10 May to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in which I expressed my concerns regarding the investigation and the information provided to the independent reviewers. I also asked for information on claimant deaths after being found fit for work following a work capability assessment, as well as on deaths in relation to the personal independence payment, and I still have not received any information on that.

In the reply from the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, nearly two months later, he said that although a “robust and thorough search was carried out of information held by the Department...the outcome is that the Department does not hold any information”

in relation to what peer review reports were supplied to the independent reviewers. He also said that this was due to “the length of time since the reviews were carried out, factors such as document retention policies, organisational changes and staff turnover”.

These documents relate to the circumstances of people’s deaths as little as five years ago. The independent reviewers were investigating the work capability assessment process, including the impact of assessments. It is deeply troubling that the Department appears to have no record of what was supplied to the reviews, especially as both Professor Harrington and Dr Litchfield say that they did not receive such documents. In the same response, the Minister tried to suggest that the reviewers did not request these reports. It prompts the question whether the Department’s record keeping systems are fit for purpose or whether these documents were deliberately withheld.

Can the Minister confirm that these documents were not sent to Dr Litchfield in 2013? Why does his Department not hold records on what information was supplied to Dr Litchfield and to his predecessor, Professor Harrington? The Minister said in his response that the retention policy is that the Department does not keep these records. I find that deeply concerning, considering other Departments’ requirements under the law to keep these data.

What steps will the Minister take to ensure any departmental reorganisation or staff turnover does not lead to the loss of such important and sensitive information in the future? Will he commit to an investigation into what happened to these documents, and will he report back to the House on the outcomes of this investigation? The Information Commissioner’s Office spoke to members of staff who were in the Department at the time of the Litchfield review. How many members of staff who were in the Department at that time still remain?

Has the Department approached Dr Litchfield and Professor Harrington about the information they received, and if not, why not? The letter I received yesterday from the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work stated that the Department shared “all relevant information which was requested by Prof Harrington and Dr Litchfield”.

However, if they were unaware of the existence of these documents, how could they request them? Given that their remit was to examine the work capability assessment and that many of these reviews and coroners’ letters contained grave concerns about the assessment process, why did the Department not provide them?

Since 2015, the Department has undertaken 84 internal process reviews, and six more have been received. The Minister will be aware of the ruling in John Pring v. the Information Commissioner and the Department for Work and Pensions, which led to the redacted publication of peer reviews in 2016. Will he commit to publishing redacted reports of these internal process reviews?

We are talking about the circumstances of people’s deaths, as I have said. A Government’s first duty is to protect their people—all their people—but they are failing the sick and disabled, and this reveals the enormity of that failure.

Will Quince: The Department takes the death of any claimant extremely seriously and always conducts an investigation into the circumstances. The Department is
continually working to improve its safeguarding practices, working with partner agencies and local government. The Department is presently undertaking a review of the departmental safeguarding policy and guidance available to staff, which will report in the autumn of 2019. The scope of the review is considering what more we at the Department can do to support vulnerable claimants, with an emphasis both on ensuring safety and on working with partners to provide the necessary support when and where necessary. The review covers all areas of DWP delivery activities.

The last independent review was in 2014. As I said in my opening response, we do not hold emails going back over 12 months, under our document retention policy. My understanding, however, is that the documentation was not requested by the independent reviewers, but we hold such information on the peer review process for six years. I should stress that we would share outcomes and lessons learned. As the hon. Lady rightly pointed out, we have about 20 to 25 internal process reviews a year— they do not all relate to suicides—but I would stress that we are fully compliant with the law when it comes to data.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): From my work in the Department, I know that Ministers take this issue extremely seriously, and they will be concerned to hear about the cases that were reasonably and sensitively raised by the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). Will the Minister confirm that whenever a claimant dies, a thorough review is undertaken by the Department and that that is the right process to follow?

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and the way he put it. We take all cases of this nature incredibly seriously, and the Department has undertaken 84 internal process reviews since 2015. It carries out such reviews for a number of reasons, not only in cases that relate to suicide. I stress that these reviews do not mean that the Department was at fault, and in the majority of cases they contain very personal information that it would not be right to publish. Nevertheless, it is incredibly important to carry out such reviews because, where lessons can be learned, they should be. Indeed, in numerous cases, they have been learned.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is deeply shocking that the Department for Work and Pensions has not kept documents relating to deaths that could have been related to DWP activity. We know from a freedom of information request that such documents were not passed to Professor Harrington and Dr Litchfield who carried out the statutory review of the work capability assessment. Surely, it was the Department’s responsibility to ensure that those reviewers had all the relevant information.

The Minister’s letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) states that the documents have not been kept for a range of reasons, including document retention policies, organisational changes and staff turnover. Sun bureaucratic language is wholly out of keeping with the pain felt by families and friends who are affected by the death of a loved one.

There is a systemic problem at DWP when it comes to meeting the needs of disabled people, and the facts speak for themselves: more than 1 million sanctions have been imposed on disabled people since 2010, and in 2018-19, 73% of PIP and ESA cases that went to tribunal were found in favour of the appellant. The Government are currently carrying out seven reviews into different aspects of the social security system where disabled people were wrongly denied the support to which they should have been entitled.

What action is the Department taking to ensure that any documents relating to deaths in serious and complex cases that were related to DWP activity are retained in future? Will the Government now accede to widespread calls for an independent inquiry into the way that assessments are carried out and demand that medical evidence about the impact of such assessments on the health and wellbeing of claimants is fully considered? Will the Government commit to an independent review into the deaths of ill or disabled people that may have been linked to DWP activity? The Department owes a duty of care not only to those who it assesses for support, but to those families and friends who have lost loved ones in the most tragic of circumstances. The DWP has failed disabled people again.

Will Quince: I am disappointed by the hon. Lady’s line of questioning. As I have had said twice already, we take incredibly seriously the death of any claimant, and we always conduct an investigation into the circumstances. The last independent review was in 2014, and under our data retention policy, emails going back more than 12 months were not retained. However, under the peer review, such emails are held for six years, and we would have shared outcomes and lessons learned. We would have shared further information with the independent reviewers, but my understanding is that it was not requested.

The hon. Lady raises broader disability issues. This year, we are spending more than £55 billion on benefits to support disabled people and those with health conditions, which is around 2.5% of our GDP, and more than 6% of Government spending. This year, spending on the main disability benefits—the personal independence payment, disability living allowance and attendance allowance—will be more than £6 billion higher than in 2010, and disability spending will be higher every year up to 2023 than it was in 2010.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I know that my hon. Friend takes these issues extremely seriously, but I am curious about two things. He said there were 84 internal reviews, but that not all were related to alleged suicides. How many were related to alleged suicides? He said that emails are destroyed after 12 months, and I am surprised by such a short period. Is that in line with the policies of other Departments?

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. We do not know the number of suicides compared to the overall number of cases investigated under the internal review process. As I said, we carry them out for a number of reasons. Under the previous system, we did not hold emails going back over 12 months under the independent review process. Under the peer review process, however, we hold that information for six years.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing the urgent question.
[Carol Monaghan]

The Government’s austerity measures have led to a system that no longer considers people as vulnerable individuals in need of support, but views them with suspicion from the outset. It is sickening that, when faced with such serious allegations as people’s deaths, the Government took so long to admit their failure to send their own independent reviewer documents that Ministers knew would have linked the fitness to work test with the deaths of disabled benefit claimants. Why was that not deemed a top priority by the Government?

The Government seem content with private sector providers prioritising profits over people. How frequently does the Department assess the treatment of claimants by private sector companies? Will the Department follow the Scottish Government’s lead and introduce audio recordings of assessments as standard to ensure accuracy and transparency?

The public will struggle to have any trust in the Government to deliver these Government-commissioned assessments for employment and support allowance, PIP and universal credit. Will the Department undertake a review of all commissioned assessments to ensure they do not lead to similar circumstances?

Finally, we very strongly support the hon. Lady’s call for an independent inquiry into all deaths linked to the Government’s social security reforms. Will the Minister commit to starting that immediately?

Will Quince: We take the independent reviews, the peer reviews, and the findings of coroners incredibly seriously. Where there are lessons to be learned, the Department absolutely looks at how we can improve our processes and procedures to improve the service we provide to claimants. On reviewing the third parties we work with, we are already trialling audio recording of assessments. We will consider the results and whether it is appropriate to roll that out further in due course. I assure the hon. Lady and other hon. Members across the House that we of course audit and take a very close look at all those who provide services to the Department.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): When I raised the death of one of my constituents shortly after he lost his personal independence payment, I asked for an independent inquiry, which the Secretary of State refused. Given our exchanges today, will the Minister take the message back to her that I would like her to reconsider her decision? As the Prime Minister laid down for Hillsborough exchanges today, will the Minister pull me and others across the House up for using that language. She raises a hugely important point. We are working closely with stakeholders in that regard, to see what more we can do, and I would be happy to meet her to explain in further detail the written answer that was given to the parliamentary question that she submitted.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Five hundred and eighty of my constituents were displaced in the transition from disability living allowance to the personal independence payment—a loss of £2 million a year. What is the Department doing to track the outcomes faced by those who are not in receipt of Government support? I think particularly of a case of mine, where a young man was forced to rely on his mother’s financial support in the last months of his life before he died of a terminal brain tumour, because the Government rejected his claim for support. What will the Government do to track such cases?

Will Quince: What we are doing is spending £6 billion more, and we will continue to work with stakeholders where possible, to ensure that we can improve our processes.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Department has, as has been said, given us a number of reasons why this information is not available, but to the public and to those affected, it will seem that there can be only two acceptable or reasonable reasons—that the information was deliberately withheld and covered up, or that it was incompetence. To get to the bottom of this and to reassure the public, will the Minister give those of us who are asking today for that inquiry, the assurance that the Department will do everything it possibly can to get to the bottom of this?

Will Quince: In cases of this nature, our inquiries and investigations nearly always go alongside a coroner’s investigation. So it is important to say that there is already that independent investigation, and we do work very closely with coroners and supply information as required by them.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): When we consider the sensitive issue of death by suicide of particular claimants, I want to press the Minister specifically on the issue of assessments being carried out inappropriately. For example, if someone presents for an assessment with a mental health issue, quite often they find that they are being assessed by a physiotherapist. What actions are the Government taking to ensure that assessments are done properly, by those with relevant qualifications?

When seeking information on the removal of the six-month time limit for terminal illness claimants, I asked for information about people who died while waiting for a decision relating to PIP. Between 2013 and 2018, 17,000 people died while waiting for a decision on their PIP assessment. I asked for the same figures in relation to universal credit, but was told that they were not available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. How can the Minister say that he covers all deaths and takes them seriously when it is not possible to provide hon. Members with information on the deaths of people, many of whom have been found to be terminally ill, who have not been able to access universal credit?
Will Quince: Under PIP, people with a mental health condition are five times more likely to be exempted than under the legacy benefit system. However, it is important to say that it was the Labour party that introduced the work capability assessment, in 2008, and that we have made significant improvements to the WCA since its introduction. We will continue to work with stakeholders and Members from across the House to improve the process where we can.

Business of the House

11.18 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride):

The business for the week commencing 8 July will include:

Monday 8 July—Consideration of a business of the House motion, followed by all stages of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill.

Tuesday 9 July—Second Reading of the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill.

Wednesday 10 July—Motion to approve the draft Environment (Legislative Functions from Directives) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve the draft Town and Country Planning (Fees for Applications, Deemed Applications, Requests and Site Visits) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, followed by a general debate on tackling climate change, protecting the environment and securing global development.

Thursday 11 July—A general debate on 20 years of devolution, followed by a debate on a motion relating to leasehold reform. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee, on the recommendation of the Liaison Committee.

Friday 12 July—The House will not be sitting.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. He announced the Northern Ireland Bill for Monday. As I understand it, the Bill will be published only later today. Despite a motion allowing amendments, there will be a window of only about half an hour for hon. Members to table amendments. This is a really important Bill, and the Opposition were happy to work with the Government to ensure that they get certainty on the Bill. Will the Leader of the House please think again.

Last week, I raised the issue of a debate on the Cox report, and the Gemma White inquiry is coming up. Can the Leader of the House update us on when the House is likely to be able to consider that motion? I know that the Leader of the House is interested in tweeting; perhaps he could tweet a clarification. Last week, I raised the issue of the Government’s Value Added Tax (Reduced Rate) (Energy-Saving Materials) Order 2019, and he said that it was an EU requirement under its regulations. In his answer to a parliamentary question in 2018, when he was a Treasury Minister, he said that “it is right that Member States have flexibility in applying VAT on different products”.

Will he look again at whether it is possible for VAT to be changed on those materials, especially given the Prime Minister’s commitment to reduce emissions to zero by 2050? The Leader of the House said that it was not something that he would necessarily have brought forward, so I ask him again whether the Government have any plans to scrap VAT in this important area.
Perhaps the Leader of the House could also tweet the answer to this question. Who said that
"in a disruptive no-deal exit there will be a hit to the exchequer of about £90bn.??"
It was his right hon. Friend and former Treasury colleague, the Chancellor. I do not remember seeing no deal on the ballot paper. We did not get the sectoral analysis until we asked for it in the Chamber. The Leader of the House may say "It's the will of the people", but the people did not have the full information when they made their decision. I do not know whether he is aware of the message from the other place about the amazing cross-party support for a motion to set up a Joint Committee to consider a no-deal Brexit, which passed by 245 votes to 99. We all praise Select Committees, and this would be an important Select Committee because it would be a Joint Committee of both Houses. The motion would require the Select Committee to report by 30 September. As I am sure the Leader of the House knows, the first Council meeting will take place on 17 October, which is why it is important for us to have a discussion to decide whether we will sit through the conference recess and whether conferences will go ahead or Members will be here. It is an important time for the EU, so perhaps he will consider having a statement next week on those issues.

The Leader of the House wrote a lovely article in "Red Box" saying that he sees
"a large part of my role as promoting parliament—to do what I can to ensure that people trust and understand its vital role".
Does he agree with a former Leader of the House, now a Government Whip in the Lords, Lord Young, who has said that he views with alarm the promises made by Tory leadership candidates? The shadow Chancellor has costed those pledges, and the total for the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) has costed those pledges, and the total for the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is £57 billion and for the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt) it is £43.4 billion—more than £100 billion in total. Paul Johnson from the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that both candidates were misleading people by implying that the Treasury's Brexit war chest would fund their spending pledges and that if they intended to borrow more, they had not said how much. It is making Parliament look absurd that the candidates can make those pledges to win their election. The people one of them will govern will not even have a say. What can the Leader of the House do to stop candidates misleading people?

It took an urgent question for the House to talk about what happened with Serco. A screaming headline in The Law Society Gazette reads, "Serco subsidiary to pay £19.2m for lying to MoJ about tagging profits". This is absolutely appalling. The Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), was very helpful earlier—he is a very helpful Minister—but I think that we need a statement in Government time.

I invite the Leader of the House to visit the all-party parliamentary group on legal aid next Monday, when we will celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Legal Aid and Advice Act 1949, along with young legal aid lawyers. I am surprised that there are any left, but it will be good to see them there. The Leader of the House will know, I am sure, that since 2010 the number of cases assisted by legal aid has dropped from 900,000 to 15,000. This is about the rule of law and access to justice. If the Leader of the House could ensure that the Government will automatically fund legal aid for the families of victims of terrorist atrocities—a subject that I raised with him last week—that would be a nice way of celebrating the anniversary of the Act.

I know that you, Mr Speaker, went to see Richard Ratcliffe when he was on hunger strike. I saw “Speaker Bear” sitting on his chair. Both Richard and Nazanin have now ended their hunger strike. I said to Richard that I would raise Nazanin's case from the Dispatch Box every week until she was freed. Will the Leader of the House please make representations, as the Foreign Secretary seems to have gone missing and is making promises that he cannot keep? I know that great things are in store for the Leader of the House, not least because he has a wonderful mentor in the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). Will he please stand in for the Foreign Secretary and raise the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe? She is innocent, and she must be freed.

Earlier this week, Mr Speaker, you mentioned the loss of two of the House’s leading black and minority ethnic officials, Kamal El-Hajji and, of course, our own Speaker’s Chaplain, the Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin. Kamal was the first person with a BME background to be appointed to the role of Serjeant at Arms, and the Rev. Rose is now the Church of England’s first black female bishop. We are sorry that she could not be the Bishop of London, and I know that she was trying to be a Canon of Westminster, but I think that was taken away from her. She has been a great comfort to everyone on the parliamentary estate. She has been here during debates, and she has talked to us one to one. She has been a reassuring presence, and we are grateful for both her presence and her prayers. We wish the two of them well in their future endeavours.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. I shall come to them in a moment, but let me start by saying that I have some bad news. Unfortunately, I have had to cancel the holiday that I suggested last Thursday. The hon. Lady did not, I think, take my offer seriously, as she never replied to it. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) was prepared to join us and provide the musical entertainment, but the appearance fee that he demanded was utterly disproportionate to his talent. Two pounds fifty and a couple of cans of Irn-Bru was a generous offer, and the hon. Gentleman should have accepted it. I mean, who does he think he is, Pete Wishart or something? Perhaps not.

Let me now deal with the hon. Lady’s questions. She rightly raised the business for Monday, and asked whether there would be time for sufficient scrutiny of the Northern Ireland Bill and the tabling of amendments to it. All I will say to her is that we are very aware of the importance of both those matters, and discussions are taking place in the usual channels.

The hon. Lady asked me about a potential debate on the Cox report. We did, of course, have a debate on that report recently, but she also raised the important matter of the Gemma White inquiry, which will be reporting soon. We are at one in respect of the desirability of a
debate on that matter, and I am already engaged in discussions with my end of the usual channels with a view to such a debate.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of energy-saving materials again, and asked whether VAT was or was not applicable. More specifically, she asked whether it was a requirement of the European Union that we apply it at a certain level. That is my understanding, but given that the hon. Lady has pressed me again, which may mean that she has some information on this matter that she is keeping to herself—perhaps I am wrong; I do not know—I will check with the Financial Secretary to the Treasury and Paymaster General, who I believe is the Minister responsible for that particular issue and tabled the statutory instrument.

The hon. Lady also raised the matter of the £90 billion that the Chancellor has referred to in respect of a potential no-deal exit from the European Union. Of course that is a figure that has been out there for quite some considerable time, not least in the analysis that the Government provided some months ago—an across-Whitehall report on the potential impact of no deal on the Exchequer.

The hon. Lady also raised the matter of the Joint Committee proposed by the House of Lords, and referred to the vote on that. We will of course consider that proposal very carefully when it comes to this House, but I would point out to the hon. Lady that there have been numerous opportunities in the past to debate at length the potential consequences of no deal. None the less, we will take the Joint Committee proposal seriously and have a very close look at that as a potential vehicle for further discussion of that matter.

The hon. Lady referred very generously to my lovely article, which was rather a kind way of introducing her remarks on that, and then she plunged into the costs of the various promises that the two candidates in the Conservative party leadership contest may have been putting forward. At one point she totalled them up to the dizzying heights of £100 billion, which pales into insignificance compared with the £1 trillion that her own party seems to be putting forward in additional borrowing, or indeed in additional tax to be raised from the hard-working men and women up and down our country.

The hon. Lady referred to Serco, but of course we have had an urgent question just this morning on the matter. She made some important points about legal aid. Justice questions are on Tuesday and, as I mentioned last week, the Justice Committee is looking at precisely the issue she has raised around the availability of legal aid to the suspected perpetrators of atrocities compared with its availability to those who have suffered as a consequence of their actions.

I applaud the hon. Lady for raising Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe again, as I know she intends to at the Dispatch Box every week as the shadow Leader of the House. I can once again assure her that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and others have been very engaged in ensuring that somebody who went to Iran simply for the purposes of a holiday and meeting family and friends is not incarcerated in the way she has been.

Finally, may I also welcome the hon. Lady’s comments regarding Rose Hudson-Wilkin and her appointment as Bishop of Dover? She will be much missed by this House, but will be a great asset and of great benefit to Dover.

**Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): May I first sincerely congratulate my right hon. Friend on taking on the role of Leader of the House and say how lovely it is to be asking the questions rather than answering them?

My right hon. Friend will be aware that yesterday the fantastic diversity and inclusion awards were held, celebrating all the House of Commons and Digital Service staff here in the House of Commons for all the amazing work they have done to try and improve the rates of diversity and inclusion here. So will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating everybody—all the nominees and award winners?

Will my right hon. Friend particularly join me in congratulating all those who worked so hard across parties on a very long-term basis—and also yourself, Mr Speaker, who supported the work—on the independent complaints and grievance procedure, which was one of yesterday’s award-winning entries? May I also thank all the staff of the House of Commons, Members’ staff, trade unions and so many people across the House who have really helped to ensure that everybody in this place in the future will be treated with dignity and respect?

**Mr Speaker:** Before the Leader of the House replies, I should like to echo very much what the right hon. Lady has said. Yesterday’s ceremony was a very happy, even joyous, occasion on which we were able to mark and commemorate great progress while being very aware of the continuing challenges and the great deal of additional work that remains to be done. She herself won an award, which she has been too modest specifically to reference, and I think that she regarded it as a tribute to her, but also to all those who worked in her support. This is one of those situations in which we prefer to regard the glass as half full rather than half empty, but there is a fine line. I think we are deservedly proud of the progress, but we know that we still have a lot of work to do.

**Mel Stride** (Northamptonshire) (Andrea Leadsom) in recognising everybody who contributed to the team effort and achieved so much around the complaints and grievance scheme’s steering group, but that does not for one moment take away from the critical role that she played in ensuring that we made progress not just on that matter but—as I am increasingly becoming aware as I get deeper into my role—across the many matters that the Leader of the House rightly has an interest in. I also thank you, Mr Speaker, and the staff of the House, the trade union representatives and all those who have been involved in these important issues.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing another exciting instalment of business for next week. I join him and the shadow Leader of the House in paying tribute to Kamal El-Hajji and Rose Hudson-Wilkin and I hope will get an opportunity to pay fulsome tributes to both individuals in the next few weeks.

The Leader of the House would do well to abandon this place for the next couple of weeks, given what is going on with this leadership contest. I am even prepared
to come on his holiday bus. I would bring my banjo and my cans of Irn-Bru, and I might even be prepared to waive my fee. I would even endure his rotten jokes, because surely we should do more than endure the purgatory of the business that we are facing right up to the summer recess. So, to spice things up a bit, may we have a debate about the Tory issue of the day—the return of foxhunting—and may we have the Foreign Secretary to introduce it before this particular fox is shot? When we are through with that, maybe we could have some legislation to reintroduce the children up chimneys Act, and then maybe a Bill to reintroduce workhouses before we move on to the dunking of witches. Such are the great offerings from the Tory leadership contest to keep us up to date with the modern zeitgeist.

Then can we have a debate about the precious, precious, precious Union? The Tories are beginning to sound like a demented Gollum who is about to throw the ring that unites them all into Mount Doom, which is probably quite apt. The Prime Minister is in Scotland today with yet another devolution plan—and no, of course it is not another desperate attempt to salvage the “precious”. This is the problem, and the Tories just don’t get it. For them, it is all about doing things to Scotland; it is never about listening to what Scotland actually wants or understanding the type of nation that we want to be. Scotland will never accept their buffoons’ Brexit. For them, Scotland is probably already lost. The “precious” is already beginning to melt in the pyre.

Lastly, can we have a debate about Brexit? You know how we were given all this extra time to try to resolve it? Maybe we should debate it occasionally. We have heard both the candidates for the Tory leadership saying that they are prepared to take this country out of the EU without a deal, and we have to start to prepare the parliamentary fightback. There is a huge moment coming, and it will be the no-deal Brexiteers versus parliamentary democracy. Democracy says no to the Brexiteers, and we now have to get ready for that fight.

Mr Speaker: Before the Leader of the House responds, I would just say to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), so that the business is not left unfinished, that there most assuredly will be tribute sessions for the Speaker’s Chaplain, the Rev. Rose, and for the departing Serjeant at Arms, Mohammed El-Hajji. Those are likely to be separate sessions—my office is in discussion about that matter—but the hon. Gentleman can be assured that, consistent with the principle of showing respect for people who have made an outstanding contribution in the service of the House, those sessions will take place.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) for his usual cheery contribution to our proceedings, but he was playing the same old tunes, as he does week in, week out. However, I have discovered that he and I actually have something in common, because we share a love of the Rolling Stones. Indeed, I believe that the hon. Gentleman once recorded a cover of a Rolling Stones classic for charity. Given the Scottish people’s firm rejection of independence, the song could serve as the Scottish National party anthem, because it was “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”. The hon. Gentleman’s love of the Stones may explain why, when it comes to the Government’s record, he always paints it black and why, even after becoming the current longest-serving Member of a Scottish seat—18 years—he still can’t get no satisfaction.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that I should desert this place because there is not enough going on, but I point out that 44 Bills have completed their passage through the Commons during this Session. In fact, since the Prime Minister appointed me as Leader of the House, a new Bill has been introduced every three sitting days, so we are actually upping the tempo.

The hon. Gentleman called for further debates on Brexit. I think that many in this House would feel that we have probably had more than enough such debates, but I assure him that it is inconceivable that there will not be many more Brexit debates in the weeks and months to come.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I endorse, echo and say how pleased I am to have heard your remarks about time being made for Rev. Rose and the Serjeant at Arms so that we can thank them in the appropriate manner.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I join others in paying tribute to the Serjeant at Arms and the Speaker’s Chaplain. I also joined the protest at the Iranian embassy. I am also delighted to say that Southend-on-Sea was a regional winner in the Tiffin cup, which is another reason why Southend should become a city.

Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the legal position of parents who have children with learning difficulties after those children reach the age of 18? The matter needs to be looked at, because those who really do know best about the needs of their children can currently be overruled by the state when it comes to their future welfare.

Mel Stride: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the success of the restaurant in his constituency. I completely appreciate the position of parents who have been caring and making decisions for their children, and it must be incredibly difficult when they do not have the automatic right to continue to do so when a young person turns 18. That would make an excellent subject for a debate, or if my hon. Friend would like to write to me, I would be happy to facilitate a meeting with the appropriate Minister.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be delighted to know that, as a result of recent generous allocations of time for the Backbench Business Committee, we have now started to get a bumper bundle of applications from Back Benchers from across the House on a weekly basis. If and when time arrives, we already have a healthy list of debates pencilled in for future dates, including an important application for an urgent debate from the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) and the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell). We also have a long queue of unallocated debates following applications from Members from across the House, so with three weeks remaining before the summer recess, any time thrown our way will be greedily snapped up.
Finally, I chair the all-party parliamentary rail in the north group, and some of us regard the rail investment situation being more northern poorhouse than northern powerhouse. We recently had a presentation from Arriva Northern, which told us, gladly, that Pacer trains were to be phased out by the end of the year, but we found out only a few days later that that was fake news. Can we have a statement from the Department for Transport about rail investment in the north? It is time that the decades-old Pacer trains departed from all the stations in the north of England.

Mel Stride: I am pleased to hear that the hon. Gentleman has great demand for debates. I am always happy to point colleagues in his direction when they have good ideas for debates, and I congratulate him on his excellent work.

The hon. Gentleman specifically raises the issue of rail in the north, and we have invested a record £13 billion in transport in the north. Investment across the UK in transport, and rail in particular, is at the greatest level since Victorian times. Of course, looking at investment per capita, more is going to the north of our country than to the south.

This issue of Pacer trains has also been raised in the Chamber this week, and I am happy to see whether we can organise a meeting between the hon. Gentleman and a relevant Minister, or to decide an appropriate way forward on that specific matter.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Leader of the House will know that next week’s planned Westminster Hall debate on libraries has been postponed due to the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), being on compassionate leave. I know that you, Mr Speaker, and the whole House send our heartfelt condolences and deepest sympathies. None the less, she, you and the Leader of the House will want the debate to be rescheduled, because we need to know what the Government will do about the nationwide closure of libraries, through which new horizons are seen, new ideas are seeded and second springs start.

John Clare said:

“E’en the small violet feels a future power
And waits each year blooming to bring,
And surely man is no inferior flower
To die unworthy of a second spring?”

And for you, Mr Speaker:

Are we a breed that no longer loves to learn?
Is ours an age where once-cherished books burn?
Or will we come again to seek and yearn?
To decipher, to distil, to discern?

Mr Speaker: I think we feel enriched, elevated and energised as a result of the right hon. Gentleman’s characteristically cerebral intervention.

Mel Stride: I begin by echoing the thoughtful comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) about the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). Of course, the thoughts and prayers of the whole House are with her and her family at this very difficult time.

Mr Speaker, you suggested that our last exchange was of such cerebral quality that it should be framed and presented to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings, and I have the framed copy here. I will, of course, present it to him directly after business questions.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

Mel Stride: It is, indeed, splendid. I think I am right in saying, knowing John Clare well—I did not confirm this with my right hon. Friend prior to his question—that he may have been quoting from “The Instinct of Hope,” which includes the line

“And why should instinct nourish hopes in vain?”

Well, his hopes of me will never be in vain, for my instincts are always to deliver for one of those I admire most in this House.

On the very important debate that needs to be delayed, I am happy to meet him, and perhaps the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, to see what we can do to bring that important debate before the House as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: That is really very satisfying indeed. I am now looking for a brief contribution.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The injustice of the Windrush scandal continues. Many of the people in my caseload have still not had their cases sorted out. I do not know anyone who has been successful in claiming compensation, because the required level of evidence is so ridiculous.

I also know people who have been promised help that has not been delivered. To add insult to injury, one of my constituents, who was kept from returning home for years and who has finally been allowed home, has been told by the Department for Work and Pensions that he cannot claim universal credit because he has been away from the country.

Can we please have a debate in Government time, ideally on a votable motion, so that we can hold the Government to account and make sure that victims of the Windrush scandal can properly receive the compensation and benefits to which they are entitled?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises an extremely important issue, and there is no question but that the events around the Windrush situation were deeply, deeply unsatisfactory. For that, Ministers have apologised. We have set up a compensation scheme, as she will know, and there is a taskforce engaged in ensuring that it operates effectively. That said, if there are any specific cases that she wants to bring forward, I would be keen to see them and to liaise with Ministers accordingly.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): The Tiffin cup has already been mentioned. You will be aware, Mr Speaker, that it is an important part of the parliamentary calendar, and it took place on Tuesday this week. I am delighted to say that a new restaurant in my constituency, Soi Kitchens—it started up in only
February or March of this year—came second out of, I believe, 78 entries. Will my right hon. Friend congratulate the restaurant and ensure that as many Members of Parliament as possible are aware of the Tiffin cup? Will he encourage them to enter more restaurants next year, so that my constituents’ business could perhaps win first prize?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to bring to the House the great success of Soi Kitchens. The House may be interested to know that the winner was Kuti’s Brasserie, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith), but that does not for one moment take away the huge success that Soi Kitchens has achieved. I will be desperately trying to find an excuse to go to Milford to sample its cuisine.

Mr Speaker: Splendid!

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you had vacated the chair last week when I asked my business question, but I had a great deal of help from the Leader of the House in relation to a constituent who had gone missing in Zante. I would like to advise him that, sadly, my constituent still has not been found.

I want to move on to a more positive question; unfortunately, I always seem to ask difficult questions about Bridgend, particularly in relation to the news about Ford. Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating the fact that Bridgend Further Education College has won the national award for further education college of the year? Bridgend College tops the league table in Wales for qualification completion, with a rate of 90% across all qualifications; it was awarded a double excellent in the education and training inspection carried out by Estyn; and the college’s staff survey shows that 98% of staff are happy to work there. Can we celebrate what a wonderful place Bridgend is to live, work and invest in, for anyone who is seeking to take over the Ford factory, because we have a population committed to the best in education and training?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks about her missing constituent. It is deeply distressing that he has still not been located, but I am grateful that she brought the matter to my attention and we were able to meet immediately after the last business questions to see what could be done. Our thoughts and prayers are still with her constituent, and with his family and friends.

I am delighted to hear the news about Bridgend College. One of the most important drivers of social mobility in our society—I think we can all reflect on this, across the House—is education. It is one of the ladders by which we climb up in life, so it is wonderful to be able to celebrate the award that the hon. Lady’s further education college has received. The fact that it is a further education institution is important, because there must be parity of esteem between further education and universities in our country.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is not often that an MP receives emails from constituents praising their local council for not doing something, but that is exactly what has happened in respect of Rugby Borough Council’s urban meadows policy, whereby it is letting grass and wildflowers grow on areas that were previously mown. That encourages insects and a diversity of flora and fauna, and it looks very attractive, particularly when the flowers grow through. One constituent has drawn my attention to the fact that it also provides a disincentive for unauthorised parking in areas where people used to park. Could we have a debate to consider the environmental benefits of this approach?

Mel Stride: I both join my hon. Friend in congratulating Rugby local authority on the measures it has taken in respect of the urban meadows policy and congratulate him on his hard work locally on those issues. The environment is always a good subject for debate, not least because of the Government’s record in this policy area—the House will know that we are at the forefront internationally in having committed to net zero carbon by 2050.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Along with my colleagues, I welcome the announcement regarding UK Government funding for Birmingham 2022 and seek assurances that the Barnett formula will be applied with 100% comparability. Given the fact that Scotland has thus far lost out on £3.4 billion, due as a result of the confidence and supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist party, and with another DUP bung imminent, may we have a debate on the departmental application of the Barnett formula to ensure that Scotland is not shafted yet again by this Government?

Mel Stride: I will not use the same language as the hon. Gentleman, but having served in the Treasury until quite recently and been fairly intimately involved in two Budget cycles, the idea that Scotland has somehow been short-changed by our stewardship of the economy is grossly unfair. If he wishes to debate the Barnett formula, perhaps I should direct him towards an Adjournment debate, at which he can interrogate an individual Minister on that subject.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Last week, the northern powerhouse Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), aborted a visit to Great Grimsby. I had hoped that that visit would involve an announcement, after nine months of waiting, that would start the OnSide Youth project in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House please explain why this much-needed initiative requires a ministerial cavalcade and long-range cameras, when surely a written statement, preferably before 22 July, would suffice?

Mel Stride: If the hon. Lady would like to avail herself of my time after questions, I would be happy to discuss the specifics of that issue, which sounds slightly complicated in terms of visits, not visits, dates and so on.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My constituent was refused a home visit to assess her employment and support allowance entitlement, despite her GP having advised that her health needs absolutely necessitated one. After three weeks of stress, threats of sanctions and calls, my constituent spoke of feeling suicidal, before her GP’s recommendation was finally upheld. May we have a debate in Government time on the impact of sanctions on the wellbeing and mental health of social security claimants?
Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises a specific issue relating to one of her constituents and ESA entitlement. If she would like to write to me on the matter, I would be pleased to look into it and make sure that the relevant Minister looks at it accordingly and that it is properly looked into.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Leader of the House mentioned £13 billion of transport funding for the north, but I am sure that figure would be met with great disbelief throughout the north. The latest dithering is over the reinstatement of the Colne-Skipton link to connect East Lancashire to West Yorkshire. That is shameful: it should be a priority for Government expenditure. In this zombie Parliament, perhaps the Leader of the House could ask the Government to hold a debate on how the expenditure of the two proposed candidates for the Conservative party leadership and office of Prime Minister will affect investment in the northern powerhouse. We could then discuss the lack of investment in the north.

Mel Stride: It is slightly surprising that the hon. Gentleman should continue to push on the issue of our commitment to the north in terms of expenditure, because the Mayor of Greater Manchester said: “There is a tendency to be London-centric in the Labour Party and that tendency needs to be constantly challenged.”

That is why we, as a Government, have injected £13 billion—a record level—into better transport throughout the north, and why we as a party have planned central Government transport investment over the next three years that will be, as I said, higher in the north than in the south, on a per capita basis. We have also committed to more than £5 billion through devolution and growth deals.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): With the ongoing dispute at the Environment Agency over pay and with staff morale at Natural England being at an all-time low, will the Leader of the House organise an urgent debate on the relationship between the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and its key agencies, so that we can look at how it deals with its workforce issues?

Mel Stride: I think that that may lend itself particularly to an Adjournment debate. If the hon. Gentleman would like to drop me a line, I will make sure that I am supportive of any such request that he may decide to make.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Pharmaceuticals company Avara Avlon, which was sold by AstraZeneca two years ago, has gone into administration, leaving many long-standing employees, including my constituents, high and dry without the benefit of AstraZeneca’s redundancy and terms and conditions. Can we have a debate to highlight the need to protect TUPE conditions in cases such as this and to highlight what the employees and my constituents feel is AstraZeneca’s lack of duty of care?

Mel Stride: On this particular matter, involving a particular pharmaceutical company and the issues of TUPE, I would direct the hon. Lady to Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions on 16 July, when she will have an ideal opportunity to press Ministers on that matter.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Last week, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister dismissed accusations of Christian persecution in Pakistan, claiming that any examples are only individual incidents that do not constitute a trend and comparing it with knife crime in the UK—what a comparison. It is very concerning that any member of the Pakistan Government should view 1,500 people of religious minorities being charged with blasphemy in Pakistan since 1987 as not constituting a trend. This is only the tip of the iceberg. I travelled to Pakistan last year and heard at first hand horrific accounts of abductions, child marriages, rape, forced conversions and other forms of persecution that Christians and other religious groups face in Pakistan. This week, I went to the Backbench Business Committee and requested a debate—67 Members of this House want to speak in that debate. Will the Leader of the House agree to set aside time to discuss the persecution of Christians across the world?

Mel Stride: I know that the hon. Gentleman, rightly, persistently raises—as he has done at more than one business questions since I have been the Leader of the House—the issue of religious persecution. He is absolutely right to do so. I know that his commitment to that particular issue has, as he has outlined, involved travelling to Pakistan and looking closely at some of the deeply disturbing matters that he has just raised. Given his persistence in raising these issues, perhaps he and I could meet at a time of his convenience and look at some of them and at the particular ways in which, using the parliamentary timetable, it may be possible to further the points that he is making.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I am proud to represent a borough that has some of the best schools in the country, so I am very disturbed that, in the past few days, Hackney New School has lost its fourth head in two years. The reason I raise this matter here is that it is a free school, which means that it is directly accountable to the Government. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in Government time about how we ensure accountability of free schools in England and will he ensure that the Education Minister writes to me about that school?

Mel Stride: On the hon. Lady’s last specific question, I have no doubt that her comments will have been heard and I will certainly follow up to ensure that an appropriate letter is written to her on that particular issue. Obviously, I do not know the specifics of the school in her constituency, albeit that it may be a free school—obviously, I cannot be expected to know as much about it as the hon. Lady—but I do not think that we should conclude that, because there are some problems with some free schools, as would be expected given the large volume that there are of them, that means that free schools per se are not a good or a successful idea. The reality is that, compared with 2010, there are now 1.9 million more children in good and outstanding schools as a result of this Government’s educational reforms.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): May I say gently to the Leader of the House, who I know to be a fair man, that he should not underestimate the level of dissatisfaction with the Government’s approach to the Northern Ireland business on Monday? It seems to be a pretty transparent and poor attempt to stifle debate on
issues such as abortion, equal marriage and restitution for victims of institutional abuse. Actually, it is an attempt not just to stifle debate, but to block any progress on them. I urge him to work through the usual channels and do the right thing: give us the proper time to scrutinise these important issues in this important Bill.

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important matter and he has my personal commitment to do just that.

Mr Speaker: I hope that that is reassuring. It is very explicit that, although there are ordinarily deadlines for the submission of amendments, it is possible for there to be manuscript amendments, and the decision as to whether manuscript amendments are permissible is a decision for the Chair. Therefore, the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), although legitimately concerned about this matter—and, I hope, reassured by the Leader of the House—should not languish in perturbation for the rest of the day because there is help at hand from the Leader of the House and potentially from other sources if necessary.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am finding it increasingly difficult to elicit any kind of response from HMRC to my letters on behalf of my constituents. The phone lines are often not staffed, attending HMRC parliamentary drop-ins brings no progress and chasing letters are simply ignored. But the plot thickens because alongside this, after two previous corrections from me, I have just received a third letter from HMRC to my home, informing me that I am an English taxpayer. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out the importance of HMRC responding to MPs’ correspondence, and can he investigate how much potential revenue may be lost to Scotland as a result of HMRC classing Scottish taxpayers as English taxpayers?

Mel Stride: Clearly I am not privy to the specific case that the hon. Lady has raised. However, I urge her to beat a path to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, who has departmental responsibility for HMRC. If the hon. Lady requires my assistance in that purpose, it will be available. As to the observation that she might have been treated as an English taxpayer rather than a Scottish taxpayer, I would imagine that that might be slightly welcome, given that she might pay less tax as a consequence.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): As was mentioned at Prime Minister’s questions yesterday, the company that owns Vauxhall Motors at Ellesmere Port has announced that we are going to get the new Astra model, but only if we avoid a no-deal Brexit. Now, I cannot help thinking that the reason the company has said this is that both the men who want to be the next Prime Minister have been talking up the prospects of a no-deal Brexit. Given that there is now a very specific threat to the livelihoods of many of my constituents because of a proposed Government policy, I am astounded that the Business Secretary has not been here to give a statement about how we are going to avoid those job losses. Please can we have a statement from the Business Secretary on this issue as soon as possible?

Mel Stride: I am not going to stray too far into the comments made by the two candidates to be the next leader of the Conservative party and Prime Minister, but my understanding is that both those individuals clearly recognise that it is better to have a deal, and that one of the reasons it is better to have a deal is to avoid the frictions at the border that would cause problems to car manufacturers and just-in-time elements of their production processes. As to how we might go forward, the hon. Gentleman is of course at liberty to propose this as a subject for debate, to request an urgent question on the matter or perhaps even to apply for an Adjournment debate, where he might have an opportunity to quiz the relevant Minister in some detail on the issues he has raised regarding Vauxhall Motors.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Families who adopt have specific support needs. Given that the all-party parliamentary group on adoption and permanence took evidence from over 1,600 people, including young people, about their specific needs, will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the future of the adoption support fund, which is due to end next year?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for all her work on this very important issue, not least as the chair of the APPG for adoption and permanence. I believe that she may have put in for a Backbench Business debate on the particular issue that she has raised. If she has a moment to meet me briefly over a cup of tea, I will be very happy to have a chat with her further about the matter and to see whether we can prevail upon the good offices of the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) to secure that debate for her.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Earlier this year, the Information Commissioner presented a substantial and important report to Parliament requesting an extension of freedom of information laws to outsourced public service providers, particularly drawing on the experiences of Grenfell and Carillion. I have discovered through a written question that the Government have responded in a letter that has been hidden away in the Library, but they are not proposing very much. Given the importance of this subject and the importance of the Information Commissioner’s work, can we not at least have a statement from a Minister?

Mel Stride: I do not know the specifics of the letter that has been placed in the Library, nor what it says, but I am sure that the Ministers concerned will have heard the hon. Gentleman’s comments.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, your enthusiasm for curry was very much on show at the Tiffin cup event on Tuesday night, when you made some quite inspirational remarks about the contribution that south-east Asian cuisine has made to this country. I invite the Leader of the House to recognise the excellent work done by all 69 nominees from across the UK who were put forward—in particular, that of Nakodor Grill in Dennistoun in my constituency, which won the Scottish regional heat and was then submitted to the final. That was fantastic. It is not just about the quality of food, which was ably judged by a team chaired by Ainsley Harriott, but the great contribution that these restaurants have made to local communities.
Tony and Johnnie Ginda, who come from one of the first Asian families in Dennistoun, established that restaurant. Many thought it would fail, but they fought against all the odds to make it a huge asset to the community. They do amazing community work as well as all the work they do to provide fine cuisine in Glasgow. I invite everyone to try it out if they are ever in Glasgow. I think we should have a debate in Government time on the fantastic contribution that south-east Asian restaurants have made to this country’s heritage.

Mel Stride: I am not so sure about a debate, but perhaps we should resurrect the bus trip and go to visit all 69 of those locations, have a good meal and see just how good those places are—I know they are outstanding. I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating the Gindas on the hard work that they have done and their deserved success.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I had hoped to be asking the Leader of the House to join me in congratulating constituents on the opening of the community pub in Ryton, Ye Olde Cross, which has been bought by community shareholders, but, sadly, I have something much more serious to raise. Just over a year ago, I raised in this House the loss of over 100 jobs that would arise from the Government’s decision to award the UK passport contract to a French-Belgian company. Last week, I was again at the delivery plant in Team Valley, being told about the loss of up to 171 additional jobs, this time on the money-printing side—a direct fallout from the loss of the passport contract. This is devastating for these highly skilled staff and for the local economy. Can we have a debate in Government time on steps to support these highly skilled print jobs for the future?

Mel Stride: First, Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions are on the 16th of this month, and that would be an excellent matter to raise with Ministers on that occasion. As to the loss of jobs around the printing of passports, the procurement arrangements and so on, if there are specific questions that the hon. Lady suggests. It also needs some finance. In the last Budget, £100 million was made available to make sure that we have the resources in order to undertake the work required. She specifically called on the Home Secretary to come to the House to make a statement. The Home Secretary has made various statements over time on precisely these matters, but I know that he will have heard her comments on this subject.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Yesterday evening, I received the tragic news that a man had been fatally stabbed in Battersea. This is truly devastating, and what makes it more painful is that it seems to be happening too frequently. My constituents should be able to live freely and safely, but increasingly they feel as though they cannot. Could I ask Leader of the House two things? First, can we get a statement from the Home Secretary on the serious violence strategy because, as it stands, we are facing a national crisis and we do not appear to be hearing anything from him on this? Secondly, can we have a debate in Government time that will look into the root causes of the rise in violent crime, and the urgent resource that desperately needs to be put into our schools, our youth service provision and our police services?

Mel Stride: First, I take this opportunity to thank the hon. Lady for our recent meeting on nystagmus. I look forward to coming back to her on the points that I undertook to look into, in the hope of giving this issue a higher profile, which indeed it deserves.

On the tragic event in her constituency—the death of, I assume, one of her constituents—our thoughts and prayers are with the friends and family of that individual. She commented that these situations are occurring too frequently, and I cannot but agree with her—they are indeed. It is the Government’s view that there are complex issues underlying why these stabbings occur, such as young people getting involved in drugs, in gangs and in county lines. It needs a multi-agency approach that goes right across Government in order to unpick it, as the hon. Lady suggests. It also needs some finance. In the last Budget, £100 million was made available to make sure that we have the resources in order to undertake the work required. She specifically called on the Home Secretary to come to the House to make a statement. The Home Secretary has made various statements over time on precisely these matters, but I know that he will have heard her comments on this subject.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am very privileged to have in my constituency the largest population of showpeople in Scotland. Can we have a debate on the forthcoming census, which would allow us to remind them that, for the first time ever, they can tick a “showpeople” box and be recognised in their own right?

My other question would be to ask you, Mr Speaker, whether we might be able to host some colleagues from the Showmen’s Guild in New Palace Yard who have kindly offered to bring some teacups and other fairground rides to put there. I wonder whether that is something that could perhaps be organised in the weeks to come.

Mel Stride: It is rather nice that the hon. Gentleman should have mentioned showpeople, who contribute in an important way to our culture and our society. I would be very happy, if he would write to me, to give some serious thought to how we make sure that the points that he has raised are better ventilated.
Points of Order

12.18 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Oh, a veritable flurry of points of order! I call the person who leapt to her feet with exemplary alacrity, speed and athleticism—Thangam Debbonaire.

Thangam Debbonaire: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance on the need for Ministers of the Crown to speak accurately about the actions of Members of this place and the other place in legislative processes and to seek to correct the record as soon as possible when they inadvertently give information that turns out not to be correct.

The Prime Minister has been given several opportunities by me and others to correct the record and clarify that, contrary to what she said in reply to my question and one other last week in Prime Minister’s questions, which must have been misinformation that she had been given, the Labour Lords did not block or attempt to block the statutory instrument for the UK to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Despite emailing the Prime Minister, tabling a written question and asking her again yesterday following her G20 statement, the Prime Minister has chosen not to correct the record, but merely to repeat some of her previous statement.

Mr Speaker, what guidance do you have for the next Prime Minister on the subject of either giving accurate information about the actions of colleagues or, when misinformed and therefore inadvertently saying something that turns out not to be correct, correcting the record as soon as possible? The public deserve to know that all of us here do our very best to uphold the traditions of truth and accountability.

Mr Speaker: The short answer is: be accurate, and if you are not, acknowledge the fact and make amends. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her intention to raise that matter and for informing the Prime Minister. In responding to the hon. Lady’s point of order on 27 June, the Deputy Speaker encouraged her to pursue the matter by means of a written question. I note that the answer to her first question was disappointing to her, but that is, I regret to say, not an unusual experience for Members tabling questions to Ministers.

The best advice that I can give the hon. Lady in such circumstances is: persist, persist, persist—note my use of the word three times, its repetition twice. Quantity, persistence and, above all, repetition are at least as important as the quality of an hon. Member’s argument. The quality of the argument, of course, must pass muster, but it is a great mistake to think that if a point is made once and has the advantage of being true, it will be readily acknowledged as such by all colleagues or outside observers. Sadly, in my 22 years in the House, my experience has been that that is not unfailingly the case. It is therefore necessary to keep going—if necessary, on and on and on until satisfaction is achieved. The Table Office would be happy to advise the hon. Lady on further options available to her, and this process can potentially continue indefinitely until she has secured an outcome that suits.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I will come to the right hon. Gentleman, but it would be a pity to squander him at too early a stage in our proceedings. The House will want to savour the experience of hearing him in his characteristically poetic form and mood, so we will come to him erelong. Meanwhile, we will hear a point of order from Marsha De Cordova.

Marsha De Cordova: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Following the High Court ruling in 2017, the Department for Work and Pensions is now reviewing more than 1.6 million personal independence payment cases, to identify people entitled to additional social security support. Today the Department has released an update on its review, and the figures are deeply concerning. The Government had estimated that 14% of cases would see an increase in their award—an estimate that was cited multiple times in this place and outside it. But the figures released today show that just 0.8% of the cases reviewed have led to an increase in award. That is a significant disparity, and given the Department’s shambolic record, we need confidence that it is not yet another error. I seek your guidance, as I believe this is such an important issue that an oral statement should have been made to the House.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her intention to raise a point of order on that matter. I am bound to say that I have not received notice of an intention by Ministers to make an oral statement—

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson) rose—

Mr Speaker: Oh! That is very helpful. The relevant Minister is in his place and veritably champing at the bit. Let us hear from the fella.

Justin Tomlinson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I notified the hon. Lady on 24 June about the latest stats publication, with an invitation to meet officials, which, I am pleased to say, has been accepted. We will continue to keep the House updated through regular statistical releases, as is the usual practice.

Mr Speaker: I cannot be expected to act as arbiter on this matter. What the Minister has told the House is of interest and relevance, and doubtless the meeting, which I assume is scheduled, will go ahead, and it may well provide enlightenment or satisfaction. If not, and the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) wishes to return to the matter, she can do so in the first instance, having alerted those on the Treasury Bench to her continuing interest, through the judicious use of the Order Paper, upon which she will be advised by the Table Office. It is perfectly possible that these matters will be aired again in the Chamber erelong.
Sir John Hayes rose—

Mr Speaker: We have now arrived at this exciting moment—I call Sir John Hayes.

Sir John Hayes: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I waited in vain during business questions to hear any mention of the plight of those who suffer from spinal muscular atrophy, such as my constituent, 12-year-old Rae White. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence approved a treatment for this condition in May, yet it now has become clear that the roll-out has been delayed and the allocation may be partial. Quite simply, those who suffer deserve better.

Mr Speaker: I had no advance notification of that point of order, but the right hon. Gentleman has brought to the attention of the House an extremely serious and pressing matter. I do not know whether he is suggesting that there is any mismatch between a public statement of what would happen and what is now happening. If so, that is a matter of real parliamentary concern.

I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I say that there is some analogy or parallel between what he has just raised and the matter that has been raised on a couple of occasions in recent months by the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), in relation to a different but very acute and serious condition and the availability or non-availability of the appropriate drug treatment. If the right hon. Gentleman wishes to raise that matter further in the Chamber before the summer recess, I think I can say with complete confidence that he will have the chance to do so.

I thank colleagues for what they have said and the Minister on the Front Bench for helpfully springing to his feet to assist us.

Lilian Greenwood: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to make a statement to the House on the 10th report of the Transport Committee, “Local roads funding and maintenance: filling the gap”, which we published on Monday. The successful preparation of all our reports depends on the hard work of the Committee’s Clerks and staff, the diligence of the Members who make up our Committee—I am glad to see my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) in the Chamber—and the generosity of our witnesses, who give up their time to prepare for and take part in our sessions.

I particularly thank Paula Claysonsmith, Lynne Stinson, Lynne Wait and Anne Shaw for ensuring that we heard expert female voices in a male-dominated sector. I am sorry that the Roads Minister, the hon. Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), cannot be here today, but he has conveyed his sincere apologies, and I am sure he will pay close attention to Hansard tomorrow.

There is a plague of potholes blighting our local roads and pavements. This is not a new phenomenon, but one that successive Governments and councils across the land have failed to tackle. The consequences of this failure are all around us—we see them every day. I want to talk about the impacts of poor road and pavement conditions, why Government and local authority actions to date have been ineffectual and our report’s recommendations for tackling the problem.

On my journey to work, here in Westminster and out and about in my constituency, I see many examples of cracked and crumbling roads. Just today, a constituent emailed me about Green Lane in Clifton. Last week, Westminster City Council filled a pothole just around the corner from the Department for Transport that I had ridden into on my way home—I confess that it caused me to use some very unparliamentary language.

Our witnesses told us about the serious impacts that potholes have on the lives of pedestrians, cyclists, motorists and other road users. For example, poor pavements can strand older, frail and vulnerable people in their homes. Living Streets has found that nearly a third of adults over 65 felt reluctant to leave the house on foot due to the volume of cracks and uneven surfaces on surrounding streets, and almost two thirds of older people were
worried about the state of street surfaces. Nearly half said that well-maintained pavements would make them more likely to go for a walk. Poorly maintained roads create real risks for vulnerable road users. DFT data shows that the number of cyclists killed or seriously injured due to defective road surfaces more than tripled between 2005 and 2017.

Local authorities must compensate motorists for damage to vehicles resulting from poor road conditions, and the cost of doing so has risen dramatically in recent years. Kwik Fit has estimated that the damage caused to vehicles from potholes in 2017 cost £915 million to repair, an increase of more than a third on the repair bill in 2016. Based on its share of Britain’s car insurance market, the AA has estimated that 3,500 claims had been made for pothole damage in 2017. The cost of this compensation ultimately falls on taxpayers, and it diverts money away from funding vital public services.

One of the most frustrating things about poor road conditions — this came through very clearly in our evidence — is the lack of any consistent reporting tool that drivers, cyclists, pedestrians and other road users can use to report problem potholes. Some councils have their own online tools, and there are nationwide sites such as FixMyStreet, but there is a lack of transparency around the whole reporting process, little clarity about what will be done and no guarantee that people will get a reply. Mark Morrell — “Mr Pothole” — for years a doughty campaigner against the pothole scourge, made a powerful case to us to fix this.

Why, year after year, do these problems persist? Why have successive Governments and local councils not done anything about them? In truth, they have tried, but their efforts have been inconsistent, and as a result, the end result is nothing. If drivers, cyclists, pedestrians and other road users are worried about the state of street surfaces, as councils and industry are, why is it not always easy for this to be shared beyond individual councils and regions.

The second is that councils sometimes do not have a full picture of the state of their road networks. If they do not know what they are dealing with, how can they plan and price maintenance properly? This lack of knowledge can be improved by innovating in data collection methods. There has been good work in this area in recent years, and there is a real desire on the part of Government and industry to work together to find solutions.

We heard about a similar willingness to innovate in the third area — good practice and collaboration. There is a real opportunity for initiatives such as the use of recycled plastic, self-repairing technology graphene and even drones to bring down the cost of road repairs. We heard about the innovation and good practice going on across the country, but it was not always easy for this to be shared beyond individual councils and regions.

Our report makes a series of detailed recommendations to the Government to tackle these problems, and I want to highlight four of them. First and foremost, funding: there is not enough of it, and what there is is not allocated efficiently or effectively. Local government revenue funding has fallen by about 25% since 2010. The allocation within it for local roads is not ring-fenced, and it is often used by councils to plug gaps in other budgets. Capital funding, through the pothole action fund and other pots, is sporadic and time-limited.

To tackle this problem we recommend a front-loaded, long-term funding settlement for local councils in England. The DFT should champion it, and the Treasury should seriously consider it as part of the forthcoming spending review. This would enable local authorities to address the historical road maintenance backlog and plan confidently for the future. The settlement should not only include capital pots managed by the DFT, but roll up into a five-year settlement the revenue support elements of roads funding administered by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This critical funding reform must not be an excuse for a budget cut.

Secondly, innovation is essential if the efficiency and effectiveness of local road maintenance is to continue to improve. In the face of limited funding, it is right that the Government stimulate and encourage innovation, but the value for money of any investment is properly repaid only when new technologies, ideas and ways of working are scaled up and made available to all. In the light of this, we have recommended that the DFT work across government to collate all innovation funding for local roads in one place, establish as far as possible common rules for bidding and properly assess the benefits of innovation initiatives.

Thirdly, local authorities will be able to make better use of available funds for road maintenance only if they can target such funding well, and this requires good data. The DFT needs to be clear about whether the data it receives from local authorities on road conditions is consistent and allows valid comparisons to be made. It needs to be clear what it does with such data, how it is analysed and what action is taken on the back of the conclusions it draws. The DFT should also make it easier for the public to report road condition concerns and access local authority road condition data. We recommend that it does this by running an innovation competition to develop a platform the public can use to make online reports about road conditions directly to their council and to access real-time local road condition data.

Fourthly, making the best use of the available funding requires the sharing and adoption of good practice in road maintenance. This is a key role for central Government. The DFT should commit to monitoring and reviewing the current approach and reporting within two years on its effects and impacts. Local councils and industry are developing good practice in highway survey and maintenance. However, from the evidence we have received, it is not always clear that this is being widely shared. Regional highway alliances should be sharing good practice and benchmarking it against one another. The DFT could do more to facilitate this—for example, by providing a virtual good practice toolkit and repository, so that councils across England can find examples of good practice.

In conclusion, local roads are the arteries of prosperous and vibrant villages, towns and cities. They are critical to the movement of goods, as well as helping people to
get around. The consequences of a deteriorating local road network are significant. It undermines local economic performance and results in direct costs to taxpayers. The safety of other road users is seriously compromised. This plague of potholes is a major headache for everyone. It is time for the Government to be bold, to take up our recommendations and to give councils the funding and the wider system of support that they need if they are to deliver for our constituents the roads and pavements they deserve.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** I congratulate the hon. Lady on her statement and her Committee on its excellent report. She says, very importantly, that best practice should be shared. Her report makes it clear that there are 153 local highways authorities managing the English local road network. Does she agree that it would be a good idea for the Department for Transport to get the best five in the same room in the department with the worst five, knock heads together and drive through some improvement?

**Lilian Greenwood:*** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. It is certainly our intention that the Department identify where there is very good practice and share that widely, so that other local councils can take up that good practice. We hope that it will also hold to account, as will their constituents, the councils that are not currently doing a good job in keeping their roads and pavements in a decent state.

**Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab):** I echo the thanks to the Committee staff and to witnesses, and I also thank my hon. Friend for his skilful chairing of the Committee. Does she agree with me that the evidence we frequently heard was that the funding streams are complicated, coming from two different Departments—the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government as well as the DFT—and that the confusion caused by the bidding culture means resources are not necessarily allocated to the best places, particularly when so much of local government has been hollowed out?

**Lilian Greenwood:*** I thank my hon. Friend for his question and, indeed, for his contribution to our Committee, which is enormously valued. He is absolutely right to draw attention to the fact that it is not just the quantum of funding that matters; it is the way in which it is delivered. It is about having long-term certainty about the funding that is available, not wasting resources on bidding for pots of money that come at the wrong time. The bidding is in itself a cost to councils, some of which are better than others at doing it. That is why we have asked for a long-term settlement, and we have asked for a single stream of funding, rather than it coming in dribs and drabs, which simply is not the most effective way to spend taxpayers’ money.

**Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab):** I congratulate my hon. Friend and I commend him, as a former shadow Roads Minister, for his interest and knowledge in this area. We heard from industry about a lack of data on the quality of roads, and one of our recommendations is that the Government improve those data. There is a bit of a mixed picture. There has been a slight improvement on some A-roads that are managed by local authorities, but as my hon. Friend recognises, for many unclassified roads, the picture has got worse. Funding is key, but as I said, it is not just about the quantity of funding; it is the way it is delivered. We call on the Government to consult with local authorities in deciding future arrangements.

**Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab):** I, too, congratulate the Committee Chair on an excellent report. A week last Saturday, I attended a memorial service at Neston High School to mark 25 years since the death of Andrew Fielding who died on the A540 near the school. Ever since then his mother, Pauline Fielding, has campaigned for road safety improvements on that stretch of road, and although it is recognised that the road needs such improvements, we always seem to struggle with funding. If we could get that road, which is a major artery for the area, to be part of the strategic road network, that would open up lots more opportunities for funding. Will the review recommended by the Committee include consideration of whether certain roads should be part of the strategic road network?

**Lilian Greenwood:*** The condition of our roads is an important part of road safety, and vulnerable pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists are put at risk when roads are not properly maintained. Our report focused on the local road network rather than the strategic road network, which is managed by Highways England. I cannot comment on whether the road mentioned by my hon. Friend is
rightly allocated, but a large amount of funding has been put into the strategic road network, and we must place the same focus on our local road network, which is, as the Minister said, part of our national infrastructure and hugely important. Our local road network is a national asset, and we must take care of it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for the report, which included input from my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan), and the Government have set aside additional money to address potholes in Northern Ireland. Potholes are a daily nuisance in all our constituencies, not just because of their inconvenience, but because they pose a danger to cyclists, motorcyclists and those who drive cars. The Government refer to a 5 million pothole strategy by 2020-21. Does the Committee consider that strategy to be fully funded and a priority, because it is important to have a proactive response rather than a reactive one?

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and we want to move from a reactive to a proactive approach to mending our roads, so that local authorities can plan ahead. The pothole action fund has undoubtedly allowed local authorities to fill some roads and undertake work, but that often gets agreed within the year and is time-limited, so it must be implemented by the end of the financial year. That is not the most efficient and effective way to deal with the funding and maintenance of our local roads, and that issue lies at the heart of the Committee’s report.

BILL PRESENTED

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No.57)

Secretary Karen Bradley, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Secretary David Gauke, Secretary David Mundell, Secretary Alun Cairns, John Penrose and Kevin Foster, presented a Bill to extend the period for forming and Executive under section 1(1) of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 and to impose a duty on the Secretary of State to report on progress towards the formation of an Executive in Northern Ireland.

Bill read the first time; to be read a Second time on Monday 8 July, and to be printed (Bill 417), with explanatory notes (Bill 417-EN).
need for a driveshaft and traditional gearbox means that designers and engineers have far more freedom to rethink the space used to enhance driver comfort and the passenger experience in an electric vehicle. Then you cannot help but notice how fast they are. There is no need to wait for the process of combustion in an EV, so initial acceleration, even in an entry-level model, is startling. I got a test of this when the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), who is in his place on the Government Benches, and I were going down the dual carriageway. I was on the inside lane and he shot past me on the outside lane. He certainly got around the first roundabout in Milton Keynes before me. You then become aware of the noise or, more accurately, the lack thereof. Few of us can afford cars whose engine noise is a thing of beauty, so doing without it altogether is a godsend.

Finally, because of the use of the reclamation engine to reclaim energy when decelerating, all but the most severe braking is done by lifting the accelerator pedal. It makes for an incredibly smooth ride, much smoother than that of the current automatic cars, although I cannot attest to the smoothness of the hon. Gentleman’s journey that day.

In short, we should not guilt drivers into electric cars. We should start by pointing out how brilliant they are. That is also borne out by the evidence.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): When my hon. Friend was on his mystery tour, for want of a better expression, did he visit the Jaguar Land Rover plant and look at the electric cars there, or did he go to look at the black cabs made just outside Coventry, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Rugby, and try a ride in one?

Peter Kyle: I am extremely grateful for my hon. Friend’s characteristically generous and insightful contribution. The Committee visited JLR—I was not on the visit—and the London Electric Vehicle Company plant. Indeed, the hon. Member for Rugby was a participant in that visit, for obvious reasons. I will talk a little later about that experience and the contribution that that company is making to the streets of London, our capital city.

The proof that driving an electric vehicle is an exhilarating experience and one that consumers enjoy is also borne out by evidence. In Norway, where 30% of new cars sold are electric, 96% of first-time buyers say that they would never consider going back to conventional cars. Evidence also shows that prior to buying an EV, potential customers have concerns about range anxiety. New electric car customers, however, report feeling liberated from petrol stations. Evidence shows that people who buy EVs love them and promote them to friends. People like me who have experience driving them soon aspire to own one.

Just as electric vehicles provide a great consumer experience, we should also see the opportunity they provide for British business, which has not only challenges but huge opportunities in this regard. British industry has already proven itself a world-leading EV maker with the Nissan Leaf, Europe’s best-selling electric car, which is made right here in Britain, in Sunderland.

Our fantastic start is not being sustained, however, and there is no time to waste if we are serious about using the conversion to electric as an opportunity for British industry. Low domestic demand, Brexit and unambitious policy have meant that Britain has lost out on the world-class manufacturing opportunities we should be snapping up. Honda is closing its car assembly plant in Swindon to make its electric cars in Japan. BMW, Vauxhall and Toyota are shipping their high-value parts, including batteries, from abroad rather than making them here. Once these global patterns are established, it will become really hard for British industry to break in.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): On that point, Cogent Power’s Orb plant in my constituency makes very high-quality electrical steel and it is very keen to be a part of this industry in the future. What it needs from the Government is support for smaller companies to help to grow the supply chain. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government could help industry in this way?

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point, which is fundamental to not only saving the industry but exploiting it. It is about not just car manufacturers but the supply chain. It is part of a comprehensive industrial strategy that our country cannot afford to miss out on. We will only succeed in the way she mentions, and succeed in achieving the kind of ambition she has for her local industry and her local businesses, if the Government are an active participant in making that happen. That is the lesson we have learned repeatedly in recent decades and repeatedly in the past year alone.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Jaguar Land Rover is investing a lot of money in making electric batteries at its research and development centre in my constituency, but not enough has been done to create the infrastructure for electric cars that is badly needed. Does my hon. Friend not agree that more could be done in that area?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): May I just say that we have a very packed debate afterwards and that the opening speeches are meant to be approximately 15 minutes in length? I hope that helps.

Peter Kyle: I am very grateful, Mr Deputy Speaker. You will be pleased to hear that I have got my speech down to 12 minutes. Interventions allowing, I will crack on.

My hon. Friend makes another very good point. It is great that we are making batteries in this country and I thank the Government for launching the Faraday challenge, which is important in inspiring and nurturing the sector, but we need to do a lot more. There is absolutely no doubt about that. The ambition of operators needs to be matched by the ambition of the Government for the electrical vehicle infrastructure itself. Otherwise, it will not succeed.

Right now, trends are emerging globally. We therefore have a window of opportunity that we cannot afford to lose. We must not miss out on this opportunity to establish Britain as a world leader in design, manufacture, assembly, and distribution for electric vehicles and their component parts. Industry cannot do that alone. As the interventions I have taken prove, the industry needs the Government to be an active and generous partner at these nascent stages of one of the world’s most significant emerging consumer trends.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next speaker, Mr Jim Cunningham, will have 10 minutes in which to make his speech.
Increasingly, electrified transport will become a normalised part of British life. People will experience it for themselves regularly from now on. As they do so, suspicion of its practicality will fall away. For example, in just 18 months’ time there will be 9,000 fully electric black cabs on the streets of London. As part of our inquiry, we visited the London EV Company and saw for ourselves the cutting-edge skills and technology being deployed by this great Coventry-based firm. Its product sets new standards, raising the bar on passenger comfort. Cab drivers love it, too. Next month, Brighton and Hove will take delivery of its first fully electric bus, and London already has several on the roads. When I was walking through Westminster a little while ago, I heard an extraordinary squeaking noise. I turned around and there was a double-decker bus. The only thing I could hear was the squeaking of the tyres as the bus made its way down the road. These are extraordinary innovations, which will transform not only our ability to tackle climate change, and the passenger and driver experience, but our lives in cities, because of the lack of the noise pollution that goes along with the combustion engine.

Our Government have a target of “almost every car and van” being zero emission by 2050, and for new cars and vans to be “effectively” zero emission by 2040. Our Committee found several faults with those targets. First, the phraseology used by the Government leaves plenty of room for interpretation. It is too vague to have bite. Secondly, the target dates themselves are miles behind other nations. China, India and Norway will all phase out petrol and diesel vehicles over the next decade, so why cannot we? Perversely, we are not even managing to beat countries within our own United Kingdom—Scotland has a target of 2032. Moreover, the motor manufacturers themselves are not hanging around for our targets. Honda will be producing electric-only vehicles within seven years, Porsche by 2030.

All those factors lead me to believe that when it comes to electric vehicles, the ambition of consumers, operators and manufacturers is outstripping that of our Government. If the UK is serious about being an EV world leader, as our Government claim to be, we must bring forward a clear, unambiguous target to achieve zero emissions from cars and vans by 2032. To achieve that target, Government will need far more ambition not just in its rhetoric, but in its action on the ground.

We need a revolutionary approach to charging infrastructure—not the incremental one that we have right now.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Would my hon. Friend accept that, as well as more charging points, we need a proper economic structure to maintain them? From my experience, that is not working on the ground. Does he agree?

Peter Kyle: I cannot disagree with my hon. Friend, particularly in an era when councils like Brighton and Hove City Council have experienced cuts of over 45% to their budget. We are investing massively in new infrastructure, but maintaining it will be a crucial challenge. We need to share the costs with the people who make money from the charging infrastructure, such as the electric companies, and the people who use the service. We also need to ensure that, for the sake of our climate change objectives, these things are subsidised as well. The cash must be there in the system.

The Government have abandoned themselves from the opportunity to become the driving force in making access to publicly available charging stations ubiquitous, and have instead devolved responsibilities to cash-strapped local authorities. As a result, a quarter of local authorities have not installed a single EV charging point in the last year. That is simply not good enough.

In the coming months, Brighton and Hove City Council will install 200 charging points across the city. Next week, I shall be joining one of the teams to see for myself what it takes to create a modern charging network. I am pleased to say that a representative of Brighton and Hove City Council who is leading on the programme is here with us in the Chamber today—I welcome Pete Turner to our debate.

Some 60% of EV charging takes place at home, which is why so many people feel liberated from being dependent on fuel stations; but for those of us who, like me, live in flats or high-density housing, on-street charging is essential. My street is scheduled to have two charging points installed in the coming months. Several London boroughs are converting street lights into charging stations.

So we know that the technology and expertise exists, and we really need to get on with it. My fear is that cities like Brighton and Hove will become exemplars in public charging facilities but others will not. That is great for people who want to drive to our city, but unless surrounding towns, cities and destinations are suitably equipped, it will not be great for people who live in Brighton and Hove who want to get out and about in their cars. Charging a car should not be a postcode lottery. EV owners should not have to do research before setting out on a trip. Infrastructure should be ubiquitous and should be evenly distributed throughout our country, and only active Government participation can make that happen.

Until EVs reach the scale of production that we have seen for conventional vehicles, their cost will remain higher. Until then, the Government also need to level the playing field with incentives. Tax breaks and other incentives work—there is no escaping that fact. Last October, when the Government suddenly cut the plug-in scheme, growth in sales of plug-in hybrids plummeted from 29.5%, which we had achieved in the previous 10 months, to just 1.7%. That was highlighted just an hour ago on the BBC website, where it was reported that the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders had said that “sales of plug-in hybrid cars had halved” in the last year.

“while hybrid electric vehicle sales were down 4.7%.”

Transport accounts for 26% of our CO₂ emissions, adding another layer of urgency to the need for electrification of our road transport.

As all of us who sat on the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee inquiry learned, the transition to electric vehicles is about a lot more than just cars on the road. Its impact will be far and wide. It will change patterns in daily life for most citizens. Implications for policy makers range from the infrastructure of our nation, such as electricity generation, to the distributional challenges for our national grid—and the
ability to capitalise on new resources with millions of batteries to be drawn down on at peak times, just as we need to charge them at others. People's homes will adapt, so that people can fuel their car from home.

Also, of course, the transition is inextricably linked to our ability to tackle climate change and the climate emergency, to meet levels of CO_2_ emissions reduction that our country and planet need from all of us. That is why this debate is so welcomed and so important. It is also why it is the start, not the end, of what I hope is ongoing parliamentary involvement from this point forward.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): May I suggest to everybody an eight-minute limit, in order to give equal time?

1.5 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), who during our inquiry became the most vociferous advocate for electric vehicles, drawing attention to the difference in the driving experience. I shall focus my remarks on the impact on my constituency and some of the business opportunities that arise as we run down the sale of vehicles powered by internal combustion engines.

I was an enthusiastic participant in the inquiry and support the target that the Committee decided on—to bring forward to 2030 an end to the sale of new cars and vans powered by internal combustion engines. That will put the UK in the first tier of EV transition and will help harmonise objectives across the UK. That puts real pressure on some of our manufacturers, but it also provides some very serious opportunities.

I want to talk about commercial vehicles. As the hon. Gentleman said, this is not just about private vehicles but about commercial vehicles too. I shall refer to the London Electric Vehicle Company, which manufactures taxis in my constituency. I also want to make some remarks on charging infrastructure and some of the problems that we are experiencing in my constituency.

I admit at the outset that I am not a driver of an electric vehicle. I have recently been in the market for a new car, but I prefer it if somebody else takes the initial depreciation, so I run a car that is maybe one or two years old. There is not yet an effective market in second-hand electric cars, and there is some concern about the life of batteries. I know that an internal combustion engine car that has 20,000 miles on the clock at two years old is approximately a fifth of the way through its life. We do not yet know about electric vehicles, and that market will develop. I am also concerned about being able to charge the car. I shall return to the subject of infrastructure later.

I am also a little concerned about range anxiety. I use a car for travelling short distances around my constituency, but on occasions want to drive 100 miles or so to Westminster or 200 miles to visit friends, and I am concerned about being able to charge the car. I shall return to the subject of infrastructure later.

I am delighted by the opportunities for the west midlands economy and welcome the news in respect of Jaguar Land Rover, which is about to build on the I-PACE vehicle, currently on the market, by developing an all-electric XJ—its big saloon. That will be available in 2020 with 300 miles between charges, and provide a UK-manufactured opportunity to compete with Tesla.

I know that the XJ is the car of choice for our Ministers and I very much hope that the Minister at the Dispatch Box will be driving an electric XJ immediately when they become available. It is good news for motor manufacturing at a time of Brexit uncertainty, and it is good news that the batteries will be manufactured at Hams Hall in Warwickshire and the motors will be built at JLR’s engine complex in Wolverhampton. That provides many opportunities for the supply chain.

I mentioned the London Electric Vehicle Company. I am delighted that it is in my constituency. It has produced 2,500 vehicles at Anstey in my constituency, and there are almost 2,000 on the streets of London already. If you see a taxi rank now, there is a pretty good chance that more than half of the taxis will be electric. Each such taxi reduces the CO_2_ emissions by 9.7 metric tonnes a year, compared with a diesel, and drivers can see savings of up to £100 a week because they no longer have to spend money on diesel.

One of the critical points about electric taxis is that for many people their first ever journey in an electric vehicle is in a taxi. It gives the taxi a pioneer role, and it is important that that is a good experience that people consider when they are purchasing. I was delighted to see the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt) driving a London taxi on the campaign trail only last week. We must encourage the switch, but the London Electric Vehicle Company has told me that lack of infrastructure is still a concern for drivers.

A second company in my constituency to benefit from the move to electric vehicles is Automotive Insulations. It is an important player and in many ways the go-to company for UK manufacturers in the supply of acoustic and thermal solutions. Acoustic material is what deadens the noise. In an internal combustion engine the acoustic material needs to deaden the sound of the engine, but the engine often masks other sounds, such as road noise, battery whine in electric vehicles and the noise made by other moving parts. So electric vehicles need different insulation material and Automotive Insulations is an expert in the field. It already supplies LEVC and the JLR I-PACE. It is also working on the new XJ. It has solutions designed for the Volvo Polestar, whose owners Geely also own LEVC, and is also working with Mercedes-Benz and BMW on developments. It is great to have its expertise in my constituency.

Grid infrastructure poses several challenges. An SME in my constituency provides extra power in the short term when there is inadequate power in the grid for people to charge their vehicles. It supplies to two locations of interest, the first of which is Oxford Bus. Oxford has a low emissions zone. For visitors who want to tour the city and see the sights on a bus, Go Ahead needed to find a way to electrify its bus fleet. Its depot had insufficient power capacity and development would have taken too long and come at a prohibitive cost. Off Grid Energy in my constituency was able to provide a
battery storage system to control the power available, limit the peak load on the network and store energy ready to recharge buses when they returned to the depot.

Off Grid Energy installed a similar system in Camden to provide power for a parcel delivery depot with 170 electric vans. If they all came back to the depot at the same time and wanted to recharge, there was not enough power in the grid, so Off Grid Energy’s batteries draw down power over time, giving the capacity to recharge. Those opportunities will continue to arise.

Charging is the key to solving the problem, and we need to make sure that we build in enough charging facilities for the growth in the market, especially if our objective is to go all electric by 2032. Rugby is at the centre of England and at the crossroads of the motorway network. It is great news that junction 1 of the M6 is getting a brand new motorway services, operated by Moto. I have made it my business to look at the provision of electric charging at the new service area. We might think that a new motorway service area would be an ideal place to include an extensive range of charging for people on their journeys, halfway between Manchester and London, but when it opens in July next year it will have just two charging points. That is extraordinary, and I have talked to the operator, Moto. It has an ambition to have 24, but it will open with just two. That issue needs to be addressed and I hope that the Minister will talk about how National Grid and Western Power, the power provider, can provide what people will need.

1.14 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on opening the debate and the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on his speech.

Our 2018 Joint Select Committee report on air quality began by setting out the impacts of air pollution, and they bear repeating. Some 40,000 lives across the country are cut short every year, with an annual cost to the UK of £20 billion. The health of babies, children, older people and those with existing medical conditions, including lung problems and asthma is put at great risk. We noted in that report that successive Governments had failed to act and violated our obligations to ensure safe, clean air to breathe. Of course, air pollution is just one of the environmental challenges that we face. I welcome the recognition in this place that we face a climate emergency, but it demands urgent and radical action to end our contribution to global carbon emissions. It is therefore particularly timely for us to debate the Government’s plans to end the sale of new petrol and diesel cars.

Road transport is responsible for 80% of NOx emissions—air pollution—at the roadside, and 65% of the emissions come from diesel and petrol cars and vans. While there has been a significant reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions, that is primarily as a result of changes in energy generation. Progress on emissions from transport has been stuck in the slow lane. Not only have transport emissions not fallen in recent years but they rose between 2013 and 2017, and the sector is now the UK’s largest generator of greenhouse gases, making up 27% of the total. Even though individual cars are becoming more fuel efficient and reducing their individual emissions, that is far surpassed by the increase in the number of vehicles on our roads, which is getting higher and higher.

The case for action is clear. The Government’s plans, however, are sadly lacking. The Joint report welcomed the commitment to end the sale of new petrol and diesel cars, but the target date of 2040 is not ambitious enough. It is too distant to produce the step change that is needed in industry and local government planning and, as my hon. Friend has said, it lags behind the commitment made by other countries and car manufacturers. Norway has committed to selling only zero-emission vehicles by 2025 and a host of other countries have set the target of 2030. Even Scotland is on 2032.

The target is about banning the sale of vehicles. We know that the replacement of the whole vehicle fleet would take 10 to 15 years. If we aim for the end of the sale of vehicles only in 2040, we will have no hope of meeting zero carbon by 2050. Are we really prepared to wait 15 years after the end of the sale of vehicles to eliminate those vehicles that emit polluting carbon from our roads? I do not think that we are.

If we are to change the set-up, industry needs clarity on what will be required and when. There is undoubtedly an opportunity to move more quickly, as the Committee on Climate Change has recommended. The National Infrastructure Commission has called for a similar ban on the sale of new diesel HGVs by 2040. It is a real challenge to decarbonise our freight sector, but we should go faster and further where we can and we need more research on how we can do that.

Setting a more ambitious target of 2030, 2035 or even sooner is not enough in itself. The Government must also take steps to ensure that that target is met and that they have the policies to support businesses and people in the switch to cleaner vehicles. We know that many consumers are confused—the RAC’s motoring survey has confirmed that—so clear guidance is needed. There are simple options such as vehicle labelling, which is very welcome and should be extended to, for instance, the second-hand market.

As has already been said, we need a rapid roll-out of charging infrastructure. The Government should work with National Grid in relation to electricity demand, and liaise with local authorities to identify the barriers and take steps to overcome them. Of course, the Government are themselves a major fleet provider, and are able to ensure that their fleets consist of cleaner and greener vehicles. However, as we start demanding that people use electric vehicles and do so rather more quickly, we should be conscious of social justice, especially when we know that clean air charging zones are being introduced in some of our most polluted towns and cities. The Government must act to help those who are least able to afford to replace polluting vehicles with ultra low emission vehicles. They should consider the role of scrappage schemes, and target support at low-income households and small businesses.

I must sound a note of caution about the limitations of this debate. Electric cars and vans are not a panacea, and they are not the whole answer to air pollution or the climate crisis. First, even electric cars’ brakes and tyres produce dangerous particulates that have an impact on health, so simply changing to a cleaner vehicle is not the answer. Secondly, cars are not the only issue. I have
to say that in our air quality report, we largely neglected to consider the rail network. While it is not a significant contributor at a national level, we know that emissions from diesel trains pose a serious problem in stations and depots. The Government have talked about decarbonising the railway, but they are also still talking about bi-mode trains, which, when they are not under the wires, are simply diesel trains.

The most important point, I think, is that air pollution and carbon emissions are not our only challenges. Inactivity and obesity are huge public health challenges, and congestion is a blight in nearly all towns and cities. We could move from dirty, polluting traffic jams to clean, green traffic jams, and that would not be right. We need more people to get out of their cars and on to public transport—this is Catch the Bus Week, and low emission buses have an enormous role to play—but we need even more people to be walking and cycling. Some 60% of journeys of one to two miles are undertaken by car, and that has to change if we are serious about securing a happy, healthy future for our country. Yes, we need cleaner vehicles, but we need so much more.

1.22 pm

Antoianette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who, as ever, advanced cogent arguments in support of electric vehicles.

Last month the House agreed unanimously to set a target of 2050 for net zero carbon emissions. Concern was expressed in some sections of the press that the decision had been made “on the nod”, and that insufficient thought had been given to how it would be delivered and the economic consequences. I hope this debate will show how wrong that concern is. There is not only a political awareness of the steps necessary to deliver our commitment, but the political will to take those steps, even if they require difficult decisions.

One of the difficult decisions that we must take is to bring forward the date by which the sale of new petrol and diesel cars and vans will end. That is supported by the Committee on Climate Change and, indeed, the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, of which I am a member. I note that in addition to our call, similar requests have been made by four other Committees, which have cited the impact on health and air quality as well as the environment, and the need to support low-carbon industries. I am delighted that the Conservative Environment Network has joined those calls, asking for a 2035 target.

The price of electric vehicles is expected to reach parity with that of internal combustion engine-powered cars by the mid-2020s—not on some far-flung date in the future, but in just a couple of years. A little further down the line, in the 2030s, sales of electric vehicles are expected to overtake petrol and diesel sales. There are now more electric vehicle charging locations in the UK than petrol stations. Despite that milestone, however, the network is not fit for purpose, as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), and poor provision of charging infrastructure is one of the main barriers to the growth of the market.

As it said in its report last year, the BEIS Committee found that my region contained just 244 publicly funded charging points, which equates to nearly 29,000 people per point. Although that is substantially better than the ratio across the border in Wales, where there are 98,806 people per charging point, it pales in comparison with the ratio in the north-east, where the figure is fewer than 4,000 people. Those three regions, which stretch across the UK, demonstrate the serious risk that access to sufficient charging points will become a postcode lottery, with someone from Newcastle standing a far better chance of being able to charge an electric vehicle than someone from Newport, Newquay or Knutsford.

A visible and extensive network of ultra-fast chargers is not just good for existing electric vehicle owners. Our Committee heard evidence that “The principle reason people are put off buying an EV, is no longer range anxiety, but the lack of a viable national/urban Rapid Charger infrastructure.”

We also need to think more carefully about how to standardise the infrastructure. If we are to develop an electric vehicle network that mirrors the advantages of petrol cars, we need to ensure that all EVs and charging points are inter-operable. That does not just mean that charging points need to charge all EVs; it means that data and information sharing must be standard as well.

I recognise that the passage of the Automated and Electric Vehicles Act 2018 has empowered the Government to take the necessary steps, but, as the report states, they will require full use of the powers in the Act to deliver a network of this kind. That is why I am troubled that they have handed responsibility for the development of this vital national infrastructure to local authorities. That would not happen with HS2 or Crossrail. Local authorities have demonstrated that they fail to have a big role to play in this project, but why do we expect them to deliver such a vital network with limited Government support and oversight?

I welcome the Government’s acceptance of our recommendation for planning guidance on the number of charging points installed in new buildings, which will help local authorities, but the Government need to recognise their responsibilities and take a lead in co-ordinating the financial and technical support that councils need to build charging infrastructure. Failing to do that will imperil the future of the entire electric vehicle sector.

Only yesterday, I received an email from a constituent about that very issue. He rightly pointed out: “Given the importance of changing to electric cars in line with the Government’s climate change policy, I am amazed that building regulations only required the installation of a 16amp consumer unit in our detached garage which was built with our house only 18 months ago. This is insufficient to power a 7kw charger which requires a 32amp supply. As from July 1, in order to meet OLEV’s grant requirements a minimum of a 7kw charger must be installed—a 3.6kw/16amp charger is no longer allowed. Given the huge cost involved in increasing the amperage of a consumer box—i.e. cabling & trenching etc.—this may well prove to be a deterrent to purchasing an electric car.”

Unless our regulations are forward-thinking and focused on the future, there will be a risk of each generation of electric vehicle adopters being left behind in just a matter of years, which would fracture the user base and deter new entrants. That is doubly true in rural areas such as my constituency. All too often, the latest and greatest technology, from Uber to Deliveroo, has been rolled out in cities, only for my constituents to look on enviously as we wait for the once or sometimes twice-daily diesel bus.
I have set out some concerns about how the green revolution might leave rural communities behind in a book, “Britain Beyond Brexit”, edited by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman). I would strongly support Ministers should they adopt the recommendation of CEN, the European Committee for Standardisation, for there to be a right to request an electric vehicle charging point. That would give rural communities a chance to show that there is the demand necessary to make one viable. I would also be grateful if Ministers focused more heavily on how to build EV infrastructure for those who live and work in rural areas rather than just for those who travel through those areas as they go from big city to big city—after all, it will not be possible to decarbonise our country unless we decarbonise countryside.

If we can decarbonise our transport sector, the prize on offer is substantial: we would not only meet our climate change targets, but see improvements in health and air quality while supporting the British car industry, which is the jewel in our manufacturing crown.

A high-tech, clean future is possible, but unless Ministers help local authorities deliver the charging infrastructure, we risk being left behind as the rest of the world rushes to embrace this technology, and our world-leading position could be squandered by a lack of co-ordination.

1.30 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edisbury (Antoinette Sandbach). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing this debate and commend him on what he said about the experience of driving an electric vehicle. He is also right that ambitious targets are important if road transport is to make the contribution it needs to if we are to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. But he rightly spent a lot of his time also talking about pathways to get there, because no target, however ambitious, implements itself: it requires action.

We have a mixed picture in that regard, however. There is good news: there was an increase of nearly 30% in the sales of alternatively fuelled vehicles last year. But more sobering is the fact that alternatively fuelled vehicles still account for only 6% of new vehicle sales, and electric vehicles—battery electric—and fuel cell vehicles account for just 0.7%. It is clear that a step-change is needed in the take-up of such vehicles if we are to meet the targets envisaged by the Committee on Climate Change that my hon. Friend talked about. That means that people need to feel confident enough about driving an alternatively fuelled vehicle.

The fact is, however, that anxiety about running out of power is still a barrier to both private and fleet buyers in making the shift to electric. The good news is that the range of electric vehicle batteries is growing exponentially. I am pleased to say that the Government have been more proactive than before in providing investment to speed up research and development to further advance battery technology here in the UK, but we are late to the game compared with some other countries, and I say to the Minister that a lot more needs to be done to stimulate that.

As has been said, infrastructure is a key part of the picture. Again, there are some welcome initiatives. The fact that we now have legislation in place allowing the Government to mandate provision and interoperability of rapid charging points is good, but there is so much more yet to do if we are to achieve the step-change in charging infrastructure necessary to provide the confidence for a step-change in the take-up of electric and other alternatively fuelled vehicles. That must include providing answers about who is going to pay for the investment in the charging infrastructure at the scale needed and who is going to maintain it; my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) made that point earlier. It also requires tackling the issue of how to enable home charging, particularly for those who do not have off-street parking. We also need to see a lot more activism from the Government on the grid: how to avoid overload and how to make it easier for vehicles to become energy sources as well as energy users, given that the majority of their time is spent parked rather than on the move.

If people are to make the shift to electric, they also need to be able to afford to do so, and the price of new electric vehicles is still beyond the reach of most people. Solving that is not entirely within the gift of Government, but Government can help with the right consumer incentives. Ministers say that the fact that the numbers of electric vehicles and other alternatively fuelled vehicles being sold has gone up means that they can cut back on the plug-in car grant for electric vehicles and scrap it entirely in the case of plug-in hybrids. However, the market is still fragile and volatile—my hon. Friend the Member for Hove made that point very well—and customer incentives help stimulate both private sales and, crucially, the fleet market, whose turnover in new EVs is critical to driving the used car market, in which most motorists buy their cars. I say to the Minister that now is not the time to be reducing those customer incentives.

The pathway to net zero is not only about how to make sure there is a step-change in the number of alternatively fuelled vehicles on the road; it is also about the transition and how to ensure that on the way there the petrol and diesel vehicles on the roads are as clean as they can be to protect air quality and produce as little CO₂ as possible. The good news is that a great amount has already been achieved in that regard. Technological advances mean that emissions from new vehicles on the road are just a fraction of what they were just a few years ago. But the picture is not all positive: last year, aggregate CO₂ emissions from new cars rose for the first time in a decade. That happened not because the environmental performance of new vehicles has taken a dip; average new car CO₂ emissions are 31% lower than in 2000. The biggest factor has been a nearly 30% drop in the sale of new diesels.

That drop is partly a consequence of the injury the automotive industry inflicted on itself through the VW dieselgate scandal, but it is also partly a result of the confused messages that have been coming out of Government about newer diesel engines—not least in the vehicle excise duty regime, which penalises the cleanest diesels on the road while leaving older dirtier diesels untouched. Little wonder then, that both private motorists and companies leasing new vehicles have delayed plans to replace vehicles, with detrimental consequences for both CO₂ and air quality.
There are lessons for the Government here about the need to end those confused messages, and those lessons particularly need to be learned in the approaching comprehensive spending review. I urge the Minister to look again at vehicle excise duty rates in relation not only to the supplement on new diesels, but, even more significantly, to the impact on vehicle taxes if the worldwide harmonised light vehicle test procedure, or WLTP, is applied unchanged to current VED rates. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders estimates that consumers would face an increase in costs totalling about £500 million, based on the size of the current new car market, if WLTP figures are applied to current rates of VED. It is difficult to see how that could add up to anything other than a depression in sales, and the sales that would be hit would be those of the most environmentally efficient conventionally powered vehicles.

We must also remember that if sales are down, that hits the health of the automotive sector, which is already rocked by the uncertainties of Brexit. If the industry is hit, the pace of investment in developing new generations of alternatively fuelled vehicles is also hit, undermining the very thing we are trying to achieve in the first place.

My plea to the Minister is to listen to what the sector is saying, to make sure that the policies adopted on vehicle taxation support rather than damage the market for cleaner petrol and diesel vehicles, and to support rather than damage the sector’s ability to invest in the way that is needed to enable the shift to electric and other alternatively fuelled and zero emission vehicles: by making them a more realistic and attractive option for many more people than they are now.

1.38 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for introducing this timely debate so well.

Using phrases that I hope will soon be consigned to the history books I want in my remarks to encourage the Minister to get the revs up, to find the bite and to accelerate our action on ending the sale of new petrol and diesel engines, and I want to speak very briefly about the three C’s in relation to this: the crisis, the context, and then the choice that we have.

We all know about the crisis: the climate crisis that this Parliament declared put clearly on the political agenda that we must take bolder, swifter and more radical action. That has happened in language, but not yet in deeds. We need Ministers to be bolder and swifter. I welcome the announcement that we will achieve net zero that is a good ambition—but I am concerned that it is at risk of falling into the trap of being easy to say and hard to match. That is why we need to ensure that people find it easier to say “net zero” than “Paris climate change commitments” and that the actions are commensurate with that greater ambition. We must be much more honest about the enormous economy-transforming fundamental changes that are required to deliver net zero, not many years away but now, if we are to do that.

We are already missing out on our fourth and fifth carbon budgets as a country, and although the Ministers in the Department heap praise on achieving the carbon budgets as we are now, we need to do more heavy lifting to achieve those fourth and fifth carbon budgets, as was required before the net zero commitment, and now that we have that commitment, we must go faster still. That means reappraising policies made before the net zero announcement, and that must mean bringing forward the date for ending the use of petrol and diesel engines.

The context is also important. We are lagging behind our friends and other countries in banning petrol and diesel engines, and we are slower than many of our peers in rolling out hybrid, hydrogen and electric vehicle charging points, but it does not need to be that way. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hove has said, we are already a global leader in this area, so we are at risk of throwing away that natural advantage.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) said, we need to be clear on the two dates in this debate: the date for banning the sale of new petrol and diesel engines and the date on which there can be no more use of diesel and petrol engines on our roads in Britain. The Government are lacking ambition on both those dates, and I encourage the Minister to bring them forward. We cannot afford to wait until 2040 and 2050 in that respect. We must be bolder in our ambition, and that means not only putting forward an ambitious date but ensuring that that date is legally binding, because I do not want this simply to be a mission, as outlined by Ministers in 2018. I do not want it to be a vague hope or a chance encounter with reality. I want it to be a legally binding date that will focus the minds of industry and ensure that the Government of the day have a plan to incentivise the early retirement of these engines and ensure that EV charging points become the norm nationwide and not just in areas of best practice.

There is another element that we have not mentioned so far, and that is autonomous vehicles. By the early 2020s, more and more cars on our roads will be autonomous. They will not have a driver in charge of them. As we get into the 2030s, nearly all our cars will be autonomous, and they will be electric, as they should be. That is what must happen here, but it will mean a fundamental change. That autonomy will change the way we interact with our vehicles—cars, buses, trucks and vans—and we need to be clear that autonomy is in many cases quite scary. My hon. Friend the Member for Hove spoke about the fear of going into an electric vehicle for the first time, and many people will certainly fear using an autonomous electric vehicle, but they will reduce accidents and, in theory, create greater capacity on our roads.

We will have more cars on our roads, however, because at the moment we only have cars travelling on our roads with people in them. That sounds like a very basic point, but with autonomous vehicles, we will have cars, vans, trucks and buses on our roads with not a single person in them. The number of cars on our roads will also increase due to population change. I support the measures to encourage more people to walk, run, cycle and use public transport, but we must be honest and acknowledge that in many parts of the country, public transport systems do not have the volume and frequency necessary to achieve that change. That is why we need to recognise that the greater number of vehicles on our roads must be matched by a reduction in petrol and diesel engines.

In the 2107 general election, I put forward the idea of extending the M5 from Exeter to Plymouth to ensure that Plymouth can harness jobs and investment
opportunities. I am glad that Labour Front Benchers have committed to undertake a study of that extension when in power, but we must be sure that it is accompanied by the quid pro quo of ensuring that no diesel or petrol engines are used on the motorway extension. We need to take action on climate change, while recognising that there will be an increase in the amount of cars on our roads.

In relation to the points raised earlier, I just want to add one thing. It is about how we deal with planting. This is not directly about petrol and diesel engines, but rubber crumbs and brake pad emissions must also be built into this process, and if we are re-engineering and reimagining our whole transport system based on more electric engines and on ending diesel and petrol use, we need to be more inventive about how we plant alongside our roads. We need taller trees, mid-level bushes and low-level shrubs to capture particulates, to muffle noise and to ensure that there is a carbon offset.

All these things can be done if we have the ambition to do them, and I know that the general public want politicians to have more ambition here, so I ask the Minister to please bring forward the date to end the sale of diesel and petrol engines and to make it legally binding, so that the entire country can know that there will be no more diesel and petrol engines used on our roads.

1.44 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing it, and I thank those hon. Members who have pushed for it. The Government have finally acknowledged that there is a climate crisis, but the 2050 net zero emission target and the ending of sales of fossil fuel vehicles in 2040 are too late. I support the movers of this debate in proposing to bring forward the date at which we stop selling new diesel and petrol cars to 2030. The shift does not just impact on our CO₂ emissions; many people across the country, including many in my constituency, are exposed to toxic air, and they want to see changes. Tens of thousands of people are dying from air pollution now, and the poorest people in society are being affected the most by air pollution.

Last week, I had the pleasure of joining the London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, in unveiling the Chiswick oasis, a 400-foot screen wall that protects St Mary’s Primary School and William Hogarth Primary School in Chiswick from the toxic air from the A4 next door. People from across the community came together and showed that they want to see action to stop the air pollution epidemic. Mayor Sadiq Khan has also introduced London’s ultra-low emission zone, which is set to reduce air pollution in central London by 45%, and his leadership in implementing low and zero emission bus fleets is already showing significant reductions in pollutants on roads such as Chiswick High Road.

We need to see national leadership now, however, and I come back to the type of fuels that cars, vans and other vehicles are using. We have to speed up the production and use of electric vehicles as a proportion of the fleet mix. We also have to help people to make changes to make this happen. Let us make it easier to scrap older and polluting cars through a Government-funded wide-scale scrappage scheme for polluting vehicles, to bring some income equality into the change that is needed, and let us have more electric car charging points. The Government provide some grants to plug-in vehicles and support for the roll-out of electric charging points based at home and at work, but for commercial vehicles—this debate is about vans as well as cars—and for users who are driving for most of the day, probably for work, fast charging points are essential.

Last month, research showed that there are just under 9,000 public charging points in the UK, of which only 1,500 are rapid charging points—those that can recharge a car battery to 80% in around half an hour. The roll-out of public and particularly rapid charge points needs to run ahead of the supply of new electric vehicles; otherwise, the demand for new electric vehicles will slow down. Overall, 29,000 charging points will be needed across Britain by 2030, of which about 85% will need to be either fast, 22 kW, chargers or rapid chargers, which are more than 43 kW. This will need Government help, such as grants to install rapid charge points, particularly in the less commercially viable places away from the town centres and major roads where there is a business case that is quite easy to prove for those schemes. We need schemes similar to the home charging and workplace schemes that are already in place for standard charging.

Tesla has raised a different concern with me: not a shortage of grants in this case, but our ancient common law. Tesla has a showroom in my constituency, and I was able to drive one of its cars to the West Drayton depot a few miles up the A4. I can say to my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle): yes, it was fun. Tesla is concerned because high-voltage cables will need to be installed for the rapid charging points, and our ancient wayleave laws make it difficult to run high-power cables across private land. The more landowners there are, the more complicated the process becomes. I am sure that the Government are addressing this.

Moving on, I share the note of caution mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who chairs the Transport Committee on which I serve. While the shift to electric vehicles will reduce our CO₂ emissions, she noted that it does not answer the problem. Some of the particulates that pollute our urban environment, such as those from brake linings and tyres, will still be present even with electric vehicles, so we do need to address that issue and put in more mitigation where we cannot get away from using vehicles.

I have concerns about the assumption that we are talking about a straight switch from one type of private car to another. We are still over-dependent on large, single-person metal boxes on wheels to get around. However private cars are powered, they still take up room, cause congestion, emit harmful particulates and are expensive to own. Car use among young people has been in decline over the past 20 years, and that is set to continue. Cars militate against using active forms of travel that keep us fitter and are cheaper. We could do so much more to reduce our dependence on private cars and vans to make our cities and towns more sustainable and pleasant places to live.

Urban areas have seen a bigger roll-out of battery-powered cargo bikes, which can move quite large loads around our cities and could be used much more with Government incentives. We need to get on low-emission
buses and cycle and walk more, and the Government could do more to provide cheap and easy alternatives, particularly for sub-three-mile journeys. Buses play a key role in helping us to reduce our dependence on the private car, but as the Transport Committee has found, 3,000 bus routes have been axed since 2010 and subsidies have fallen by £20 million in the past year, following cuts to local government grants.

In London and other cities, many people want to cycle for short journeys, but we need dedicated cycle lanes, better cycling infrastructure, such as storage, and stronger laws to protect cyclists. The Government need to ramp up the amount of investment in cycling infrastructure.

Finally, by moving forward the deadline for net zero CO₂ emissions, we need to inject much-needed urgency into the policy. The clearest message that I have heard from the hundreds of people who have contacted me about climate change is that they want us to take urgent action. They do not want just more warm words; they want us to take the lead. Let us put the UK at the front of the global fight against climate change and air pollution by taking much bolder steps.

1.52 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It really is a pleasure to speak in this debate today, because it is on an issue of great importance not only to our environmental commitments, but to the continued success of the UK’s automotive industry. As people will no doubt be aware, because I bang on about it, it is also important to my constituency, which is home to Nissan’s UK car plant. Just last month, the plant became the first in the UK to build its 10 millionth vehicle—an astonishing achievement and a real testament to the efficiency of the facility and the dedication of the workers.

Despite that good news, the overall picture for the automotive industry is worrying. A decline in sales of diesel vehicles, continuing uncertainty over Brexit, fears of a no-deal outcome, and the shift towards electric cars and autonomous vehicles are just some of the key factors that have led some in the sector to describe the current situation as a crisis. According to the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, British car production fell for the 12th month in a row in May as output dropped to 15.5%. It is now clearer than ever that we fell for the 12th month in a row in May as output dropped to 15.5%. It is now clearer than ever that we

cannot expect people, many of whom were encouraged to buy diesel cars not that long ago, to be able to afford new EVs when they can cost up to £10,000 more than a petrol or diesel vehicle. Even if they cost less to run over time, that initial outlay is the barrier.

As for charging infrastructure, Sunderland is well served, as is the north-east as a whole, as the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) pointed out. I attended the launch of our new Fastned charging station in Sunderland just last month, for example. As she said, the current market-led approach could lead to an unequal and inefficient distribution of charging points, and if the Government expect consumers to make the change to electric, they need to set out a national strategic infrastructure plan for charging points and further support individuals with home charging.

Although it is welcome that, as of 1 July, all electric car charge points installed via the official homecharge scheme must now have smart features, that means that chargers installed outside of the scheme will not have to be smart. In order for the electric revolution to ever be able to cope with this new future of high levels of EV charging, the systems in place need to be as efficient and smart as possible, not only in homes, but in workplaces and public locations.

The SMMT published figures today showing that the UK car market is in decline for the fourth consecutive month and that alternatively fuelled vehicle demand fell
for the first time in 26 months. It is clear that the EV market in the UK can thrive with the right conditions in place, and the Government should be ensuring that the transition away from petrol and diesel vehicles is seen as an opportunity by all.

1.59 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I congratulate the sponsors of today’s debate on securing time to discuss this important issue.

I start in a similar vein to the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) by declaring, or admitting, my love of cars, driving and motorsport—not just Formula 1 but all kinds of motorsport. Perhaps worst of all, I own a 2.2 litre diesel car but, not just for the purposes of this debate, I am looking to change it as soon as possible.

Earlier this year, Scotland’s First Minister declared that “there is a climate emergency. And Scotland will live up to our responsibility to tackle it… That means real and practical action across our whole society in how we go about our daily lives, and it means a positive role for Government in building up the infrastructure and support available to us all as we transition to a low-carbon economy. In Scotland we are creating the infrastructure that the future requires.

The UK Government’s words are warm, but their actions get nowhere near to matching them. As we have heard, Scotland aims to phase out fossil fuel-based vehicles by 2032, eight years ahead of this Government’s current plans. The average distance to the nearest charging point in Scotland is fully one third less than the UK figure, despite our much smaller population density, and we lead the world in our commitment to carbon neutrality by 2045, five years ahead of the UK Government’s commitments. Our commitment is clear, and our transition to a low-carbon society is well under way.

The Scottish Government have invested in one of the most comprehensive and widespread charging networks in Europe, with nearly 1,000 publicly available charging points. That is a great start but, obviously, there is much more to do. Another 1,500 charging points are in the pipeline through Scottish Government funding, and work on the first ever electric trunk road is well under way. The plans for the electric A9 are not only ambitious in terms of infrastructure and support available to us all, they are forecast to grow further.

Vehicles will be able to come off the Orkney ferry—an apt starting point given Orkney’s world-leading marine energy research programme—and be charged while overlooking John o’ Groats, before travelling the length of Scotland from Tain to Tomatin, from Dingwall to Dunkeld, and from Pitlochry to Perth using renewable, clean energy over every mile. Such practical action is needed across these islands to play a part in tackling the climate emergency we all face.

It is also instructive to look at what our neighbours in Norway have done. This year will see electric vehicles make up a majority of new car registrations in Norway, a world first, after years of already leading the way on electric car take-up. Electric car sales in Norway, with a population not dissimilar to Scotland’s, already outstrip those in the UK, with a population 11 times the size, and are forecast to grow further.

Norway is an energy-rich, progressive, independent country with the sovereign power to take the kind of radical action needed to promote low-carbon transport. The lessons for Scotland could not be clearer. In contrast, the UK Government’s track record on low-carbon transition has been nothing short of abysmal. The scrapping of plans for carbon capture and storage at Peterhead shows the lack of good faith on offer. The Tories’ 2015 manifesto was clear in pledging £1 billion for carbon capture and storage, which they ditched six months later. Perhaps if the plant had been due to be built in a Democratic Unionist party constituency, we might have seen a tad more support from the Government.

The report of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee could not be clearer about the importance of CCS, saying that “the UK could not credibly adopt a ‘net zero emissions’ target in line with the Paris Agreement’s 1.5° C aspiration.” The report demands that the UK Government “move away from vague and ambiguous targets and give a clear policy direction to ensure the UK seizes the industrial and decarbonisation benefits of carbon capture usage and storage”.

If the UK Government do not want to seize those benefits, instead preferring to fall further behind the rest of the world, they should not drag Scotland down with them. Time after time, we have seen this Government, who have the power to drive real change, do very little to use that power. The Scottish Government, in contrast, are forced to weave their way through the Scotland Acts to show real ambition by setting targets and then meeting them.

We have seen the solar feed-in tariff scrapped, casting asunder an industry beginning to make real inroads and achieve critical mass. We have seen total underinvestment in our electricity grid, resulting in our power infrastructure creaking as more and more renewables come on stream. Much worse, we have seen the continued farce of clean, renewable energy from Scotland, particularly the north and the highlands, being penalised with exorbitant transmission charges, while gas and coal-fired power stations in the south of England carry on regardless. The decarbonisation of transport and the roll-out of electric vehicles now, alas, seems to be facing similar gridlock. This Government are stuck in first gear, meandering in the slow lane and being overtaken by the rest of the world, including the EU countries on which they want to turn their back.

I very much agree with the hon. Member for Hove and others in calling on the UK Government to recognise the leadership that the Scottish Government have shown over the years on electric vehicles and decarbonisation overall, and to ensure that we have the powers to work, as Norway has, towards a carbon-free transport network in preparation for joining Norway as a modern, progressive, independent European state.
2.5 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing and introducing this incredibly important debate, the context of which is the climate crisis and this Government’s failure to respond to it with any real ambition.

As my hon. Friend mentioned at the outset, while we have been debating the issue the BBC has reported that sales of low emission cars have fallen for the first time in more than two years—I think I am right in saying that sales have fallen by 4.9% on last year.

The Committee on Climate Change, the Government’s own advisory body, has stated that the UK is “way off track” on meeting its own carbon emission targets in the 2020s and 2030s. Those targets were set under the Climate Change Act 2008 introduced by the previous Labour Government.

The Government are even further off track on their Paris climate change agreement commitments, to which we must adhere if we are to have a chance of avoiding catastrophic climate change impacts. Transport is the worst performing sector of the economy. It accounts for a third of all carbon dioxide emissions and is now the UK’s largest source of greenhouse gas. Emissions are just 3% lower than in 1990, and they have risen since Labour left office in 2010.

Although vehicle technology has improved, reductions in transport emissions have been frustrated by growth in vehicle miles travelled on our roads. Between 1990 and 2018, vehicle miles travelled on our roads increased by 28% to 328 billion a year. If the Government wish to reduce transport emissions, in line with the UK’s targets, they must reduce the number of vehicle miles travelled on roads, which means giving greater support to public transport and active travel to encourage fewer car journeys. Unfortunately, the Government are heading in the wrong direction, with rising car use and falling public transport use.

We must decarbonise road transport by transitioning to electric vehicles and decarbonising the production of the electricity on which those vehicles rely. Reducing vehicle miles travelled on roads and switching to electric would also address poor air quality, which is the largest environmental risk to public health in the UK, as long-term exposure to air pollution can cause chronic conditions such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases and lung cancer, which lead to reduced life expectancy. We know that poor air quality is responsible for between 30,000 and 50,000 premature deaths in the UK each year, and the Environmental Audit Committee estimates that the total health cost of air pollution ranges between £8.5 billion and £20.2 billion a year.

In order to improve air quality, it is necessary to reduce the number of vehicle miles travelled on roads in areas of poor air quality, to transition to electric vehicles and to improve internal combustion engine technology. The Government have not been doing these things, as evidenced by the fact that the UK has been unlawfully breaching nitrogen dioxide limits since 2010. Road transport is responsible for some 80% of roadside NO₂ concentrations, but the Government air quality strategy dodged road transport and instead focused on wood-burning stoves. The Government should understand that their failure to invest now will have damaging long-term economic, social and environmental costs. The climate crisis and the air pollution crisis require bold and immediate action, which is not forthcoming from the Government.

The motion that we are debating is right to bring to our attention the lack of progress and ambition on electric vehicles. By international standards, the Government’s current phase-out date is unambitious. No country that has adopted a phase-out date for the sale of new diesel and petrol vans and cars has chosen a date later than 2040. Norway has a phase-out date of 2025, while Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands all have a phase-out date of 2030. The Government’s commitment that all new cars and vans will be effectively zero emission is also vague. The policy should be more ambitious and should require vehicles to be fully, rather than effectively, zero emission.

Phase-out dates are important, because they give manufacturers, businesses and consumers the clarity they need to inform the investments they will have to make. The view that the UK should have a more ambitious phase-out date is shared by the cross-party Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, whose report “Electric vehicles: driving the transition” recommended a date of 2032.

Although phase-out dates are important, what matters in reducing vehicle emissions is to ensure that as many as possible of the vehicle miles travelled on UK roads are completed in electric vehicles, as soon as possible. A phase-out date in and of itself will not ensure that that happens, which is why it is vital that the Government provide the necessary support to accelerate the transition. That means breaking down the barriers that are frustrating the growth of the EV market, and cost is one of the most important discouraging factors. I speak as the owner of a little Renault Twizy, which is completely electric.

Market projections suggest that EVs could reach price equivalence with internal combustion engine vehicles by the mid-2020s. In the meantime, however, financial incentives will be required to help to bridge the gap if the Government are to deliver on their ambition of growing the EV market. Vehicle costs remain a major barrier to EV uptake in the UK. The up-front cost of most electric vehicles is substantially higher; they cost up to £10,000 more than their internal combustion engine equivalents, even after the Government support.

I am heeding your instruction and advice to me earlier, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wanted to mention a few other points, especially the Government fleet, private fleets and the industrial strategy, but given the time constraints, I shall leave my remarks there.

2.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): I pay tribute to all hon. Members who have contributed to today’s debate, especially the mover of the motion, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), who eloquently set out the joy of driving an EV and spoke about the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee’s work in this area; the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who chairs the Transport Committee and has considerable expertise; and my hon. Friends the Members for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), who also played important roles on the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
Committee inquiry into electric vehicles last year. I am also delighted that the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) was able to contribute, never missing an opportunity to remind us that the Nissan UK car plant is in her constituency. I will try to address many of the points that were raised in the debate, but given the time constraints, I hope Members will accept that I will have to limit the number of interventions I take in order to allow time for the next—very emotional—debate on assisted dying.

The dangers of climate change are helping to drive a revolution in road vehicles, and everyone who spoke today shares the Government’s ambition that the UK should lead the way. We can all be proud of the fact that on 27 June, the Government set a legally binding target for the UK to achieve net zero by 2050, making us the first major economy in the world to legislate for a net zero target and continuing a proud tradition of leadership when it comes to tackling climate change. Achieving that target will mean working together across political lines and encompassing all parts of society. We will need clear, considered strategies, backed up by action.

Let me be clear from the outset that the Government and I share the ambition of all colleagues from across the House to have all new vehicles delivering as many zero emission miles as possible, as fast as possible. As has been said, the current targets are that by 2040, all new cars and vans will be effectively zero emission; and that by 2050, almost every car and van in the UK will be zero emission. We set out clear steps towards achieving the 2040 target in our strategy “The Road to Zero”, which was published almost exactly a year ago. We believe that 2040 is an ambitious but achievable target, which represents the right balance between environmental ambitions and deliverability, recognising the need for a period in which industry can develop the necessary products and we can address some of the barriers about which hon. Members have talked at length today.

Lilian Greenwood: Does the Minister recognise that it takes 10 to 15 years to replace the fleet completely? If we do not end the sale of new petrol and diesel vehicles until 2040, we will simply not be able to decarbonise transport by 2050. How will he address that issue?

Andrew Stephenson: I will come on to that, but I think we are making good progress on a range of fronts, although significant barriers remain. Our wider commitments on climate change have been bold, and we have achieved a faster reduction in our carbon emissions than any other country in the G20 has done. There is no reason why we cannot go faster than the targets that we have set ourselves. Meeting those targets requires an adequate supply of ultra low emission vehicles, a strong consumer base and a fit-for-purpose infrastructure network.

Government cannot deliver our ambitions alone. At the heart of our strategy is a commitment to working in partnership with industry, business, academia, environmental groups, devolved administrations, local Government, consumers and international partners. We need new charge points in homes, workplaces and public places. The consumer experience of public charging needs to be improved. The system must be easy to use, affordable, efficient and reliable. That is why we passed the Automated and Electric Vehicles Act 2018, which allows us to regulate further in this area; that is why on Monday the Prime Minister askedOLEV to undertake a review, setting out our vision for a core national network of rapid charge points along the country’s key roads; and it is why we are encouraging people to charge at home overnight, both on and off street.

On Tuesday this week, I attended a roundtable convened at 10 Downing Street with companies such as Jaguar Land Rover, LEVC, Tesla, PSA and the National Grid to discuss how we can best build on our core infrastructure network for electric vehicles in the UK. Those who were present were supportive of Government schemes, such as the up-front £500 off the cost of installing a domestic charge point; the provision of grants to businesses for workplace charge points; and the provision of grant funding to local authorities to install charge points for residents who lack off-street parking. We accept that we need to go further and faster; for example, by ensuring that all new homes are electric vehicle ready. We will soon consult on requiring every new home to have a charge point where appropriate.

We are already in a strong position. Government funding and leadership, alongside private sector investment, has supported the installation of more than 20,000 public charge points to date. That includes more than 2,000 rapid charge points—one of the largest networks in Europe. We want to build on that and encourage private sector investment to build and operate a self-sustaining public network.

Overall, we are investing nearly £1.5 billion between 2015 and 2021 to support ultra low emission vehicles and address the barriers to uptake. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) mentioned, we have grants available to offset the up-front cost of ultra low emission vehicles, which currently cost more than petrol or diesel equivalents. As an incentive to make the switch, our plug-in grants offer up to £3,500 off the purchase price of an electric car, up to £7,500 for a taxi and up to £8,000 for a van. We are also funding the development of new cleaner technologies. With £300 million of funding from OLEV, we are supporting vehicle manufacturers, technology companies and academia to deliver a major programme of research and development in the UK.

I am pleased to say that a year on from the publication of our strategy “The Road to Zero”, we are making progress against our ambitions. In 2018, the UK was the second largest market in the EU for ultra low emission vehicles, and there are now more than 200,000 of them on our roads. We are also building in large numbers—last year, one in five electric cars sold in Europe was made in the UK—and I am proud to say that Europe’s best-selling electric vehicle, the Nissan Leaf, was made in Sunderland, as the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West mentioned.

Let us not forget that this sector is hugely important to the UK economy: with a £77.9 billion turnover, it directly employs 165,000 in manufacturing alone. As someone from the north of England, that is particularly important to me. Manufacturing is still a major employer in my constituency, with companies such as Wardle Storeys, part of Uniroyal Global, employing more than 150 people in Earby, making automotive components. That is why I am keen to see the industry’s rapid evolution, rather
than revolution, supported by our automotive sector deal, which was published last year. As I speak, the Automotive Council, which I would have attended were it not for this debate, is meeting just down the road.

It has been a real privilege of my role to see at first hand some of the technologies and innovations that are already delivering for us on the Road to Zero. Just last week, I visited the BMW Mini plant in Oxford, and I have also visited Bentley in Crewe; the Advanced Propulsion Centre in Coventry, where I got to sit in—they would not let me drive it—the first all-electric Aston Martin, which will be built in St Athan, south Wales; and McLaren in Wokingham. We are supporting innovation in the sector, with the Advanced Propulsion Centre, the Faraday battery challenge and the connected and autonomous vehicles programme, focusing on the key technologies that will drive the global transition to low-carbon mobility and form the basis of future vehicle supply chains in the UK.

Battery technologies are of course integral to the market, which is why we have committed more than £270 million to the Faraday battery challenge, to ensure that the UK builds on its strengths and leads the world in the design, development and manufacture of electric batteries. In May, I announced additional funding for the UK Battery Industrialisation Centre in Coventry, a project in which we have so far invested more than £100 million and which will provide a stepping stone in our ambitions for a gigafactory in the UK. The Government and industry have committed around £1 billion over 10 years through the Advanced Propulsion Centre, to fund the research, development and commercialisation of the next generation of low-carbon technologies and keep the UK at the cutting edge of low-carbon automotive innovations.

We have reached the tipping point with the ULEV market and made a strong start on the Road to Zero, but we cannot be complacent. The closer that we can work together across Government, manufacturers, innovators and industry, the quicker we can make that transformation and allow future generations to enjoy the benefits of cleaner air, low carbon emissions and a thriving low emission automotive sector.

Mark Pawsey: Will the Minister comment on the fact that a new motorway service area is going to open with just two charge points? What can we do to accelerate the provision of charge points?

Andrew Stephenson: That is another shocking example. In the Road to Zero strategy, a copy of which I can lend to my hon. Friend, the Government announced that we would look into the best options for ensuring the adequate provision of electric-capacity connections at motorway service areas, and that work is under way. The key task over the next year is to sustain and strengthen our collaboration in the sector, as we strive towards our ambitious emissions targets for road vehicles and beyond.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House calls on the Government to bring forward the date by which the sale of new petrol and diesel cars and vans will be ended.

### Assisted Dying

2.23 pm

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Ind): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the functioning of the existing law relating to assisted dying.

Six years ago this week, on a sunny July day like today, my father made a decision. At home in Devon, in the bed that he shared with my stepmother for more than 30 years, with his family around him, he took communion for the last time, said a few words of goodbye to each of us, and asked the district nurses to switch off the oxygen and make him comfortable. He could have clung on to life for several more days, but he was ready to go and, after talking it over with my stepmother, made his decision. A few hours later, he slipped away, with my brother by his side. This was the best of deaths: the saddest moments in our lives, filled with love and gratitude, and even joy.

A few months ago, Geoff Whaley made a similar decision. Cut from the same cloth as my dad, he was a gentleman of the old school, but Geoff had motor neurone disease and recognised that he was likely to suffer horribly in the final days and weeks of his life. He knew that his only chance of a good death was to arrange to go to Dignitas in Switzerland. Geoff was a determined and organised man, but there were some things that he physically could not do. He needed his wife Ann’s help. When someone tipped off social services about their plan, the police turned up at the Whaleys’ door and Ann was interviewed under caution. That caution remains on her record.

Thanks to the support of Ann and their daughter Sarah, Geoff died on his own terms, but several months earlier than he would have needed to had the same procedure been available here in the UK. Under Swiss law, none of the family was allowed to be present at his cremation. Yet Ann would describe herself as one of the lucky ones, because she and Geoff could afford the cost—the air fares, the hotels and the fees—of going to Dignitas. Every year, hundreds of other people in our country face the prospect of great suffering at the end of a terminal illness—suffering that cannot be alleviated by our wonderful palliative care nurses—and have no legal means of doing anything to stop it.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way during what is a heartfelt speech, but will he please answer the question of why he feels that the vast majority of disability organisations in this country remain opposed to assisted dying?

Nick Boles: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. It is incredibly important to understand all the concerns raised, perhaps especially those from such groups. What I think drives that very understandable concern is the fear that although a law might start off tightly constrained, there will be what people refer to as “the slippery slope”, and it might then be abused somehow; there might be situations in which people come under pressure to take their own lives when, in fact, they do not want to do so at all.
All I would say to the hon. Lady—I am happy to have further conversations with her about this—is that in jurisdictions such as Oregon, where for 20 years now there has been a law of the kind that was proposed here, there is no evidence of that slippery slope argument leading to people being put under pressure. If ever there were to be such a change of the law here, it would of course be essential to have safeguards that would prevent that and ensure that disabled people knew they had the same right to life as any of us, for as long as they wanted.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab) rose—

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab) rose—

Nick Boles: I will give way to the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) first.

Lyn Brown: This is an incredibly difficult debate for many of us; most of us will have personal stuff that informs our judgments about it. My mum died suddenly, riddled with cancer. I knew that had this law been passed at that time, she would have spent her last months consumed by guilt and anxiety about when she should press that button. She would have worried about the pressure on me and my sister, about the cost of her care, and that people would have thought she was consuming resources that she should not consume. Sometimes when we have this debate, we do not consider collectively the pressure we would put on people by giving them that choice.

Nick Boles: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. All I would say is that the law could operate only with independent assessment—both by doctors and by a High Court judge, under the proposal in the most recent Bill—that would be clear that the person could not show any signs of coming to a decision under pressure or because they felt they were a burden.

Interestingly, talking to the Whaley’s about Dignitas, I heard how the Dignitas doctors explained that if at any point Geoff had said anything like, “I think it is time to go. My family wants me to go; they are ready, we are here,” they would have sent them home. On no account would they allow somebody to go through with it if there was any indication that they might have changed their mind or that they might be prioritising other people’s feelings.

Several hon. Members rose—

Nick Boles: Let me make a little progress.

Kate Green rose—

Nick Boles: I will give way to the hon. Lady first.

Kate Green: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I thank him for the case that he is making. I support it, but I, too, recognise what a very difficult and sensitive issue this is.

In relation to disabled people and the concerns to which my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) rightly alluded, it is true that most disability organisations—perhaps all that I have spoken to—oppose the legislation that the hon. Gentleman and I would like to see, but that is not true of every individual disabled person, and we should acknowledge that. Is it the case therefore that what we need to consider is that we build into any legislation excellent regulation, excellent audit and an equal commitment to investment in assisted living alongside the investment in assisted dying?

Nick Boles: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. The truth is that this is not in any way an alternative to the best possible palliative care; it is a complement to the best possible palliative care. We want to ensure that all those who want to choose to live out their lives and die naturally—even through a horrific illness with horrific symptoms—are given every support to be able to make that decision. Unfortunately, we also know—and all the evidence suggests this—that there are some people for whom palliative care cannot help in those final moments, and it is of them that I am thinking.

What do we think of a law that criminalises otherwise law-abiding people, such as Ann Whaley, who are simply trying to act with love in accordance with their marriage vows and their conscience? What do we think of a law that forces people in the final months of a terminal illness to take desperate and even dangerous steps, which may cause even more suffering to themselves and to the people whom they love, in secret and without any safeguards or support? What do we think of a law that denies hundreds of innocent people dignity and control as their lives draw to a close and condemns them to extreme suffering instead? I will tell you what I think, Madam Deputy Speaker: it is a bad law and it should be changed.

However, the purpose of today’s debate is not to propose a new law on assisted dying, but to understand the effect of the current law on people suffering from terminal illnesses, on their families, on the doctors, nurses and carers looking after them, and on social workers and the police. It is only when we have fully understood all the different ways in which the current law impacts on the British people that we should consider returning to the question, last debated in 2015, of what kind of change in the law might be justified.

To that end, I have a request for my hon. Friend the Minister. We all understand and accept that laws such as these are matters of conscience and that it is for Parliament to initiate a change of the law, but Parliament’s ability to gather evidence is very limited. On behalf of those affected by such laws, and in honour of Geoff and Ann Whaley, I ask the Lord Chancellor and his boss, the Secretary of State for Justice, to initiate a formal call for evidence on the impact of our existing laws on assisted dying, so that Parliament can benefit from a comprehensive assessment of the facts when it next decides to debate and vote on a possible change in the law.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I came into the Chamber in 2015 fully intending to vote for a change in the law. However, as I listened to the debate, although I was completely persuaded by the points that he is now making, I was unpersuaded that that was the right law or that the right people had been persuaded that it was the right law. What has changed between then and now that he thinks would bring the House to a different conclusion?
Nick Boles: I do not think that I have ever had a more
timeless set of interventions, so I thank the hon.
Gentleman for another one. There has been change, but
I do not want to pretend that the change has gone far
enough, which is why we are not proposing, at this
point, to bring forward a new set of legal measures.

Perhaps the most significant change is in the opinion
of the medical profession. We have seen a number of
royal colleges move from having a formal position of
opposing assisted dying to having a position of being
neutral about it, which reflects the fact that they will
always have some members who are very much opposed
to it, but they now have an increasing number of physicians
who are in favour of it.

We have seen not so much a change as a consolidation
of public opinion on this issue. In the latest opinion
poll, which, frankly, is not very different from any of
the opinion polls over the past couple of years, more
than 80% of the British public support an assisted
dying law for people in the final six months of a
terminal illness, and well over 50% of people who
declare that they have an active faith take that view. So
although Church leaders, apart from the very honourable
exception of the former Archbishop of Canterbury
George Carey, are opposed, their flocks are actually
finding that they, too, believe that a change in the law is
justified.

I also agree with the hon. Gentleman that, before any
further proposals come forward, we should study closely
the experience in the state of Victoria in Australia, for
example. As he will be aware, New Zealand recently
passed on Second Reading an assisted dying law, and
there is the much longer standing experience of Oregon
as well as Canada more recently. We should study all
those and look at the precise legal and medical safeguards
used to try to devise something that avoids many of the
risks that have been raised by other hon. Members.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con) rose—

Nick Boles: I will give way very briefly, but then I
must conclude.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman
for his response to my hon. Friend the Member for
Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin). In the
Netherlands, the number of physician-assisted deaths
is 3.5%, which, in this country, would translate into
21,000 deaths a year. There are about 5,000 suicides a
year in this country, of which about 400 are estimated
to be people dying at their own hand because they have
a terminal illness that they do not want to live with.
How can one explain to anyone else the difference
between that 300 or 400 and 21,000, which is four times
the number of suicides that we have at the moment?

Nick Boles: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising
that point, because it allows me to point out that the
Netherlands law is a completely different law, and I
would vote against it if anyone proposed it in the House
of Commons. It is a law to enable people to commit
suicide more or less whenever they want. That may
work for the Dutch—I have nothing but respect for the
Dutch people—but I could not vote for it, and I do
not believe that it would get more than 100 votes in
this House.

What we are proposing is something that has existed
in the state of Oregon in the United States for 20 years,
and it has never crept anywhere near being the kind of
law that the hon. Gentleman is talking about. Yes, of
course, there will be much more lax and liberal laws of
assisted suicide in other jurisdictions. That is of no
relevance at all to the question of whether, in the final
six months of a terminal illness, a narrow assisted dying
law, with legal and medical safeguards, can operate
safely in the United Kingdom, as it does in Canada and
in the state of Oregon. I am entirely confident that it
can.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Will
the hon. Gentleman give way?

Nick Boles: I must wind up, because Madam Deputy
Speaker has pointed out that there are many, many
Members who wish to speak.

I am keen to hear from as many Members as possible
during this debate. I will listen to all contributions with
sincere respect, because this is a very difficult issue and
one on which I myself have changed my mind since
2015. Before I sit down, I would just like to say a word
on the role of religious faith in the debate about assisted
dying.

I admire people who are blessed with religious belief.
My own father was, and I envied him. Faith groups play
a very positive role in our society and I salute them
for it, but this country is a democracy, not a theocracy.
When we make our laws, we must focus on men and
women, not on God. Parliament was right to legislate
to allow abortion for women in the early months of a
pregnancy, despite the opposition of Church leaders.
Parliament was right to legislate to extend the institution
of marriage to gay people although most organised
religions still consider homosexuality a sin. When
Parliament next debates the reform of our laws on
assisted dying, I hope that it is not religious doctrine,
but humanity—our humanity as Members of Parliament
and the humanity of all those suffering from terminal
illnesses—that wins the day.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): As
colleagues can see, many Members wish to contribute
to the debate. If everybody is to have the chance to
speak, speeches will need to be kept to about six minutes.

2.40 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I
will be very brief. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for
Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) for the eloquent
way in which he has introduced this very important
debate. I just want to refer to him one of my constituents,
Mr Noel Conway, who has campaigned on this issue for
many years, both through the courts and the media. I
had the privilege of visiting him and his wife at their
beautiful Shropshire home, where I spent the afternoon
finding out about his daily life and how his wife is
caring for him. As I am sure hon. Members will realise,
it was an extraordinarily emotional afternoon, especially
when I found out about some of the very difficult
conditions my constituent is living under and the constant
care that he needs.
I spoke to Mr Conway about the possibility of him travelling to Switzerland, and his answer will stay with me forever; he said, “No, I am an Englishman and I want to die in England.” I think that is extremely important, because although some constituents have the wherewithal, financial means and opportunities to travel to Switzerland to take things into their own hands, that is not always the case for all our constituents bearing in mind financial restrictions, but also the fact that some people do not want to leave our country to be able to die. This is their home; this where their families live; and this is where they want to die.

I have always been a Roman Catholic—having been born in Poland, I come from a very strict Roman Catholic family—and my Christian belief is very important to me, but I have disagreed with my own Church on numerous issues. As the right hon. Gentleman alluded to, in our views, the Church is not always right. Having now been in a same-sex partnership very happily for the past eight years, I, too, agree that although we can respect the church and our Christian beliefs, perhaps the Church does not always get everything right when it comes to how human beings behave, interact and ultimately decide to die.

I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate to the Chamber. I have not decided how I will vote in future debates and my constituent Mr Conway knows that I have not yet decided, but I really appreciate that the hon. Gentleman has afforded us this opportunity to continue debating this matter until a consensus can be achieved.

2.43 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) for securing this debate, and for the thoughtful and powerful way in which he opened it. Like him, I will share a personal experience, although mine is not as positive.

It is, by a coincidence, the eighth anniversary to the day of my receiving a phone call here in Westminster that my father had been found dead in his garage. The previous night, he had tidied up his belongings, left small piles of money to settle the bills with the newsagent and others, and written final notes. He had then walked to the garage, connected a hosepipe from his car exhaust into the car, taken an overdose and switched on the engine. As hon. Members can see, I do not find this easy to talk about, even after eight years, but I have done so before and I will do so today, not least because I know that he would have wanted me to, as somebody who had always believed in a change in the law on assisted dying.

My father’s experience shows how the existing law in itself encourages people to take their life sooner than they would otherwise do. My father was 87. At that age, he had inevitably watched many of his friends go, often miserably. He talked in particular of one friend who had become confined to bed, doubly incontinent, and—having become both deaf and blind—unable to communicate with anybody. My father saw no point in that kind of life, and had always said that he would rather end things than face a degrading death. He was somebody who had made the most of his life: he had a tough east end upbringing in poverty, became an RAF pilot in the war and built a successful business career. He had his share of health problems, but faced them all positively. He was not afraid of pain, but he could not face the indignity of a lingering death, and I am sure that he made up his mind to end his life after a terminal diagnosis of inoperable lung cancer. But he still died prematurely, and I am sure that what drove him to end his life was the fear that if he did not act when he could and was still able to do so, he would lose the opportunity to act at all. He could not talk to me or his partner about it, because he would have made us complicit. The current law forced my father into a lonely decision and a lonely death.

Some people will say that we simply need to improve end-of-life care, and it is hugely important that we do. My father supported our local hospice and I raise funds for it. It does a great job, but no hospice can enable everybody to die with the dignity that they would want. Indeed, for my father, it was soon after his appointment with a palliative care nurse where together they talked about his last months that he took the decision to take his life. If the law had made it possible, he could have shared his plans with us, and knowing that he could, with support, go at the time of his choosing would have enabled him to stay longer. If the law had made it possible, he would have been able to say goodbye and go with his family around him, not in a carbon monoxide-filled garage. He, and many others like him, deserve better. We simply need to change the law.

I appreciate that there are those here whose personal beliefs—whose faith—makes my father’s choice unacceptable. I respect those beliefs. Live your life by them, but do not impose them on others. Let people have their choice at the end of their lives. Allow them dignity in dying as we would want them to have it in life.

2.49 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I have been engaged in this issue since the very early days when I arrived in this Parliament in 1997, guided, along with many other right hon. and hon. Members, by the experience within my own wider family.

By 2040, nearly one in seven people is projected to be aged over 75, so we will be engaged in supporting an ageing population who will lead fuller lives, working longer, by adapting the workplace and ensuring that individuals can reskill throughout their life. But people will be living with chronic conditions, and multiple morbidities and cognitive impairments will become more common within our population. I have no doubt that our innovative and caring society will solve, or certainly ameliorate, these conditions, but the hard truth is that more of us will have to grapple with surviving with the pain and indignity of crippling progressive infirmity in later life.

If we do not change the law, even more people than the current one every eight days may travel to Switzerland for an assisted death—and, of course, there are all those
people who do not have the means to travel and all those travelling to Switzerland early so that they can exercise the autonomy available to them there. I do appreciate the views not only of right hon. and hon. Members but of the public who express concerns over assisted dying. It is of course a controversial subject. However, the injustice and the tyranny of having no escape from pain and indignity that our law continues to impose on a growing number of our fellow citizens will not go away until we address it. In Oregon, since 1997, a total of 1,127 patients have died from ingesting these medications. Not only does the yearly figure barely rise above the 0.003% mark, but only 64% of those who have received prescriptions for the medications since 1997 have actually taken them.

When we discuss this emotional topic, the most grotesque characteristics of greedy, overbearing relatives are conjured up in some hypothetical dark fantasy, but these arguments about a slippery slope or the vulnerability of people simply ignore the fact that this applies only to terminally ill people. When the Assisted Dying Bill came to this House in 2015, its terms would require two doctors to sign off on the fact that the person would be dead within six months and the process to be overseen by a High Court judge. How many more measures would opponents of this principle want to satisfy them? The difficult truth is that for many, it is none. This is about the imposition of a faith-based view of the sanctity of life overriding any sensible application of personal autonomy for people in dreadful and terminal strife.

**Lyn Brown:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Crispin Blunt:** No, I will not. I might want to pick up on the example the hon. Lady gave later in my remarks.

That personal autonomy on any individual application of universal human rights includes the freedom to control and direct one’s own life and, in this case, death. Yet again, despite a poll in March of more than 5,000 people showing that 84% of Britons wanted a change in the law on assisted dying, they have to contend with the moral certainties of those who are not suffering extreme pain and who are taking these decisions on their behalf—us. We have a responsibility to discuss this issue in an honest, compassionate and evidence-based manner, and we have a swathe of evidence available to us.

The whole Oregon experience entirely supports that this is a practical, sensible, humane and decent measure. Over two decades later, the opinion of the people has not changed one iota. This Parliament, in not facing up to its responsibilities, is party to increasing tyranny, pain and despair.

Ultimately, this is about potential control. Just as people exercise control over how they live, they should be able to exercise control over how they die. In reality, the vast majority of people will never take this choice, even when faced with it. With strong safeguards, Oregon, Washington state, Montana and Vermont have had no documented reported cases of abuse. Why, when the evidence is clear, do we deny everyone the comfort of some personal control over the end of their life?

To return to the point made by the hon. Lady, I wonder what her mother’s view was, because under the law, she could not exercise her autonomy. I am utterly certain that the hon. Lady would have wanted, with all the generosity in the world, to ensure that her mother had the full support available to her. Well, that just might not have been the view of her mother, in the pain and difficulty that she was facing. Why was she not allowed the opportunity to make that decision?

**Lyn Brown:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; she would have argued that she should have had the right to take her own life, but let me put one statistic to him. He mentioned Washington state—51% of the people who took the tablets there said that their reason for doing so was that they were a burden to the people they loved. That is the exact reason that my mother would have done the same. We must weigh the evidence properly.

**Crispin Blunt:** The evidence is there to be weighed by two doctors and a High Court judge, and the hon. Lady’s mother and other people in those circumstances would have had the right to exercise their autonomy. It is that autonomy and that control that we are choosing to suppress. Sadly, for now, it remains that we have a cruel, outdated law that forces people to die earlier by traveling to Switzerland while they are fit enough to travel, or to suffer pain, indignity and degradation that we would never impose on a suffering animal.

2.57 pm

**Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): I regularly visit Ty Ohwcn, a fantastic hospice in my constituency, which is staffed by the most wonderful clinicians and volunteers. Ty Ohwcn is a beautiful, peaceful haven, providing dignified, loving and intensive palliative care for patients, as well as comfort for their loved ones. I am full of admiration for the work they do and the care they give, but sometimes that may not be the choice of the person who has been diagnosed with a terminal illness. Imagine for just one minute being given that diagnosis. Imagine, in time, knowing each day that you will never feel this good again and that eventually all your future holds is more discomfort, more fear and possibly a slow and painful death.

While I wholeheartedly believe that life is sacred—I have a faith, and it is my faith that gives me strength—I am a huge advocate of quality of life over quantity and for an individual’s right to make their own choices. I cannot say 100% which path I would choose if I was given that diagnosis, but I know for a fact that I would want to be able to make that choice, and I would want the same for loved ones.

I appreciate that assisted dying is an emotive and contentious issue that splits opinion in this House and across society, but when someone makes the decision to end their life with assistance while they are still physically able to do so and of sound mind, they will do so after much research, thoroughly discussing it with their family and considering the consequences.

As it stands, a UK citizen travels to Switzerland to end their life every eight days. I believe that if the law allows assisted dying in this country, enabling people to choose to die surrounded by their loved ones in a familiar environment, that would bring comfort and solace to many people.

Under the Suicide Act 1961, while suicide itself is not a criminal offence, the act of encouraging or assisting someone else’s suicide is, leaving doctors and families facing prosecutions and up to 14 years in prison. There are many people who would, and do, choose to continue...
with their suffering, sometimes dying a painful and undignified death, rather than risk those consequences for their families.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I agree with much of it. Does she agree that there need to be various safeguards and that the law is outdated, and this may be a subject for the Law Commission to look into?

Carolyn Harris: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and we have to make sure that the right safeguards are in place.

A few years ago, I met a woman who had recently travelled to Switzerland with her terminally ill husband to end his life. She supported his decision to end his suffering on his own terms, and she watched the man she loved die a peaceful, respectable and comfortable death. She then returned home alone, where she was questioned by the police for facilitating his final journey. I watched this woman struggling to cope with the fear of prosecution on top of the grief that was already eating away at her.

I understand the concerns surrounding assisted dying, and the need to ensure that the decision is voluntary and one that has been expressed repeatedly over a period of time. As in most things, I still believe people should be given a choice. Palliative care is wonderful and it is the right choice for some, but for others assisted dying is their preference. The point is that everybody should have the right to control their own life, and ultimately their own death.

3.1 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). I thank the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) for bringing forward this debate, because I am on something of a journey in relation to my approach to this issue. That approach has largely been shaped by speaking to the family of a constituent who, in July 2017, went to Dignitas in Switzerland, where she ended her life. Her mother and sister came to see me, and their experience echoes that of the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). I pay tribute to him for his bravery in outlining his experience with his father.

Anna, my constituent’s sister, said:

“To get to Dignitas in Switzerland Jemima had to be able to single-handedly plan, pay for and travel across the UK until she was outside its legal jurisdiction, all without any family support. In accompanying Jemima to Dignitas, I knew that my family and I were going to be subjected to a police investigation on our return from Switzerland. At the worst possible time, when we were grieving the loss of our loved one.

Jemima interpreted the UK laws as best she could so that she didn’t implicate us in her death but she was still terrified that we would be prosecuted on our return. Jemima was also really concerned that her degenerative diseases would deteriorate to the point where she would not be able to either plan the journey or to physically get to Switzerland under her own steam.

So Jemima made the decision to have an assisted suicide years before she needed to. The UK Government literally stole years of her sister’s life. I know if she had been able to exercise her ‘right to die’ in the UK, she would have chosen to stay with us for many more years to come.”

I think those are very powerful words.

Those who wish to end their lives now must leave the UK alone, despite their ill health, or leave with relatives who will face suspicion and investigation when they return home. This imposes a legal complexity that requires ordinary people, at a time of great stress, to understand and interpret complex areas of law and how it is enforced by the police, often without professional legal advice, because of the terms of the Suicide Act, as outlined by the hon. Member for Swansea East. I would like to focus on that for a moment. In the case of this constituent, I had to write to Cheshire police to ask what its approach was and how it enforced the law. The lack of clarity from police forces is deeply troubling, and although I was pleased that it said it would enhance constable training and update its website, I am deeply concerned that that guidance is still not online. That means there is a postcode lottery in this country regarding how a local police force will enforce the law, which makes an already complex legal picture even more difficult to navigate.

Whether or not we change the law, the police must respond to these cases fairly, transparently and be more transparent about how they handle them.

My constituent and her family were put through months of hell, waiting for an investigation to conclude. To face such scrutiny after a heart-rending loss is difficult, but for the police to then make a family spend month after month reliving their loss does not serve the interests of the family, the public or justice. Despite all that, my constituent had the resources to go to Switzerland and plan her own death.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): My hon. Friend says that her constituent had the resources to go to Switzerland and end her life. Does she know how much it costs to go to Dignitas? The whole package, plus recovery of the body, must be an eye-watering amount.

Antoinette Sandbach: Dignity in Dying estimates the average cost of a trip to Dignitas to be around £10,000, which is a substantial amount. Only one third of UK families have that much in savings, so under our current system, with its manifest cruelties, that option is inaccessible to two thirds of the country on financial grounds alone.

This week Jemima’s mother told me:

“I have become increasingly sure that under certain circumstances and with the right safeguards, a person should have the right to choose to end their life in this country. I know Jemima would have been with us for longer if she had been able to take that choice at home.”

Alongside her heartfelt plea for reform, and those of others, there must be two key criteria for any future proposals. First, assisted dying must be made available under certain circumstances, and there must be appropriate safeguards for patients, families, medical professionals and those who need to enforce the law. It is a difficult area, but I hope that Jemima’s story will help build a consensus that will allow us to take this issue forward, and that we will not continue to block future changes to the law.

3.8 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), my right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and others for giving us the opportunity to debate this subject. Members have spoken movingly and from experience about their views.
I am someone whose views have radically changed. Until recently I was a vehement opponent of assisted dying, but I have changed my views and think I should explain why. That change is partly based on an understanding of why I was previously opposed to it, which was due to my own personal experiences. Two of those experiences were relevant, and I think they will resonate with many Members of the House.

One experience concerned my elderly mother who descended, as many do, into confusion and dementia, compounded by mental illness and depression. One week she would say, “Please, please end my life. I am a burden. I want to go”, but a few weeks later she would be enjoying the simple pleasures of life. I could see all too clearly that under a permissive system of assisted dying, people like my late mother would be extremely vulnerable.

My conviction at that time that assisted dying was the wrong route was compounded by my experience with my late wife, who contracted breast cancer and had a very long illness. She eventually died at home with good palliative care, surrounded by a loving family. She was vehemently opposed to assisted dying and wanted to live her life to the full. I guess that I took the view that that was her choice but should also be everybody’s choice.

I came to realise, however, that there are very different situations we need to understand. One thing on my conscience is that in my 20 years as an MP, two constituents came to see me to request help and political support for a campaign in the High Court to be allowed to die through assisted dying and, although I expressed sympathy, as one would expect, I declined to support their campaign. I was very wrong to do so. Both suffered from motor neurone disease, and I think many of us know of such cases. One has surfaced today: a man called Richard Selley in Perth, in Scotland, who is fighting for the right to assisted dying. I think we all know the nature of this condition. Although some people live with it, Professor Hawking being a famous example, in most cases it involves the physical degeneration of all bodily functions combined with absolute clarity of mind and very great suffering. It seems to me that we should consider the position of those living with it and similar conditions.

The argument that is deployed against doing so is that hard cases make bad law. That was quite well summarised by Lord Sumption, who gave the Reith lectures a few years ago, when he said assisted dying should be criminalised but that the criminal law should be broken. That is a somewhat strange way of putting it, but essentially what I think he was saying was that we should keep the law but turn a blind eye to exceptions and treat them compassionately.

I have thought about that argument, but it seems to me that the evidence is very strongly against it for a variety of reasons. However sensitive the Director of Public Prosecutions or the police might be—I am sure they are; the 2015 guidance is very humane—the sheer process of going through a criminal investigation and a caution is deeply traumatic, and probably the most difficult period of any person’s life. It is probably also difficult for the police who have to implement it.

We can all see from the evidence that the law simply is not working: from the fact that 300 people over the past decade have been through the pain—and, indeed, the expense—of the Dignitas solution, and the fact that about 300 people a year are killing themselves, often without medical support and in very painful circumstances. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) gave a very moving example, which I think showed the extent to which the law as it currently stands does not work.

When we put that together with the change in public opinion and the change in the views of the various medical bodies that would have to administer this and would be faced with the awesome responsibility of authorising assisted dying, I think the evidence is now very strongly in favour of a change to the law. I hope that when the opportunity arises, we will progress beyond the theoretical discussion to the practicalities of how we introduce humane legislation with proper safeguards.

3.14 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) on initiating yet a further discussion on this subject. We have heard some passionate contributions, and very moving ones, including that by the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who delivered his speech with great dignity; I congratulate him on that.

We discuss a wide range of matters in this House, from rather mundane ones, such as those which we were discussing before this debate, to those that affect life and death. Nothing, of course, can be more important than issues that affect life and death.

I am not a lawyer; nor do I claim any particular insight. Indeed, I see through a glass darkly. I have an uneasy feeling, which I know is shared by some hon. Members, that we as a society are moving towards a situation in which assisted dying is legitimised, and I recognise that many would support that, as we have heard this afternoon. For myself, I believe life to be sacred and God-given, and I readily acknowledge that that is a view that is not universally accepted. However, I am sure we can all agree that life is uniquely precious, and that we should do all we can to preserve it, and I do not in any way question the motives of those, be they Members of this House or members of the public at large, who take a different view. Many will have reached those conclusions having witnessed the slow, painful death of a loved one.

I believe that any move to lay out a statutory framework is a further step, however small, towards an acceptance that assisted dying is in some way given the seal of approval. Some things are best left in the grey area.

We are today discussing the functioning of the current law, and it is perhaps an argument to say that it is not as clear as some desire, but surely the question is whether we can give clarity to such a complex matter—can we, as the Legislature, frame an Act of Parliament to cover all the complexities—or is it better, in cases that are presented to the prosecuting authorities or the courts, to leave it to them to consider the unique circumstances that each case presents?

Both my parents died of cancer and suffered in their final months. I well remember the telephone call from a specialist who, having received the results of the tests on my father, said, “We must hope that God is merciful and does not allow him to suffer for too long”. Although he did suffer, it was not for too long. In fact, he lived for
[Martin Vickers]

a further six months after I received that fateful call. In his final weeks, which he spent in St Andrew’s hospice in Grimsby, I saw what comfort could be offered through palliative care. No longer did he suffer the periods of pain that he had had in earlier weeks—and that happened as long ago as 1988. Through my visits to St Andrew’s since, and to Lindsey Lodge hospice near Scunthorpe, both of which serve my constituency, I have seen the advances that have been made in the years since. Sadly, my mother died in hospital on the day that she was to be transferred to St Andrew’s.

In the case of both my parents, it is probably true that their passing was hastened by drugs, such as morphine, and no doubt others would argue that it would have been better had they been given the opportunity to shorten their lives by a few weeks or months, but I firmly believe it is better that the situation is left as it is. If one is old, frail, weak and seriously ill, one needs help, support and compassion—not the added worry and the nagging doubt over whether everything possible is being done to preserve one’s life.

Crispin Blunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend. He is making an extremely good argument so far, except that it does not address the wider benefit that comes from a change in the law here, which is about the knowledge that you have that control available to you as you enter a period when you might be contemplating these very difficult decisions. That is the principal benefit that I share.

Martin Vickers: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and acknowledge that that is a deeply held view for him and many others, but I am afraid it is not one that I share.

Lyn Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. A gentle reminder—I have made just a few notes for my speech, because this is a very important debate.

Martin Vickers: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention and I share those views.

Having spoken of the work of the hospice movement, I will take the opportunity to pay tribute to all those who work in, volunteer for and generously support the hospice movement, with a special mention for St Andrew’s in Grimsby, which is marking its 40th anniversary this year.

We all have to cope with the loss of loved ones, and such experiences raise—in the mind of any right-thinking person—the question of how to minimise suffering. If someone has previously indicated their wish to hasten their death, I acknowledge that it is extremely difficult, and a major moral dilemma, to say to them, “Sorry, that’s not possible.” However, I believe that any move to legalise assisted dying would be yet another step that lessened the value that we as a society place on human life.

The relationship between doctor and patient is crucial, and it could be compromised if the patient was anything other than 100% certain that the doctor was striving to maintain life. When we are old, weak and seriously ill, we need compassion and support, not the nagging doubt—

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I do not think this debate is about the sanctity of life, because the people who did not support the Bill last time believe it is legitimate to end a life early; the question is how to legalise it. It is not a moral question. On the point about the medical profession, plenty of evidence shows that people are acting in the grey area that my hon. Friend describes, leaving them with the questions he mentioned. That is not the issue either. The question is whether we can safely change the law in a way that does not create new or worse dangers.

Martin Vickers: I recognise what my hon. Friend says, but I do not think it is possible to change the law and cover all the varying circumstances. I regret the fact that many in the medical profession are moving towards support for assisted dying. The views of the public vary considerably at various times, and can be influenced by headlines, but I hoped that the medical profession would take a different view. Mention has been made of motor neurone disease, and I recognise the unique difficulties of that condition because I had an aunt who died from the disease.

I will finish shortly as I appreciate that I have taken interventions. I have a final question. Is the abortion law working as originally intended? I would argue that that is not the case. A change in this law would open the door to a very different thing. Transparency is something we seek in many areas, such as financial dealings, but in this area I suggest that the grey area should remain.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am anxious to ensure that everyone is able to contribute, and I urge colleagues to be considerate to each other. I am now going to apply the six-minute limit.

3.24 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I have made just a few notes for my speech, because this is a very important debate.

I picked up a couple of emails earlier from constituents. Some wished me to speak in favour of a change in the law, while others wished me to oppose it. I wanted to
stand up today and explain why I would vote in favour of assisted dying if legislation were to be introduced in the House, because I grew up as a Catholic. I was educated in a good Catholic school, and I feel very strongly that when something becomes a religious issue we must be very careful about how we use our language, particularly when the issue involves life and death.

The debate is very pertinent to me, because I have a kind of counter-argument. My father died on 22 December 2011, and this choice was taken away from him. It was not like the situation described by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), whose father, having known that he was dying, sadly and tragically took his own life.

I feel very strongly about people being in hospital and being told that they will be fine and they are keeping going, given that in this case the decision was not a decision made by the patient and the doctor. That does not take away our family’s choice, and the opportunity—not the choice, but the opportunity—to discuss with my father how he would end his life. He would not have been in favour of assisted dying—I can tell you with my hand on my heart—but the information was kept from him, and from the family, that his medication was to be withdrawn, and he was to die a very painful and horrible death in a hospital bed just before Christmas because it was at the convenience of the hospital.

This is a mega decision, and one that each individual has the right to make, because we should have that choice; we should be able to choose how we end our lives. The choice was taken away from my father and from the family, and I will never forgive the clinician for that.

I believe that charities should play a greater part in this discussion, because talking about dying and death is a huge taboo in our society. The need to improve knowledge and understanding of death is key to the debate. Amazing work is done by people like Kathryn Mannix, a palliative care consultant in Wales. It is very important for these options to be available to us, and for us to be able to have the necessary conversations. There are many flippant conversations with my friends and family—“If anything is going to happen to me, you know what to do; I will have my savings, and I will have my paracetamol”—but we should not be having such conversations. It is our duty as Members of Parliament to ensure that there is legislation that enables people to decide how they want to end their lives.

I pay tribute to the people who are in the Public Gallery today, because they include many families who have either been in this situation or are in this situation currently. We need to remember that their journey is real, and we need to know that we must have this discussion. I will not use any religion, or my Catholic upbringing, as a reason for the discussion not to happen, or for a change in the law not to come about.

We have talked about the law in New Zealand, and, indeed, across the world. Let me also pay tribute to a good friend of mine, Louisa Wall, a Member of Parliament from Auckland in New Zealand. She too is in the Gallery today, and she has a great interest in the debate.

I hope that we will see that legislation, and I just wanted to explain to my constituents, and to everyone, how I would intend to vote.
[Fiona Bruce]

The suggested need for two clinicians to give consent is apparently being effectively flouted, too: all anyone has to do if they cannot find one of the clinicians from the first two approached to give consent is approach another and another until one who will give consent is obtained. Conscientious objection by practitioners is not statutorily provided for, so practitioners are feeling increasingly obligated to undertake this. In Canada the safeguards simply are not working, and I was interested to hear Baroness Meacher, the chair of Dignity in Dying, stand up at the end of that meeting and say, “We don’t want that in this country.”

Those advocating change argue that legal opinion has changed, but it has not. In the most recent court case—that of Noel Conway, who has been mentioned here today—arguments for a change in our current law were rejected not just by three judges of the divisional court, but by three judges of the Court of Appeal, and three judges of the Supreme Court, our highest court, then declined permission for a further appeal.

Advocates of change have wrongly and selectively argued that in a Reith lecture this year the former Justice of the Supreme Court, Lord Sumption, called for a change in this law. He did not. In fact, if his speech is read in context and comprehensively, it is clear that he said the very opposite. He did no more than state a fundamental principle of the criminal law—namely, that it is there to protect society by prohibiting acts regarded as unacceptable, and that one such act is encouraging or assisting suicide. He said that “we need to have a law against it in order to prevent abuse”.

Yes, he referred to what he called the “untidy compromise”, which recognises that, as with other criminal laws, there can be exceptional circumstances where a person breaks the law for altruistic reasons, and that in such cases prosecution may not be warranted, but there is a world of difference between not prosecuting in such situations and licensing acts in advance.

Next, those arguing for change say that medical opinion is shifting. On what basis? A recent Royal College of Physicians poll of its members is mired in controversy. The RCP was, before the poll, opposed to any change in the law. However, this poll unprecedentedly required a super-majority of 60% of those voting to maintain the status quo. How strange! Bizarrely, the RCP’s council is now arguing that the result of this poll justifies a change in the college’s stance, despite the result of the poll showing that the highest number of those members voting—43.4%—opposed any change in the law and that the lowest number—25%—thought that the RCP should be neutral. Yet, strangely, the RCP has chosen to adopt a neutral stance. It is no wonder that the poll has been the subject of a referral to the Charity Commission for investigation. And for what? As Baroness Finlay said in another place, “neutralit y adds nothing”. Let us also note that, within that vote, more than 80% of palliative care physicians wanted the RCP to remain opposed to change.

The fact that the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners are set to consult their members is neither a surprise nor an indication of a change in their position. Professional membership consultations can be expected every few years. Indeed, the RCGP said five years ago that it would do this about now. It is to be hoped that both the BMA and the RCGP will reaffirm their opposition to any change in the law.

Finally, the proponents for change argue that public opinion is shifting, but it all depends on the question people are asked. That is the problem with the 80% figure that the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford cited. The more deeply we probe this issue and the more aware people are of the implications of change, the more concerned people become. I can quote from another poll from February this year indicating that more than half the public say that “some people would feel pressurised into accepting help to take their own life so as not to be a burden on others” if assisted suicide were legal. Only 25% disagreed with that.

3.37 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): It was a pleasure to join the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) in applying for this debate. I want to use my time to tell the stories of two constituents. The first is Vonnie Daykin, who has come to Parliament today to hear the debate. She has talked about how she witnessed her uncle and her father die of Parkinson’s and her mother die of motor neurone disease. She says that her mother went through living hell, but ultimately had no choice and was forced to suffer “until the bitter end”.

I also want to spend a little time quoting my constituent, Zoe Marley. Her words deserve to be heard in Parliament, so if I may, I will quote from an email that she sent me. She says:

“In January 2018 my mum Judith Marley was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer...She had nursed her own mother with cancer and had seen numerous ‘bad’ deaths. From the outset, she announced that she would not let the cancer do its worst, but would formulate a plan to escape the terror. No matter how marvellous the palliative care, she didn’t want it.”

That is her right, incidentally.

“She was a very private person; her death should have been a private affair instead of the circus that it became. On a warm July afternoon in 2018, she took a framed picture of her mum, a bottle of Drambuie and approximately 70 sleeping pills into the garden and in this most cherished place, she proceeded to attempt to take her life.”

After some considerable time, her daughter found her there; she had not died and then started to come round. Zoe was then placed into an impossibly invidious position, not knowing whether to call an ambulance. Her mother had already given her lasting power of attorney and did not want resuscitation—her legal right. Ultimately, however, because of the impossible situation that her daughter was in, she had to call an ambulance. Zoe says:

“Her wishes to stay at home and not be admitted to hospital were my priority as her LPA. But was I technically assisting her suicide? My lack of action could be considered supporting a suicide. I was terrified of the consequences of my inactivity. We waited but no change, the day was cooling down and I wanted her to be comfortable.”

In the end, an ambulance was called, and a doctor also attended.

Zoe writes:

“The doctor was unsympathetic. He said he had spoken to an on-call psychiatrist and that he was within his rights to call the police so they could take her to hospital. He was threatening and arrogant, telling me if Mum died there would be a police investigation and she would have a full autopsy. It all made me sick to my stomach. All this time my beautiful Mum laid outside while my...
I rang my sister and told her what was happening. She
would be, and he said, "When I stop playing golf." The
did not wake up in the morning. I asked when that
My father clearly told me he would never go into a
mother died six hours early because of pain control.
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jo@samaritans.org, visiting a branch, or writing to them.
they need help or is contemplating suicide, other than in
number for the Samaritans is 116 123. If anyone thinks
3.43 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The
number for the Samaritans is 116 123. If anyone thinks
they need help or is contemplating suicide, other than in
some of the circumstances that we have heard about,
they should think about calling up, sending an email to
jo@samaritans.org, visiting a branch, or writing to them.

It is obvious that a lot of people in many countries
around the world want to end their lives because of
depression or mental pressures, and people ought to
start a debate like this by talking about that.

We then ought to get on to what was said by my hon.
Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick
Boles), who stated that this was not about changing the
law. However, it was fairly plain from his speech and
that of my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin
Blunt) that they are talking about changing the law, and
that was confirmed by the speech we just heard from the
right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb).

I have experience of some of these issues. My brother's
life support was switched off after an accident, and my
mother died six hours early because of pain control.
My father clearly told me he would never go into a
hospe. He said he would go to bed and make sure he
did not wake up in the morning. I asked when that
would be, and he said, "When I stop playing golf." The
third time he gave up golf and put his clubs in my car, I
rang my sister and told her what was happening. She
told me he had said the same thing about when he
stopped playing music.

A year later, I discussed with my father whether he
might ever think of going into a home, and he said he
would—he never did—and that he had thought about
what he would take. He said he might take three CDs
with him, because he might want to play music, but he
had not actually played any music for six months.

My father's story echoes what the right hon. Member
for Birkenhead (Frank Field) said in an early debate on
this subject about 20 years ago. Barbara Wootton, the
founder of the national assistance service, had made
him swear that, if she were in hospital and asked for
drugs, he would go and get them from her bathroom
cabinet and give them to her. She was in hospital for
six months in awkward circumstances, but she never
asked.

I spoke earlier of the equivalent of 21,000 people
having assisted deaths or euthanasia in the Netherlands.
In Switzerland, where Dignitas provides a service for
some people, the rate is under half of that in the
Netherlands and, I think, Belgium—that needs checking.

Some people say we might have an initial peak but
that a second order, polynomial best-fit trend line will
show that, in time, the rate of increase slows and the
overall rate levels off. That may be so, but what is also
so is that 15 jurisdictions in the past two years have
decided against changing the law, and 96% of jurisdictions
around the world do not have laws that go further than
ours.

Of course there are difficult cases, but we should not
use hard cases to justify a change that can lead—not
will lead, but can lead—to a major change. Nobody in
the Netherlands said in 2002 they were anticipating
5,000 assisted suicides or euthanasia cases a year. They
did not say it. People may say that because Oregon has
not changed further, things there will never change, but
in Oregon they are having the same debates about
euthanasia as we are having about assisted dying.

There is a whole series of expressions: medical aid in
dying, physician-assisted suicide, physician-assisted death,
aid in dying, death with dignity, compassionate
death, end-of-life choice, medical assistance at the end
of life and advanced care directives, and the like. I
understand all that, and I have taken part in more of
these debates than anyone else in the Chamber because
I have been here longer—I am probably nearer my
death than other Members are—but what I want to say
to colleagues is that we should not build on individual
cases.

Our first lodger was the first person I knew with
motor neurone disease. In the days, weeks, months and
years before he died, he never once suggested that he
wanted to end his life. A constituent of mine—she has
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not said it. People may say that because Oregon has
not changed further, things there will never change, but
in Oregon they are having the same debates about
euthanasia as we are having about assisted dying.
What has changed since then, as the Assisted Dying Coalition points out, is that the numbers going to Switzerland have virtually doubled. Parliament now finds itself in a position where we can decide to intervene and change the law, or we can accept random prosecutions, interviews under caution and denying assistance to people who seek it.

Contrary to what the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) said, I think we can draw much better conclusions about safeguards on the basis of Canada’s experience. In Canada, assistance is not available to non-residents, and that discourages suicide tourism. Assistance is not available to minors; it is not available to people who have a history of mental illness; and it is not available on the grounds of mental illness, long-term disability or any curable condition. The safeguards include ensuring that none of the legal witnesses or physicians involved has any legal or financial interest in the outcomes of the patient. Consent must be repeatedly expressed, not implied, and consent can be revoked at any time and in any manner. To receive a medically assisted death, patients must be experiencing intolerable suffering and must sign a written request expressing their wish to die. As we have heard, two independent witnesses are required. I would say that those are quite strong safeguards.

We have also heard that the view of the medical profession in this country has changed; I think the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) referred to the Royal College of Physicians, and I know that there will be a poll of the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners.

Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to listen to tetraplegic Paul Lamb, who spoke at a humanist event in the House, and I was very moved by the case that this very rational and sane man made. Traditionally, the argument for changing the law is based on the Oregon model, as we have heard, and it generally refers to people who have six months left to live; that was the case with the Marris Bill. I have some difficulty with that, if we are to look at the matter again, because I think there is a problem with being precise about life expectancy. In addition, such a narrow position would not help someone such as Paul Lamb. Paul has been living with his condition for 29 years. He is in intolerable pain that can sometimes only be controlled with very strong medication, which blurs his consciousness and limits his life experiences. He wants the right to choose, if he reaches a stage where he has no quality of life.

We need to focus on quality of life, capacity for life and the rational, sound judgment of a person who makes such a decision. Life expectancy in itself does not tell us anything about suffering. We should be considering assisted dying both in the context of terminal illness and in the context of suffering and a lack of meaningful life. That is especially true when we are talking about progressive conditions, conditions such as locked-in syndrome or intolerable suffering.

Some people have strong views about this subject, and they are influenced by their Church or religious community. Those organisations encourage people to contact MPs, and I understand that it is always going to be like that, but the Supreme Court did ask this place to consider the case for changing the law, and the Court recognised that that was a decision that only Parliament could make. Having listened to Paul Lamb and thought about it again, I think that we should be wondering whether things have moved on since 2015. The poll that was released by the My Death, My Decision group shows that the level of support for a change in the law is now about 88%. I think that is significant, and I am surprised that people would want to ignore that.

Of course, as the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford said, we are a democracy. It is our job to wrestle with these decisions, not to rely on the fears of particular groups. It is our job to make sure that we get the safeguards right. It seems to me that the choice is simple. We cannot stop assisted dying: we can only prevent legal assisted dying, which would be open, transparent and open to change and challenge.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Ten years ago, I worked with some excellent doctors, nurses, patients and carers who were trying to improve clinicians’ communication skills to help patients gain a better understanding of long-term conditions and diseases—how to live with their disease and how to die with it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) said, not all clinicians are equipped with the skills necessary to have those conversations. I learned particularly about how lonely it is for people who are dying—it is often nobody’s role to talk about dying—and no one has exemplified that today more than my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). It is a very lonely place. I learned that people do not have the control and choice that they otherwise have in their lives, and I learned how hard it is for clinicians to support people. It really opened my eyes and made me determined to change the law even before I came into this place.

It is a pleasure to work with the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) as co-chair of the all-party group. In that capacity, it was my absolute pleasure to welcome and host Geoffrey and Ann Whaley when they came to talk to MPs in February. I welcome Ann to the Chamber, as well as all the other families who have come here to listen to this very measured debate.

When the campaigners, who are very passionate on this subject, come to see me, I talk to them about how to talk to their own MPs, and the first thing I say to them is, “Try to look at the MP in front of you as a human being.” We know in this place and in this time in our politics that lots of people do not think we are human beings, and it is difficult, but we are human beings. I say to those campaigners, “You do not know what those human beings you are talking to have experienced in their lives or are currently experiencing in their lives. Please bear that in mind when you start to talk to us.”

We are here as human beings, but we are also here as legislators, and legislation is what we are trying to encourage with this debate. Through the all-party group, we are trying to help all of us human beings, with all our failings, prejudices and experiences, to understand the law as it operates, how it affects people and what we need to do to take our responsibility to change that. I am clear that the law needs to change, but I understand that many people have not got to that place. We want to try to help people. In particular, we want to try to get evidence. The call is not just to trade facts and figures, but to collect evidence. I really hope that we can help to move forward on that today.
The story of Geoffrey and Ann really did horrify me, although it is not the first time I have heard it. We have two committed, loving people being treated as criminals for carrying out what was an act of love and compassion. We should also think about the impact on people like those in our police services. Think about the poor police officers who were sent round as this lovely family were trying to manage a terrible situation. Think about the time taken out of their duties and the trauma for them as individuals. That is not acceptable; it is us abrogating our responsibility.

Geoffrey died comfortably at Dignitas only a week after he came to Parliament. He was clear that he was dying before he was ready, and he was terrified about the police investigation. As the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford said, he was a strong man. When he talked to us, the only time his voice faltered was when he talked about that knock on the door, because he was so worried about the impact on his family. He was clear about the hurdles that needed to be jumped to make the decision that he wanted to make, but he was also clear that he did not expect MPs just to change the law. He had high standards for us as MPs. He expected us to collect evidence and to challenge the evidence, and to do so very carefully. He was, as the hon. Gentleman said, cut from some old cloth. He expected us to do a diligent job.

Bob Stewart: It seems to me that the law is grossly unfair. If someone has the resources—we have talked about £10,000—they can go to an alien place and die, with a few family around, and their body can be brought back. But they have to have the money to do it. Currently, our law is not fair, because it differentiates between people who have the resources to end their life when they want to, without the pain and the indignity, and those who have resources can have that choice and those who do not. That is one of the many reasons why I think our law is outdated, unpopular and uncompassionate. It is time to look at the undue suffering that the blanket ban on assisted dying is causing people at the end of their life, because compassion is not a crime.

4.1 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): This is undoubtedly a hugely emotive and controversial subject, but I thank the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and my right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for giving us the opportunity to discuss it. I am convinced that I have not just a right, but a duty to work for changes in the law that will make it possible for people to have the individual right to choose their own time and manner of death. I am talking about people who, otherwise, will face a situation that will soon be very painful and that will also cause a great deal of stress to their family members. I have been lucky: I have not had to go through the sort of experience that we have heard about from other Members of the House.

Two years ago, I had a conversation with my husband about a friend who, we had just heard, had been given a terminal diagnosis. It was January. We said, “This year will be difficult. Christmas will be difficult. We will have to think about how to deal with it, but it will not be easy for him or for his family.” The irony of that conversation has never left me, because neither my husband nor the friend actually lived until Christmas, but the difference was that my husband died very suddenly. Our friend went through a long, painful, lingering death. If there had been a way that he could have been spared that, I would have wanted him to be offered that choice. There is also an irony in the fact that had I had the choice for my husband, I would have chosen the death that he had, rather than the one that our friend had.

The last piece of the ironic jigsaw is that, in this House, if we do make a decision on a change in the law, it will be a free vote, because we will regard how we vote on that law as a matter of conscience. Yet we have never taken up the challenge of giving that same choice, that same freedom of conscience, to the people who actually deserve it. If we are to take up that challenge—and I think we should—it will not be easy and it will not happen quickly. We will have to spend time on it. It will be extremely difficult for us all because we will have to examine our consciences and take into account the views not just of those who feel it is a necessary change, but of those who find it difficult for religious or other moral reasons. But we have a duty to do that.

Like probably every other Member here, I have received numerous letters from constituents this week, asking me to speak up for the change because they have been through experiences like the ones we have heard about so movingly today, and they want and need this change. We would sometimes do well to remember, as I am sure most of us do, that we are here to represent those people. We are told by Dignity in Dying, and in every other poll that has ever been done, that the majority of the public out there—84% at the last time of asking—believe that it is time for a change.

I saw the reports on television this morning about people who are currently facing this decision. They know that death is not far away, and would like to choose the manner of their dying. They would like to
have what they believe is a good death. It is our duty to do whatever we can, for however long it takes, to ensure that they have that choice.

4.6 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate; I thank the Backbench Business Committee for the time, and congratulate the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing it. I am also pleased to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine).

My starting point is the last debate on this matter on 11 September 2015—Second Reading of the Assisted Dying (No. 2) Bill, which was sponsored by the former Member for Wolverhampton South West, Rob Marris, and was moved in the other place by the noble Lord Falconer. I do not often quote myself, but I am going to do so in this case. In fact, I think this is the first time that I have ever quoted me. I said on that occasion:

“There are three key issues here...it is about having the right to choose; secondly, it is about the need to protect the vulnerable against...pressure...thirdly, it is about treating every citizen with the same degree of respect and dignity...On the right to choose, this—I should declare an interest—is personal.”—[Official Report, 11 September 2015, Vol. 599, c. 666.]

As many colleagues know, before coming to this place I was a firefighter in the London fire brigade for 23 years, during which time I worked with asbestos. Its heat-resistant properties meant that the fire service used it for all manner of things. For example, we had asbestos gloves and hoods.

I do not know how many people have seen the terminal stages of those with asbestosis or mesothelioma. It is not pretty. It is not as bad as some of the deaths we have heard about—my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) spoke about his dad and we have heard about people with motor neurone disease—but it is not pretty. If that is what lies in store for me, I want the right to choose. I want the right to choose for myself and for everyone faced with that kind of situation, and I challenge colleagues who would deny me or anybody else the right to a dignified end.

Like most people, I want to die in my own home with my own family, and in as much comfort and as little pain as possible. Earlier, I tried to intervene on the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford regarding the references he made to Oregon. One statistic I have not heard quoted in the debate so far is that one third of patients who request assisted dying and meet the eligibility criteria in Oregon do not take the life-ending medication; rather, they want it as an insurance policy. Many actually die of their underlying condition—in some cases outliving their prognosis and not taking the medication because they want to live for as long as they can without suffering.

If I was to be denied the right to choose, I could afford to jet off to Switzerland—this point has been raised by several times Conservative Members—because I have the money, the savings and the pension. However, how many of my constituents in Poplar and Limehouse could afford to do that? Not many, and even if they could afford it, the uncertainty of whether their family members would be condemned to suffering and pain, terminal stages of those with asbestosis or mesothelioma, is not of their choosing while other people can afford to die peacefully.

The right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) and the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) quoted Lord Sumption. The fuller quote says:

“I think the law should continue to criminalise assisted suicide, and I think that the law should be broken from time to time...It has always been the case that it’s been criminal, but it’s also been the case that courageous friends and families have helped people to die...I don’t believe there’s a moral obligation to obey the law. Ultimately it’s for each person to decide.”

Coming from somebody who is a judge in the Supreme Court, that is absolutely breathtaking. The courts have challenged Parliament to address this issue and to clarify the law.

What we have is confusion. The clarification of the guidance by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) when he was the Director of Public Prosecutions, while done with integrity and courage, does not eliminate the risk of prosecution, or certainly investigation and caution. Different constabularies, different doctors and different standards mean that we have not just a two-tier system but a multi-tiered system, and it does not protect the vulnerable. The Bill proposed by the former Member for Wolverhampton South West had 15 safeguards written into it. The law is not as strong today as it would have been had my hon. Friend’s excellent Bill been passed. We need better safeguards, and the 2015 Bill would have provided them.

I want to conclude by thanking the families of the bereaved and campaigners such as Dignity in Dying for the progress that we are making on this issue—because progress is being made. Public opinion is changing. The Lords is almost there and the Commons is slowly coming in behind. I think that eventually we will provide the people of Britain with the right to choose their own end.

4.11 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I do not plan to take the full six minutes, not least because we have heard so many really eloquent and brilliant speeches today. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for their incredibly moving and powerful contributions.

I supported changing the law in 2015, and I would do so again. I pay tribute to the Members who came to this debate with an open mind and said that they have changed their minds for having the bravery and open-mindedness to do so. I still support changing the law because I believe that it is not working. I want to emphasise three areas where is not. First, there is the unfairness of the current situation. We have already heard that roughly one person a week goes to Switzerland. However, people go to Switzerland if they have the financial resource, practical resource, and, very often, emotional support to do so. We should not be condemning those without the financial resources to an end that is not of their choosing while other people can afford to go abroad. Even that, I would argue, would not be their first choice and is not the ideal situation, but at least they have the financial means and support to be able to make a choice of some kind. We should be giving that choice to everybody who needs it.
Secondly, the current law results in perverse outcomes. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central and the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) pointed out that it results in people dying sooner than they should. I am not going to repeat those remarks because they put it far better than I could. I pay tribute to them for their speeches.

Thirdly, I want to touch on the issue of palliative care. This debate is often framed as a choice between good palliative care and the right to choose how to die, but that should not be the case. Of course we need to invest in good palliative care—we need the best that we can get—but even with the best palliative care, we cannot stop all suffering at the end of life. A person should have the opportunity to choose their way of dying in addition to the availability of great palliative care.

I also want to respond briefly to three points from the debate. First, I agree very strongly with the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford in his request for a call for evidence to study the experience of Oregon and Canada. I do not share the pessimism of others that we cannot frame legislation that works for the people who need it to work, and gathering that evidence and learning from those examples will, I believe, allow us to do so.

I strongly disagree with the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), who said that introducing assisted dying will lessen the value we put on human life. If we value human life and if we value people, we should allow them to live the life they choose, and that includes the death they choose.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) quoted a statistic about the number of people in Oregon who gave being a burden as their reason for choosing assisted dying. That only tells part of the story, because people who request assisted dying in Oregon give several reasons—

**Lyn Brown:** It is Washington.

**Jeff Smith:** People in Oregon and Washington give several reasons. In both those states, the most frequently given reason for requesting to die—by over 90% of people—is a loss of autonomy. Being less able to enjoy life is chosen by around 88%, and a loss of dignity is chosen by around 74%. It is important to tell the whole story with the statistics.

**Lyn Brown:** I really regret not putting myself down to speak in the debate, because I think there is an absence of understanding about just how difficult it is for many people in this country and elsewhere to withstand the pressures of family who might feel that they are a burden. We are tripping gently into a hellish nightmare for many people. I urge my hon. Friend to listen properly to what people say.

**Jeff Smith:** I hear what my hon. Friend says, and I accept that there is real concern, but I think we can create a legislative framework that takes account of those concerns and allows safeguards to be put in place to ameliorate those concerns.

In the end, it comes down to one key question: if faced with a terminal illness and a painful end, would we want the death of our choosing for ourselves and for our family? If the answer is yes, as I believe it would be, we should allow that choice for everyone.

4.16 pm

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), although I disagree with most of what he said. That does not mean that my mind is not open.

I wanted to take part in the debate in response to requests from constituents urging me to attend and represent their views. Unsurprisingly, their views are more or less equally split—from the retired GP who urged me not to support any changes, to those who were moved by the very sad case of Geoffrey Whaley to ask whether it would be possible for a change in the law to be made. We all know that this is an emotive issue that divides opinion, with strongly held views on both sides.

I was present in the Chamber the last time we debated this issue, when Rob Marris brought a Bill on assisted dying to the House. On that occasion, 85 Members were hoping to speak, and I was unable to make a contribution due to the huge amount of interest. We must remember that the Bill fell, with 330 Members voting against it and 118 for it. I am proud to say that I voted against the Bill.

I am grateful to be able to make a contribution today, but the views that I held in 2015 have not changed—that does not mean my mind is closed—and I will try to briefly outline why I still feel the same way. My concern then, and my concern now, is that in the current climate, at a time of overstretched NHS budgets and massively underfunded social care, if assisted dying were legalised, it would begin to be seen as an alternative to treatment and care. I believed then, and I believe now, that there is a real risk of a subtle but dangerous culture change in which vulnerable, terminally ill patients come to see assisted dying as a treatment option and the best way to stop themselves becoming a burden to their families, the NHS and wider society.

I worry also about our attitude towards people with disabilities. In 2015, a disability campaigner expressed their concern to me about changes in legislation having the potential to lead to value judgments being made about whether other people’s lives are worth living or not and to send out a message that suicide is acceptable in some cases. As the campaigner said to me,

“Someone taking their own life is seen as a tragedy, except if that person is disabled. Then it is seen as understandable.”

I do not believe that there have been any societal changes between then and now that have led to any alteration in attitudes towards those with disabilities, and those concerns remain valid.

The retired GP, whom I referred to earlier, told me that in her career she had been asked on a few occasions by terminally ill patients if she could end their lives for them. She said to me that when she had explored their issues, she found common themes, including the fear of being left alone without support, worrying about suffering from poorly controlled pain for the rest of their lives and the need not to be a burden on medical staff and carers. There were also psychological issues, including profound sadness and despair at their predicament, sometimes accompanied by depressive illness. However, she then told me that, once she had addressed these concerns properly, the request to end life was not made again, and in most cases it had been possible to achieve a dignified and peaceful death.
If we are to achieve this outcome, it will require good quality palliative care, which does not come cheaply. I speak as a vice-chair of the all-party group on hospices and end of life care. We need to look at the funding of hospices and palliative care, a huge proportion of which comes from charity fundraising, and we need to put the provision of good-quality end of life care on a much more sustainable basis. Some of my constituents who support changes in the law have said to me that they want to see changes because: “Nobody should be forced to live in unbearable pain.”

I completely agree with that, and that is exactly why we need to make sure that patients receive better palliative care, and to ensure that better information and support are given to terminally ill patients and their families.

I welcome this debate, which forces us to ask the right questions about how we care for the sick and the dying, but I believe strongly that the answer lies in improving palliative care and making it accessible to all those who need it. We need to get that right, rather than changing the law on assisted dying.

4.27 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee; the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who brought forward this debate; and those Members who have described in moving terms their personal experiences. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who has just spoken in moving terms about the importance of good quality palliative care, because she is absolutely right. As far as I am concerned, this is a “both”: we need better quality, better informed palliative care and we need to change the law on assisted dying.

On Monday morning, I listened to Ann Whaley’s moving account on Radio 4 of the decision her husband Geoff took to die at Dignitas. Last night, I read Annabel Dixon’s blog in which she described, in such loving terms, her sister Jemima’s life and also her death at Dignitas. Both Geoff and Jemima decided, with different but in both cases degenerative conditions, that the only way to have a good death—in control, a simple act, taking the medicines oneself, with their loved ones around them—and to get around UK legal restrictions was to die in suburban Zurich.

What struck me about both Ann’s account and Annabel’s account was the difficulty of having to go to Zurich, with the logistics of the journey and the pain of travelling as someone who is very sick, as well as the fear of prosecution, and then there is the cost of fees, travel and accommodation for everyone so that loved ones could be with them at their end. Geoff Whaley and Jemima Dixon, and others who have taken the journey to Zurich, had the capacity and the funds to make the arrangements. As others have said, the cost of going to Zurich is beyond the means of most people.

However, we have heard today of other deaths that were not happy—that were not with loved ones present, and where people could not, because of fear of prosecution, discuss their plans with their loved ones—and particularly the account of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield).

Clinicians often feel that they have to take control, and they cannot discuss what they do with anyone else. Very often that is about upping the dose of morphine until the person slips away or, as in the much more tragic story mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), about removing the drugs that were keeping a loved one pain-free and alive. Those actions also removed the possibility of that person and their family discussing their end, which was going to be soon but needed to be pain-free and calm.

Many constituents have written to me supporting a change in the law, and in 2015 I voted to support that change. I assure hon. Members who are concerned about such a change that this debate is not about disabled people, those with life-limiting conditions, or those considering suicide due to depression. It is not about frail elderly people who are worried about being a burden, and it is not about vulnerable people who are at risk of being exploited on their death.

Reading Anna Dixon’s blog gave me an understanding of the level of assessment and scrutiny that was required over several stages before the assisted death in Zurich was permitted. The change to the law under debate today is relevant only to people of sound mind with a terminal illness—those who can predict the rough timing, but also the nature of their own natural death, which will be undignified, painful, and traumatic if they cannot take control. It is relevant to those who want to choose when to end the suffering that they know they and their loved ones will experience.

As we have heard, public opinion is moving behind a change. People of faith are also changing their views. Yesterday I spoke to a colleague whose faith background would generally oppose assisted dying, but who is now minded to support a change in the law. The medical profession is also coming round to support a change, or at least move to a position of neutrality.

I understand the concerns and worries raised by hon. Members today, but we can learn lessons from other jurisdictions that have already implemented the right to an assisted death, and ensure that those concerns are addressed as the law is drafted. We can learn from 20 years of experience in Oregon to ensure that people’s fears are addressed. The UK can, and must, learn from the experience of those states.

I support the proposal to task the Law Commission with looking at this issue. We have to change the law. We owe it to those who know what their final months hold without assisted dying, and who wish to choose the time and place of their passing, and who is with them at their end. We must remove the grey areas for those people and their families.

4.27 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is almost four years since we last debated and voted on this issue, after Rob Morris introduced the Assisted Dying (No.2 Bill), which is now sponsored by Lord Falconer in the other place. I thought it was a thoughtful piece of legislation, and during the last debate I responded from the Front Bench on behalf of the Opposition. It was a highly charged debate, and 85 Members tried to speak. I was slightly surprised that the vote was so decisive, with 330 votes against the Bill and 118 in favour, particularly given that public opinion was then
80%—now perhaps 90%—in favour of such a change to the law. It is unusual for us to lag behind public opinion on matters of social legislation in such a way.

From reading that debate, and from some of the speeches this afternoon, I appreciate that a number of Members speak from a religious perspective. I entirely respect that and their right to make their own decisions, but I do not agree that they should be able to impose those decisions on me or those of my constituents who do not necessarily share that outlook. We have talked about choice, which is important, but I think this issue goes further than that. The ability to choose the time and manner of one's own death under the circumstances that have been described, sometimes in horrific terms, is a basic human right. That is particularly true when we consider the issue of people's means because, as many Members have said, someone's ability to make that choice is restricted to those who can afford the organisation, time, money and support to go to Switzerland or somewhere else abroad.

The arguments about dignity and suffering have been very well made and are very difficult to rebut, but the more one looks into this the more compelling the case becomes. I met Ann and Geoffrey Whaley when they visited this House the week before Geoffrey went to the Dignitas clinic. Meeting them was one of the most profound things to have happened to me since becoming a Member. It was extraordinary to witness not just their courage but the certainty and the measured way in which they put forward their arguments. I pay tribute to them. They then had to go through the stress of a police interview. The fact that the police, I gather, interview in about 50% of such cases, is itself strange, but in 100% of cases the threat is there for those relatives—the feeling that the police might turn up on your doorstep at the most vulnerable time in your life.

There is also the risk of forfeiture, or at least having to go to the courts to apply for relief from forfeiture, because it is quite possible that joint assets cannot pass to a succeeding spouse, for example, because of their involvement in that regard.

Fiona Bruce: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise, though, that it is that concern that the police might call that protects so many vulnerable people from abuse? If we do away with that, there will be no reason for relatives not to support or even encourage vulnerable relatives to consider assisted suicide. What sanction will there be?

Andy Slaughter: I do not think the hon. Lady does. I do not think the hon. Lady does herself any favours by making that argument. It is quite barbaric to think that relatives may sit in fear of a knock on the door from the police. The police themselves are in a very difficult situation. As Ann Whaley recalled, the police felt that they had to go through with an obligation which they perhaps did not want placed upon them.

Consider the case of Tony Nicklinson, who lost his case in the higher courts. I make no criticism of the higher courts— I think this is a matter for us rather than the judiciary—but he effectively had to starve himself to death to achieve the same objectives. The fact that people are going to their deaths earlier than they need to, and going through the most distressing of additional circumstances to do so, should prick our consciences rather more than it does. On the other hand, I do understand—this is why I have moved over a period of time—the arguments about undue influence and the slippery slope. It is important to look at what safeguards are there. I believe, from what we have heard today, that the safeguards are there, but I also believe that this is a balancing act.

Members will perhaps be aware of the case of another very brave man, Phil Newby, another sufferer of motor neurone disease, who is crowdfunding at the moment to take a case on the basis of proportionality. Yes, there are rights for those who are in a difficult circumstance and who might fear, or feel, pressure on them, but there are rights for those who are in great distress because they feel the need to end their own lives and are unable to do so.

The medical profession was mentioned by a number of hon. Members. I think there is a change of mood. If one looks at the Royal College of Physicians, the direction of travel even over the past decade has been from 70% of its members being against a change in the law to about 50% now. I think that trend will continue. I understand the additional pressures it would put on the medical profession. I understand that for some it looks like a conflict of interest and a compromise of their role, but I feel that everybody must take a mature view and I believe that opinion in the medical profession is changing.

I think we all support good quality palliative care for a number of reasons, including taking the pressure off the acute sector and off our hospitals. A palliative care setting can often be the best place to die. I am furious that the Pembridge palliative care unit, which serves my constituents, is being decommissioned; we only learnt of that last week. It is an excellent unit, and I will fight to preserve it. However, I do not believe that there is a conflict there with what we are discussing today. The two things sit alongside each other. They are both matters of compassion, and about doing the best for people in extremis in the most difficult parts of their lives.

So, with a lot of thought, I support what has been said and I congratulate the Members who tabled the motion.

4.35 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On 4 June, in making the case for holding this debate to the Backbench Business Committee, the basic justification set out by the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) was that a lot has changed since the House last debated these matters, and therefore it would be opportune for the House to have an opportunity to discuss them. I would like to go into that in some detail, in the short time that I have.

First, I want to say that I respect the views of others in the House greatly, and I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will respect my point of view, which may be very different from some of those expressed in today's debate. I am a man of faith. My father was a man of faith; he died, and I know he believed in the sanctity of life, as do I. I believe that in my constituency of Strangford, the vast majority of my constituents also believe in the sanctity of life, and they also believe that the law should not be changed. I want to put that on the record at the start of my speech.
Both the Royal College of Nursing and the Royal College of Physicians have moved to adopt a position of neutrality on the question of assisted suicide. The Royal College of Nursing actually adopted its position of neutrality some 10 years ago—six years before the Marris Bill came to this House. Neutrality is far from endorsement, and that has to be understood. It no more gives grounds to positively endorse assisted suicide in 2019 than it did in 2015.

The manner in which the Royal College of Physicians approached its poll, however, has had the effect of leaving a significant cloud hanging over it. In the 2014 poll, those who opposed assisted suicide were 44.4%; in the 2019 poll, they were 43.4%. The proportion opposed to assisted suicide is the largest by a significant margin, and almost identical to the 2014 result. For the Opposition side of the House—indeed, it is important for the whole House—I point out that in Tony Blair’s landslide 1997 general election victory, he received 43.2% of the vote. The Royal College of Physicians actually voted against this change by 43.4%. So there is a figure, when we come to stats in this House.

Before that poll, however, the council of the Royal College of Physicians, without consulting its members, decided that it wanted to go neutral, and structured the rules of the contest in such a way that that was bound to be the outcome. It took the extraordinary step of saying “would make it almost impossible to achieve” that majority.

Professor John Saunders, a former chair of the RCP’s ethical issues in medicine committee, wrote in The Guardian to accuse the college of carrying out “a sham poll with a rigged outcome”.

Over 1,500 doctors and medical students signed an online petition expressing alarm over the college’s behaviour. Professor Albert Weale, chair of the college’s ethical issues in medicine committee, resigned in protest. He claimed that the RCP council failed to take notice of the wrong one, and worded the wrong way.

Professor Albert Weale, chair of the college’s ethical issues in medicine committee, resigned in protest. He claimed that the RCP council failed to take notice of the wrong one, and worded the wrong way.

“Overall, we would caution MPs and the public...There are a number of problems noted with this survey.”

Those problems included the fact that the poll is likely to be unrepresentative because of the demographic profile of respondents; the fact that only one side of the argument was presented to respondents in the question wording, using emotive language including terms such as “unbearable suffering”; and the fact that response options for several questions were designed such that they led people to choose a certain answer, even if they did not have a strong opinion, and may have led to respondents tending to select positive options even if that was not their settled opinion.

The basic problem with the proposal to legalise assisted suicide remains unchanged. It costs about £5 to give someone a lethal dose of barbiturates. It costs between £3,000 and £4,000 to keep someone in a hospice for a week. In that context, the right to die for the eloquent and financially well off will become a duty to die for the vulnerable. That is how I and other hon. Members feel, and it is deeply shocking that anyone living in a so-called civilised society should avail themselves of a state-sanctioned means of killing themselves.

In both Oregon and Washington State, 52% of those questioned said that not wanting to become a burden was one of the motivations for their decision. I have no desire to live under a law like that, and no desire therefore to see the legalisation of assisted suicide in the UK. We need a system that supports and helps families so that no one feels they are a burden, and I will push for change on this rather than in the current law.

4.41 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): There is no doubt that this is a deeply sensitive debate on matters of considerable gravity, and I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this important debate this afternoon. The topic of taking a life is not one that this House can or should debate lightly, and clear opinions—including strong points and robust arguments—have been expressed on both sides this afternoon, including by Members who have been directly affected. We heard from the hon. Members for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi),
who all referred to personal experiences. We also heard
the passionate and emotional speech from my hon.
Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield).
It is always difficult to stand up in this place and talk about
very personal matters. Whether we agree on those matters
or not, we should pay tribute to hon. Members who
show bravery in talking about their experiences.

In the short time I have, I will seek to summarise the
debate so far. We have heard arguments made about
why the law on assisted dying should be changed. The
primary point that is put forward for changing the law
is that it would end individuals’ suffering in the final
days, weeks and months of their lives after having been
put through the tortures of terminal illness. A further
point about individual liberty is also made, with hon.
Members stating that we have free will, are responsible
for our own lives and should be able to choose the time
and place of our passing when we face a terminal
illness. Many state that the safeguards that would be
absolutely necessary should assisted dying be legalised
can be put into place to prevent abuse of the system.
Several hon. Members have mentioned the finances and
the fact that if one has means, one is able to travel out of
the country, but none of these issues should ever be
linked to one’s ability to pay.

There is resistance to changing the law, and as some
hon. Members have pointed out, any attempt to legalise
assisted dying for people with terminal illnesses represents
a slippery slope that can start with legalised assisted
dying but then escalate to legalised assisted suicide and
legalised euthanasia. Such a situation, it is argued, would
be beyond what was originally envisaged in legalisation
for assisted dying and could lead to further issues. For
instance, people with terminal illnesses or chronic conditions,
particularly the elderly, could see themselves as being a
burden on their friends and families and could opt to
end their lives to allow them to escape those perceived
pressures. Another concern is that the elderly and those
with medical conditions could be pressured into ending
their lives against their will by a number of different
people.

There has been some resistance from the medical
profession—the British Medical Association has set out
its opposition to the policy, and the Royal College of
Nursing has refused to advocate it—although a number
of Members have rightly pointed out that the profession’s
position has also been shifting of late.

One of the positives that will emerge from this debate
is that we are talking about death, because, as a country,
we do not do that enough. Death is one of society’s last
great taboos, which we still have not overcome. We close
up and do not discuss it, because we think that by not
discussing it we can avoid it—can prevent it from happening
to our friends and family, to those whom we care about
and to ourselves. We do not have these conversations
often enough or engage in them deeply enough, particularly
when a friend or family member is suffering from a
terminal illness and approaching the end of their life.
That is one of the reasons why palliative and end-of-life
care is not as good as it could be, and why too many
people are reaching the end of their lives in hospital
rather than in their own homes, surrounded by their
families.

There is no reason why we, as a society, cannot
provide end-of-life care that provides full pain relief
and soothes mental distress. That is why we have committed
ourselves to providing free social care for those on
the palliative care register, starting with those with the
highest needs, so that no one will have to die in hospital
for want of a social care package of support.

Time does not permit me to say much more; I have
already exceeded my allocated time by a few seconds.
Let me end by saying that this is a clear issue of
conscience. Members on both sides of the debate have
advanced strong and robust arguments. If we are to
take one thing from the debate, it must be a commitment
to improving the care received by those approaching the
end of their lives and to giving them dignity in death.

4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice
(Edward Argar): With your permission, Mr Deputy
Speaker, I will endeavour to conclude my speech a few
minutes before 5 o’clock to allow the hon. Member for
Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) a few minutes in
which to respond, if he wishes to do so.

It is rare for a Private Member’s Bill Friday to be one of
the most memorable occasions in the House, but the
debate that took place in 2015 on a private Member’s
Bill on this subject was one of the most memorable
during my time in the House thus far. It was a crowded
House; the speeches were many and of an exceptionally
high quality; and the Division saw an exceptionally
large number of Members voting on a Private Member’s
Bill. It was an example of the House at its best, debating
a deeply emotive issue of huge significance in a dignified,
informed and passionate but also respectful manner.
The same is true of today’s debate, which it is a privilege
to wind up on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government.

I have been contacted by a number of constituents
with different views on this subject, as, I am sure, have
many other Members. They have asked me to attend the
debate and to speak in it. I had to say to them that
while, as a Minister, I would endeavour to attend, I
would not be able to speak; but, having been nominated
by the Government to respond, I can now say that it is a
privilege to do so.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Grantham and
Stamford on securing the debate. Indeed, I congratulate
all 26 Members who have spoken, including the shadow
Minister, the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran
Hussain). I will turn to their individual comments shortly,
but all spoke with sincerity and from the heart.

Since that 2015 debate, legal and other developments
and campaigns have served to keep this issue very much
in the public eye. In respect of campaigners in the House,
it behoves me to mention one of my hon. Friends who,
by virtue of his ministerial office, can no longer campaign
and speak about the issue. My hon. Friend the Member
for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) did a great
deal in this regard before becoming a Minister. We have
seen various opinion polls and media coverage, most
recently on Radio 4’s “Today” programme, focused on
this issue.

The Government’s position remains that any changes
to the law in this area remain an issue of conscience for
individual Members of this House, and it is right that
this is so given the strength of the deeply and sincerely
held views on both sides of this debate. It remains a
matter for this House to decide, not the Government, but
a Government must implement and work with whatever
this Parliament and future Parliaments decide. In the recent lectures by Lord Sumption, which a number of Members have alluded to, he touched on this issue, and while it is important that the courts should, and do, interpret the law, Parliament cannot and should not seek to avoid or outsource decisions on such profound moral questions to them. It is for this Parliament to debate and to determine the law in this area.

As I mentioned, powerful and moving arguments are put by both sides, and we have heard many of them today. Those speeches whether in favour of or opposing a change in the law were equally motivated by compassion and a sense of humanity. Those who oppose changes to the current framework do so from the basis of profoundly held views about the sanctity of human life and about the position a change could place medical professionals in, and because they have genuinely held concerns about whether vulnerable people, or people with a serious and terminal illness who are at their lowest ebb, may feel pressure, real or imagined, to take such a step, and they fear that no safeguards, however well-designed, could adequately protect against this.

We heard very powerful speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and the hon. Members for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and although the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) did not make a speech, she intervened on a number of occasions powerfully and movingly.

Those who advocate change again do so on the basis of sincerely held and equally strong views. No one can fail to be deeply moved by the situations in individual cases described by people as they set out the terrible choices they and their loved ones faced, and in that context, I pay tribute to the dignity shown by Ann Whaley in her campaigning on this issue, reflecting her situation and that of her husband, Geoffrey, which I know has deeply moved Members of this House and, indeed, those outside this place.

I would like to recognise those across the country who have campaigned, including a number of my constituents—for example, those in the Leicestershire and Rutland Dignity in Dying group. They have contacted me, as I am sure different groups and individuals will have contacted other Members or even come to see them to set out with conviction, sincerity and always courtesy their reasons for wishing to see this House reflect on the law and consider changing it. They wish to see the law changed to allow those who are terminally ill and in great pain, and who have the ability to make such a decision, to decide what they wish to do with their own body and life and their right to have a choice in ending that life with dignity, and with assistance if they need it, without fear for them or their loved ones. They have set out, as I said, their case with equal dignity, and I pay tribute to them all now.

I turn to the Members who spoke very powerfully in support of changes in this space, and I pick out to start with of course my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford, who spoke deeply movingly and, I know, on a very personal basis. He asked a very specific point about a call for evidence. I know that he has recently met and spoken to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice, where he put, with typical eloquence and persuasiveness, his case. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is reflecting carefully on the case that the hon. Gentleman put to him.

Other hon. Members spoke movingly from a personal perspective in arguing for a change. The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) spoke with incredible dignity and courage in sharing his very personal story with us and those beyond this place, and he did it because he believed that that was the right thing to do to advance this debate. I pay tribute to him. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and the hon. Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) for their very personal stories, and to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) for his willingness to share a very personal story reflecting his position. I would say to him that, whatever view one takes on this issue or others, the willingness to change one’s mind is a sign of strength and never of weakness.

I will refer other hon. Members. But I will not go into what they said, owing to pressure of time. They are my hon. Friends the Members for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) and for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), the right hon. Member for North Norwich (Norman Lamb) and the hon. Members for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury). I think that I have referenced every right hon. and hon. Member who has spoken. They all spoke with passion, with clarity and with a true sense of the tone in which we would wish the House to conduct this debate. I pay tribute to them all.

This has been a humbling debate to listen to and to have the opportunity to wind up. The views on both sides of the debate have been reflected with eloquence and dignity in the House. This Parliament has a responsibility to the people we represent. It has a responsibility to deliberate on behalf of our nation on the most difficult questions that we consider, and this is certainly among them. It is right that the House continues to do this, and I believe that the tone and content of this debate reflect how those who send us to this place would wish us to conduct ourselves.

4.57 pm

Nick Boles: I should like to thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and your colleague Deputy Speaker very much for chairing this debate so well. I should also like to thank all hon. Members for contributing to it so powerfully and persuasively. I would particularly like to thank Ann Whaley for attending the debate. She has inspired us all to be here, and, whatever arguments we have made, I know that we all think she is a truly marvellous woman. Her husband would be very proud of her today. I would also like to thank all the other family members and those suffering from terminal illnesses who have taken the trouble, at a time of great stress in their lives, to join us and to observe our debate.

I should like to end on this note. I have changed my mind about this issue. Many people have changed their minds about it, and I hope that more people will change...
their minds about it so that we can get on and change
the law and make this country a more humane place for
people to live and die.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the functioning of the existing
law relating to assisted dying.

**Business without Debate**

**BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE**

Ordered,

That, in respect of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation)
Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to
be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the
Table before the Bill has been read a second time.—(Iain Stewart.)

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**NHS Procurement and Subcontractor Exclusion**

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

4.59 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): I requested this
debate this afternoon not only to put right a wrong that
has been done to a long-established business in my
constituency, but to highlight wider issues about
Government procurement policy, particularly in relation
to the national health service. The Government rightly
talk about delivering a Brexit that supports UK businesses,
jobs and our standard of living. However, this sorry
story illustrates how, even before Brexit, we are unable
to create a level playing field for our companies, let
alone back them up. In this case, the EU cannot be
blamed for a lack of transparency or fair competition,
or for the exclusion of a UK company from an NHS
preferred supplier list.

Under NHS ProCure22, the Department of Health
and Social Care appointed Kier as a tier 1 provider to
decide who should be the preferred providers for floor
covering in NHS facilities. In May 2018, without any
competitive tendering or other transparent process, it
was announced that three overseas companies would be
on the preferred supplier list—two French companies,
Tarkett and Gerflor, and a Swiss company, Forbo.
James Halstead, a UK plc from my constituency with a
50-year track record of supplying NHS institutions was
not on the list or even given the opportunity to tender
or participate in dialogue with Kier.

Halstead is highly successful global business that
we are proud of in Radcliffe, with a global turnover of
£250 million and a UK turnover of £83 million. The
NHS currently accounts for approximately 15% of that
UK turnover. A significant proportion of that is now at
risk, and there is the also potential reputational damage
of being excluded from the list for unstated reasons.
Many NHS organisations are understandably asking
Halstead why it is not on the list. That would be bad
enough in any circumstances, but things have been made
worse by the recent track record of the three overseas
companies.

In October 2017, the three companies were found
guilty of price fixing over a 23-year period in France,
and the French competition authority fined them a
total of £302 million. They were found to have discussed
minimum prices, price increases, sales policy and other
sensitive information, such as their trading volumes.
The French regulators discovered that the companies
had also exchanged confidential, recent and detailed
information on their sales volumes and commercial
forecasts. That information was exchanged through the
SFEC, a sectoral trade union in France, which was in
charge of collecting the information and sharing it with
manufacturers. It is surprising—some would stay staggering
—that seven months later these same companies were
given a monopoly as preferred suppliers for the NHS.
In addition, it is worth noting that Tarkett pays no UK
taxes whatsoever. To be clear, it is not breaking any laws
in doing so, but that does not mean that there are no
ethical and fairness issues.

I have several questions for the Minister, and if he is
unable to answer them today, I would be grateful if he
wrote to me in detail. What criteria did Kier use to draw
up the preferred supplier list? In the absence of competitive tendering, what process did it use? Why were Halstead and other suppliers not included on the list or given the opportunity to put their case? What consideration was given to the probity of the three overseas companies in view of the sanctions imposed on them in France?

Will the Minister assure me—this is incredibly important—that Kier will be instructed to add Halstead, and any other appropriate company, to the list as a matter of urgency? Will the Minister initiate a review of all such NHS contractor lists with a view to identifying how many are drawn up without a competitive tendering or transparent process? Finally, will the Minister issue an instruction in due course that NHS staff and third parties, such as tier 1 providers, appointed on the NHS’s behalf to commission goods and services should have a duty to be proactive in encouraging UK companies to apply or bid, depending on the relevant process?

I believe that this case has wider implications for UK Government and NHS procurement policy than simply the effects on the business in my constituency. I want to make it clear that this is not about saying that, in an unlawful manner, the NHS or the Government should favour UK companies over foreign companies. That is not the case whatsoever, so officials should not try to deflect us away from the substantive issues here. The issue is that a UK company with a good track record, a history of financial probity, and quality goods and services should be on this list. It has never been sanctioned by any regulatory authority. In contrast, these three overseas companies were significantly sanctioned, less than a year before the NHS’s decision, for price fixing—basically operating a cartel in France—over a 23-year period.

Clearly this is not a matter of direct ministerial responsibility and, having been a Health Minister, I do not hold the Minister personally responsible for individual procurement and tendering decisions, but Ministers are responsible for policy and oversight in this area. There has either been incompetence by those charged with these responsibilities or, frankly, something stinks in Kier’s decision-making process in this case.

I would be incredibly grateful if the Minister responded to my substantive points, considered the wider implications for UK Government and NHS procurement and put right, as a matter of urgency, the wrong done to Halstead plc in my constituency.

5.6 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): It is a pleasure to respond, and I thank the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) for securing this debate to highlight an issue about which he rightly feels very strongly, as it affects a company in his constituency.

The title of this debate highlights the two things the hon. Gentleman wants to raise. The first is the specific issue and, as I have some time, I will talk a little about procurement processes with subcontractors in general, too. He highlights an issue with a specific framework contract that, as he rightly says, is managed by my Department.

The specific issue the hon. Gentleman raises is on the use of subcontractors in the flooring industry under the construction framework ProCure22. The issue was originally raised through the Government public procurement review service, hosted by the Cabinet Office, back in December 2018. A response was provided by officials at the time and is on the Government website.

The hon. Gentleman asked a number of direct questions, which I will tackle later in my speech. I hope to satisfy him but, if not, I will, of course, be very happy to write to him.

The issue, as the hon. Gentleman says, is that one of the suppliers under the P22 framework is using three companies based in the European Union and that a supplier in his constituency is not being used. He is not seeking to suggest that suppliers be excluded for unlawful reasons, but he is suggesting that the supplier in his constituency has been excluded because there was not a fair competition. That is the essence of what he said.

On the competition question, the hon. Gentleman will know that my Department and the Cabinet Office provided a response saying that, although we have some influence over subcontractors under the ProCure22 framework, this only relates to certain tier 1 subcontractors that are primary supply chain members. They are required to pass a certain series of checks with the authority before they can be registered. Those checks are limited to organisations undertaking certain roles and do not extend to the suppliers of flooring products. The principal supply chain partners have been selected through an appropriate procurement process, in line with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015. Those companies are then free to build their own supply chains, which is where the company in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency is at odds. The company leading the supply chain is not always bound by public sector procurement regulations. I am obviously aware of the French authorities imposing a fine on the three companies at the end of 2017, and I want to address some of his remarks on that in a moment.

Officials in my Department have met supply chain partners on a regular basis, and we seek wherever possible to encourage the use of UK-based SME subcontractors. As the hon. Gentleman said, we have a duty to the public sector to deliver value for money. It is for our supply chain partners to demonstrate that that is the case with each of their products.

I think the hon. Gentleman is concerned that my Department has not replied to a letter from Halstead—the aggrieved company in question—of January this year. I can confirm that the Department received the letter from DWF lawyers, acting on Halstead’s behalf. The letter was addressed to me on 16 January, and my Department has a record of a reply being sent on 13 February, referring DWF to the response that had been published on the public procurement review service that I referred to earlier. If the hon. Gentleman does not have a copy of that reply, or if he finds when he speaks to Halstead that it does not have a copy or the lawyers have not passed it on, I will be happy to sort that out.

Officials in my Department have engaged with Halstead directly—that engagement started in March 2018—to explain how the framework operated. I hope that the company will be able to confirm to the hon. Gentleman that officials have responded fairly promptly to any questions that have been raised. I understand that Halstead has used that feedback and is currently bidding to form part of the supply chain.
The hon. Gentleman asked a large number of very specific questions, and given that the House has a little bit of time tonight, I thought I might try to respond to them now rather than writing to him.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I take an interest in this matter because I have a large and very successful district hospital in my constituency. I listened with care to what the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) said. It seems to me that what we want in public procurement—not just in the NHS, but across the public service—is for the best contractor to do the best job at the best price for the public purse, but always in a framework, as the hon. Gentleman wisely said, of fair competition. If that has not happened in this case, does the Minister believe that that is because of a structural problem with the P22 framework, or is a local difficulty to blame?

Stephen Hammond: I want to speak about the overall process later in my speech. Having been to Nottingham to open the national procurement centre for the NHS last week, I am clear that we should have the best procurement processes in place to ensure that money from the public purse is spent wisely. That is even more important in the health service than it is in almost any other part of the public sector, because money spent wisely means better patient care, and that is key.

I hope that I will be able to prove to my hon. Friend and the hon. Gentleman that the problem with this contract was not with the framework itself, but with how one particular company chose to apply the criteria. I am not saying that the company necessarily applied the criteria inaccurately or wrongly, but it did not do so in a way that we would normally encourage.

Mr Ivan Lewis: I thank the Minister for the openness and frankness of his response so far. His last comment was very telling, because he acknowledged that in these circumstances, Kier perhaps did not behave in accordance with best practice or what would usually be expected, even if it did not do anything unlawful. If possible, I want clarity on whether the Minister or his officials have had, or will have, strong words with Kier about what the situation has exposed and the unfairness that Kier perhaps did not behave in accordance with. Will he or his officials have that conversation with Kier about what is expected of it, or have they done so already?

Stephen Hammond: To be absolutely clear, I was not suggesting that Kier had not necessarily followed best practice, and it certainly had not acted unlawfully. I was suggesting that, as I said a moment ago, we would encourage all the people who use the frameworks to ensure that there are opportunities for UK firms to be on those frameworks.

Let me try to answer directly some of the hon. Gentleman’s questions. He asked what criteria Kier used to draw up the supplier list. As I explained, in respect of how the framework is set up, the Department ensures that the principal supplier on the framework is there correctly, appropriately and legally. It is not for the Department to comment on the criteria that private sector organisations use to draw up their supplier lists. The Department sets out the expectation of the principal supply chain partners, and our expectation on them is to ensure that supply chains provide value-for-money, quality services for the public sector. Understandably, because of the nature of what is being procured, each supply chain partner will have its own processes and prequalification criteria.

The hon. Gentleman asked me directly what processes were used in the absence of competitive tendering. Again, it is not for the Department to comment directly on the specific processes, but I can confirm that each of the supply chain partners needs to follow its own internal policies, and those policies and procedures must align with the requirements of the framework.

The hon. Gentleman asked directly why Halstead and other suppliers that were not included on the list were not necessarily given the opportunity to put their case. The Department does not have visibility of which suppliers were given the opportunity to put their case; however, Halstead is now discussing that with the supply chain partners. As I said, Halstead has spoken to officials at my Department, and that communication goes back as far as March 2018. I understand that Halstead is now using that feedback and is bidding to form part of the supply chain. We give the undertaking that the application will be considered fairly and scored against the set criteria.

The hon. Gentleman asked me directly about what consideration was given to the probity of the three overseas companies, given that sanctions were imposed on them in France.

Mr Lewis: The Minister said that the application will be tested against the set criteria, but he cannot tell me what those criteria are. Is that a fair reflection of the situation?

Stephen Hammond: As I said earlier in my remarks, each principal supply chain partner must make sure that their internal policies and procedures align with the requirements of the framework, but it is not for the Department to tell each principal supply partner how to set out their criteria, nor the specific processes they should use. The hon. Gentleman rightly made the point that is my Department’s responsibility to ensure that the policy is correct. I hope he is hearing that my Department ensures that the right procedures and processes are in place and that the individual principal supply chain partner must choose the most appropriate one for the right framework it is on. I hope he will accept that.

I was just about to refer to the issue of the three overseas companies that were chosen and the sanctions that were imposed on them. As I said earlier, I am aware that the French authorities imposed the fine on the three companies at the end of 2017, but those convictions were imposed after the preferred supplier list was established. Clearly, the Department does not have sight of the contractual agreements between the supply chain partners and the suppliers. The supply chain partners are not within the scope of the Public Contract Regulations 2015.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether I could assure him that Kier would be instructed to add Halstead to the list as a matter of urgency. He will know, obviously, that it is not within my remit or my ability to instruct private sector organisations to engage with specific companies, but I can reassure him that Halstead is currently bidding as part of the refresh of the Kier supplier list and its application will, I know, be scored on the merit of the criteria set. I hope that that reassures him.
I want to turn briefly to how the Department supports and encourages small and medium-sized enterprises and subcontractors more generally. Clearly, we have been dealing with some very specific issues, and that underlines the complexity of the procurement landscape. The understanding of who exactly subcontractors are, and the work that they undertake, is, by its very nature, not well understood unless it is for a very major significant construction project. NHS organisations would usually expect the Crown Commercial Service or the regional procurement solution to identify and track the supply chain of the suppliers providing the goods, works or services. However, there is currently a limited understanding of the suppliers on locally negotiated contracts.

The Public Contract Regulations 2015 clearly allow public sector organisations to permit subcontracting within supply chains as long as the subcontractors meet the minimum standards set out, and the hon. Gentleman knows that I have just set those out. Where issues in subcontractor performance arise, the regulations also allow for the subcontractor to be excluded.

The Department’s SME action plan for 2019-20 highlights the actions that we are taking to make it easier for SMEs to work with the whole of the health supply system. The Department has a target of 23% of our direct and indirect spend with SMEs by the end of March 2022.

Peter Heaton-Jones: Notwithstanding the note that the Minister might just have been passed—[Interruption.] This is an important point. I have mentioned already the fine hospital that I have in my constituency, but I also have many fine SMEs, which need to be on a level playing field when it comes to being able to tender for these sorts of procurement contracts. What I am looking for the Minister to give me and, I am sure, to other hon. Members with fine SMEs in their constituencies is an assurance that they have that level playing field and that they can get these contracts.

Stephen Hammond: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. It is absolutely the commitment of the Government to ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises are not excluded from any form of public sector procurement. I am pleased to say that the Department has published an action plan to that effect. I am actually the Minister in charge of ensuring that that action plan is implemented, and I am pleased to say that the Cabinet Office holds meetings of ministerial champions across Whitehall to ensure that, as a Government, we meet our targets.

Mr Lewis: May I ask the Minister about a really important point of clarification? Are Kier or similar organisations fulfilling that function required to publish the basis on which they make these decisions? The Minister has said that it is not for the Department to tell such organisations how to fulfil their responsibilities in drawing up these lists, but are those organisations required to publish, openly and transparently, the basis on which they make decisions about their preferred suppliers?

Stephen Hammond: What can I say to the hon. Gentleman—he has heard me say this twice, and I am happy to have a longer discussion with him outside this debate—is that there is a process in place whereby principal supply chain partners are on the framework. If they are on that framework, they have to ensure that their policies, procedures and the criteria they intend to use align with that framework. As private sector organisations that have been contracted by the public sector, they in turn have subcontractors, and they have to ensure that the processes they use to contract those subcontractors are compliant with the framework. I am happy to set that out in writing for the hon. Gentleman, if he would like me to. Clearly, the Department cannot and does not instruct principal supply partners to detail every aspect but, as I have said to him before, we have to be reassured that the processes and procedures they use are compliant with what we have set out in the framework.

This has been a fascinating debate because it gets to the heart of what we want to do. If we want to have a vibrant economy, we must have transparency regarding how companies contract for public sector contracts and the supply thereof. What the hon. Gentleman has rightly done on behalf of his constituents is to ensure that the Department is clear and has investigated that the processes and procedures being used were the correct ones, and that if, as he believes, his constituents were unfairly treated, the Department looks into the case. My officials have been in regular contact with Halstead since 2018 and I am pleased that it is now able to refresh its application for the subcontract list. I am also pleased to have had the chance briefly to set out the Government’s overall ambitions to ensure that all small and medium-sized enterprises are able to bid for Government contracts.

Question put and agreed to.

5.28 pm

House adjourned.
Pet Identification

4.30 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 229004 relating to the identification of pets.

The petition calls for compulsory scanning of the microchips of all cats that are injured or have died in road traffic accidents and are collected by councils at roadsides, on paths and in all other locations. Dog owners have also supported the petition because it has implications for all pets found deceased on council roads and paths.

The Gizmo's Legacy petition has met its target because we are a nation of animal lovers. Forty-nine per cent of UK adults own a pet, with 11.1 million pet cats and 8.9 million pet dogs across the UK. This debate is about the human suffering caused by a family pet going missing. Pet owners suffer terribly when their cat or dog goes missing. Everyone knows someone whose cat or dog has disappeared, and the frantic searching that ensues. Everyone has seen attached to lampposts the desperate posters that often offer a reward, the photos in shop windows, or the social media posts on community pages from cat owners pleading with everyone to check their sheds and garages for a beloved missing cat. I get a little anxious when my fellow goes out in the summer and does not come home at night, which he does a few nights a year. So far, he has always eventually returned home.

Pet owners never give up searching when there is hope. Sadly, their time and money are often wasted chasing a lost cause because their council has no clear policy. Some councils are better than others, but there is no consistency between them, and on occasion there is even variance within a single council. This debate is about how council staff following a few simple procedures can halt years of searching and heartache for pet owners, who live in hope of a miracle that will never happen. Often, the not knowing hurts the most for those pet owners—if only owners of a missing pet had a crystal ball to find out whether their cat or dog is still alive and well. We do not have crystal balls, but we do have microchips, and much more could be done to make use of them.

The Gizmo’s Legacy petition was created by Helena Abrahams, who is sitting in the Public Gallery. She is a cat owner, cat-sitter and volunteer who scans microchips and has reunited hundreds of deceased cats with their owners every year. Not all pets are microchipped, so she photographs each pet she finds. It is a heartbreaking task, but Helena knows that if she does not do it, there is a risk that the pet will simply end up in landfill and the owner will have no chance even to collect the body to bury or cremate it.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a compelling opening speech, which will resonate well beyond this Chamber. I put on the record my admiration for the determination and passion shown by Helena and her team of volunteers. At its heart, their argument is about our compassion at the worst moment for a pet owner or parent—for all intents and purposes, pets are family members. We are asking for standard and consistent practice across the country that is supported by law—a Government looking for a legacy could implement that now—to ensure that a cat that has been involved in a traffic accident or killed in some other way is returned to his or her mum or dad through scanning. It is a simple process and many local authorities are already picking such animals up.

Pets should not end up in landfill but be returned to the arms of their mum and dad. Otherwise, even in this time of austerity, we risk having councils with all the parts but no heart. I hope that the attention and support shown by the 100,000-plus signatures collected by my constituent Helena and her team set a trend of expectation of changes in law to end that practice quickly and reunite parents with their cats.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): It is a good job Sir Nicholas Winterton is not in the Chair. I ought to explain to hon. Members that Mr Frith very kindly and courteously indicated that he has to be in two places at once. I am not normally quite so relaxed about interventions, but on this occasion, it was fair for him to make his point.

James Frith: Thank you, Sir Roger.

Martyn Day: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith) for his intervention—he made some fantastic points with which I agree entirely. I join him in praising his constituent Helena Abrahams for the absolutely fantastic work she does.

As part of sharing so many lost and found cats on social media, Helena set up the first deceased cat group on Facebook, “Deceased Cats UK and Ireland”, after she lost her beloved cat Gizmo, who was chipped but was not scanned and was disposed of in the most horrific way. Through that group, it came to light that so many cats throughout the UK were being disposed of like trash, without councils scanning them for microchips. The general public witnessed councils throwing cats in the back of refuse trucks and caged vans. Helena realised that for the sake of her other cats and all cats nationwide, she needed to take action, so she set up the Gizmo’s Legacy petition. Within six months, it had over 107,000 signatures, which is a tremendous effort.

Helena joined forces with It’s All About The Animals, Pet Theft Awareness, Stolen and Missing Pets Alliance, Animals Lost and Found in Kent, Vets Get Scanning, Harvey’s Army, Dog Lost, and Cats Protection. These organisations all recognise that no unified procedure is in place for when dead pets are recovered under council jurisdiction. Gizmo’s Legacy has been campaigning since 2016. The founding members include Wendy Andrew, Angela Hoy, Beryl Beckwith, Geoff Sharp, June Jeffrey, and Valerie Peachey. They have tirelessly raised awareness about the issue and the devastating impact on owners and their families. The mental health implications for owners who never get the closure of knowing what happened to their beloved pet cannot be overestimated.
[Martyn Day]

We already scan dead pets found on the motorway and on the strategic road network—a positive move following the work of Harvey’s Army, which secured Harvey’s Law. Harvey was a miniature poodle who went missing in November 2013; he was microchipped and wore a collar and tag. Just 21 minutes after he went missing, his body was recovered; it was stored and then cremated, yet no contact was made with his owners, who, with friends, searched for 13 weeks before discovering what happened to him. Harvey’s Army is a registered charity and has grown to include more than 300 volunteers across England, Scotland and Wales, who are active in trying to identify and connect families with their lost pets.

Following a parliamentary debate in 2015, the Government committed to requiring Highways England to scan all pets found and, if a microchip is found, to inform the owners. Similarly, Transport Scotland has been mandated to scan pets collected on its strategic road network. However, most cats are killed on minor roads, and what to do remains at the discretion of local authorities. Gizmo’s Legacy calls for the same model to be implemented on council roads, paths and all locations that councils collect from, to ensure the same empathy and respect for cats and dogs wherever they are found.

Some councils already have a procedure in place, but it varies from council to council; “best practice” is followed very loosely and often ignored, or it relies on animal-loving council staff with an understanding of how they would feel if their own pet were found dead. Some councils, such as Leeds Council, do not even scan.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on having secured this debate. I am an owner of several cats. My first cat was killed before my eyes when I was aged about six; he jumped in front of a lorry, and I knew what had happened to him.

In the past two years, we have lost three cats. The only way that we could discover what had happened to them was by producing posters and the children in my family going door to door, asking people in the area if they knew what had happened to those cats. We discovered that each of them had been knocked down by a car. The council in the area in which we live has a policy of reporting cats that are chipped to the owner when their cat is killed, but the council did not report on any of those three occasions. I congratulate those who are attempting to get a firm policy throughout the country that all councils are required to scan dogs, so that councils take the collection of dead pets seriously. Bear in mind that all councils are required to scan dogs, so they have the equipment. There is absolutely no excuse for scanning not to happen.

Another message sent to Gizmo’s Legacy reveals more evidence that council staff are failing pet owners. This incident happened to Wendy Andrew in Oldham:

“A while back I went to pick up a deceased cat that had been reported via our Facebook group ‘Deceased cats UK and Ireland’, on Shaw road, Oldham. As I arrived at the location I saw a small road sweeper driving up and down the road and I parked my car and was looking for the cat. As the sweeper passed me he made conversation and asked me was I ok. I said, ‘I’m looking for a deceased cat reported in this area.’ and he then said, ‘Oh the big road sweeper just came and swept it up. That is what we are told to do.’ He then said there would be ‘nothing left of the cat now as the sweeper just sucks them up and annihilates them.’

I said, ‘Do you not pick them up and check them for chips?’ He said, ‘No they just go back to the depot and empty their loads on to the local tip.’ I did say, ‘That’s disgraceful. That was someone’s much loved baby,’ but he replied, ‘That’s what we are told to do.’”

All too often, that is what many council refuse people are told to do. From an operational point of view, I can understand it, but it is not humane and there is better practice that they could follow for very little extra effort.

In that incident we again see a lack of council policy, of respect and of empathy. All of that results in an owner still searching, knocking on doors, spending money on unnecessary posters and leaflets, and searching the internet for a cat they will never find. Perhaps a distressed family is not able to sleep at night with the worry that their cat is trapped, has been stolen, or is being cruelly mistreated. We all know that pet owners never give up searching. The owner of that cat would surely rather know the truth.
I ask everyone to think for a moment how they would feel if they found out that their pet had been thrown into the back of a wagon and tipped into a landfill site like rubbish. To those who signed the petition, the idea of their family member becoming rubbish is simply abhorrent. A pet’s body cannot be brought back to life but the body is the owner’s property, and the owner deserves the right to choose what happens to it. Many councils are ignoring that.

The Gizmo’s Legacy team have had several high-profile names and organisations supporting them or helping to achieve the target that triggered this debate. Special thanks must go to “Emmerdale” actress Samantha Giles, BBC News, “North West Tonight”, “Granada Reports”, Eamonn Holmes, Ruth Langsford, the lost and found groups on Facebook, Dr Daniel Allen, Richard Jordan, Debbie Matthews, Deborah Meaden, the hon. Member for Bury North, Dermot O’Leary, Rachel Riley, the actress who plays Harriet Finch, Peter Egan, TV vet and campaigner Marc Abraham, DogLost, the Stolen and Missing Pets Alliance, Cats Protection and Harvey’s Army.

Those organisations and individuals recognise the importance of pets in our lives and all share posts from the Gizmo’s Legacy Twitter and Facebook accounts calling for Gizmo’s law. In addition, the team thank the many radio stations that did interviews, all the newspapers that published articles and, of course, members of the public who worked tirelessly distributing posters to help get the signatures. All those people are animal lovers and understand that pets are valued companions to many folks—their pet is more than a family member and is often their best friend.

The way in which the country supported this petition has been heartfelt. It shows the passion people feel for the need for Gizmo’s law. Obviously, the general public were unaware of the practice of many councils, but are grateful to have had it brought to their attention and to have the opportunity to press the Government to amend it. Cats as well as dogs are part of the family. They are not a commodity to be disposed of on rubbish heaps.

For people to lose their cat or dog to a road traffic accident and never have the opportunity to say goodbye rips the heart out of families and wrecks lives. Why have their beloved pet chipped just to be disregarded and thrown away as trash? It takes seconds to scan a microchip, to get the details and to inform the owner. Given that we encourage microchipping as best practice, we need to follow up to make it worthwhile for people to do it.

James Frith: To follow up on the hon. Gentleman’s point, this is about joining up policy. The policy and the legislation are there, and there is evidence of good practice, so this is about joining it up. For the policy not to stand in isolation, we have to apply the empathy. His point is well made. We can turn things around the moment we ask those same people to envisage that happening to their pet—to all intents and purposes, pet owners view pets as family. Underpin it by legislative change, yes, but this is about empathy, otherwise the policy stands in isolation, detached from people’s experiences. To give a worst-case scenario, when I met Helena and her team, we talked of an early-morning drive home from holiday and seeing a dead cat on the road. I, too, felt a sense of empathy—the idea that such animals end up not being returned to their families. That is at the heart of this, is it not?

Martyn Day: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point—this is about empathy. What we are calling for is easily attainable within the current resources.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): There is no question about the success of the compulsory microchipping of dogs. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that basing the need for the microchipping of cats on the risk that the animals pose to the public simply ignores the welfare of the animals in question?

Martyn Day: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. This is not about the safety of the public. It is about the family’s wellbeing and knowing what has happened to their beloved pet.

The process of scanning can be done in minutes and is not a complex procedure. Councils that have a policy to scan deceased pets often leave the onus on the owner to contact the council within seven days, which is a pointless exercise if an owner is not notified or if the pet is disposed of without the owner being given the chance to collect the body, to bury or cremate it, and to deal with their grief. During the holiday period, people might be away for longer than one week, so seven days is just unrealistic.

Too often, there is a disparity between council policy and actual practice. We know that from various cases evidenced by witnesses and council workers. One such worker, who wished to remain anonymous, told Gizmo’s Legacy:

“...Oh, we don’t scan them, we are told not to. We take them to the local tip, where they are thrown in a freezer until full then put into the refuse.”

Des Kane is a volunteer chip scanner with Harvey’s Army. He regularly pops by his local council’s storage facility in Coatbridge in North Lanarkshire, to check whether any pets in the freezer can be identified. He finds the council’s approach to pets found on the road to be very hit and miss:

“I find that the only real documenting of any such unfortunate deceased pet is the label attached to the bag in which they are placed. This label states the following: animal type, colour, where and when picked up from, and any distinguishing markings.

To my knowledge that is as far as it goes with documentation and I am not aware of any other efforts made by the council to find a potential owner, i.e. posting on their website or social media. They do have an animal welfare officer who they call to scan animals when they’ve been lifted or they call me when he’s not available.

I’ve found the council staff at the facility very accommodating and helpful but I feel the council policy, as it stands, could be a bit more thorough in trying to contact a possible owner, although I know they are more proactive than some other authorities.”

Such volunteers do a tremendous job around the country uniting people with their deceased pets, but it should not be left to them or to the random lottery of what each local council chooses to do.

Cat owner Anita Short, a resident of Sunderland City Council, learned from a neighbour that her cat Toby had been collected by cleansing services. She then contacted the council and was invited to Sunderland council’s depot to see if Toby was in its freezer. Anita recognised her cat from his collar. She asked why her cat had not been scanned and the excuse she was given was that they did not have a scanner on them. Why does the council state that its workers will scan animals they pick up? As I said, they should all have scanners, given the
requirement for dogs. The council was not following its own policy. Anita Short would have never known that her cat had been collected and was in a council freezer if it was not for her neighbour. Relying on best practice is meaningless if policies are not strictly followed, which is why Gizmo’s law needs to be implemented.

DogLost.co.uk is the country’s leading lost-and-found pets service—despite the name, it also deals with cats. It has a national network of volunteers. Its service is free but it relies on donations. Hon. Members have probably seen its posters attached to lamp posts or in shop windows with details of missing pets. Since the launch of DogLost UK in 2003, more than 105,000 dogs and cats have been registered as missing or stolen. Thankfully, nearly three-quarters of pets have been found. DogLost informs us that, in 2018, 9,029 pets were reported missing. At the start of this month, 24,201 pets were still missing, which means that many families are still searching. How many of those dogs and cats will have been recovered from council roads and paths but never scanned? We will never know how many of those dogs and cats have ended up in landfill because of lax record keeping.

Of course, not all animals are microchipped, so to be fair to councils it is sometimes not possible to find owners even when they scan. What we do know is that two councils admitted to collecting bodies of cats and putting them in the freezer, but failing to scan or keep any records. On questioning, they admitted remembering the description of two cats: that happened to Michelle Morton’s cat Cookie, which was in the hands of Blackpool Council, and Janette Barton’s cat Benji under Wigan Council. Both those cats were microchipped, but it appears that neither council bothered to scan, because they do not have to—it is only best practice. Councils make their own policies and do not even need to bother to stick to the rules that they have set themselves. Is it too much to ask that they take a few minutes to scan for a chip, keep some records that can be easily accessed and contact owners to let them know the bad news, to give them the chance to collect their pet for burial or cremation?

Janette told us that she still cries over losing her cat. The emotional connection between humans and pets cannot be emphasised enough. This debate is about human suffering, not the lost pet that has caused the human suffering. There are so many heart-breaking examples of families who have lost their pets. Gizmo’s Legacy detailed a broad range of them in the pack it sends to members, which highlights that there is a lack of scanning all over the United Kingdom.

The last example I will give is that of Wendy Turner and her cat Merlin, who was neutered and microchipped. After spending a day looking for him, she posted on Facebook and, following a last sighting of him, discovered he had been taken by the council. After contacting the council, Wendy was told that they would be in touch after they had scanned the cat, but that did not happen. She was then given the runaround, being passed on to different departments and being told that Merlin would be added to the list of deceased animals in a day or so. It was to be several weeks later before a vague description of a cat found in the area where Merlin was picked up appeared on the deceased animal list. Wendy says that “it is two years since I lost Merlin and even now I feel that there is no closure. The thought of his precious remains being tossed away with rubbish or thrown into a furnace with no regard to him or his family I find very hard to accept. I only wanted to bring my boy home. This was the reason why I invested in a microchip. If it was not for the reply to my Facebook post I would still be searching for Merlin.”

People are spending real money to get their cats microchipped, so that when something does go wrong they can be reunited with them, whether alive or unfortunately deceased.

What can be done? Recommendations of good practice clearly do not work for everyone, which suggests that legislation for the UK’s 408 councils may be required. Local authorities are devolved, so we may need legislation in the devolved nations as well as in this Parliament. It takes minutes to scan a pet, log details and contact an owner—a small price to pay considering the human misery that searching for a pet generates. It is important that contact is made where microchips exist, and that there be a system to view photos of deceased pets where no microchip is found.

Our pets need improved protection. Gizmo’s law would mean that all councils would have to start scanning all animals they collect on all their roads, paths and locations and contacting their owners to give them closure. If the animals are not chipped, they should send images to organisations such as Deceased Cats UK and Ireland or DogLost, which will happily share them to help to trace owners. Councils could even set up a web page or social media site. It is not too much to ask to keep all cats and dogs for at least seven days. If local authorities do not have freezers, they can use a local vets. The petitioners are not asking for anything that is not easily attainable, and given the attendance in the debate, it seems they have broad cross-party support.

We need Gizmo’s law to help to protect the basic rights of pet owners: the right to have a family member thrown into a landfill, and the right to know whether their pet has been found and identified so they can collect the body and start the grieving process. Pets are part of the family. It is unacceptable for councils to treat pets as throwaway rubbish. Now is the time to do away with the postcode lottery of random policies and often uncaring practices that are described by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as best practice. Campaigners and pet owners all hope that the Minister will do the right thing: make Gizmo’s law a reality.

4.56 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for introducing the debate and explaining the real pain when a cat goes missing and no one knows what has happened to it. More than 800 people across the three Plymouth constituencies signed Helena’s petition. So many of them have shared stories of their own missing animals to stress how important this issue is—a fairly simple legislative tweak could make a powerful difference to those families. A total of 320 people in the patch that I represent signed the petition. It is clear that British people are asking us to demand an animal welfare agenda that is consistent in its application across the country.
Last year, 230,000 cats were killed in road traffic accidents. That is more than 600 every day. Since this debate started, roughly 12 cats will have died. Each of those incidents will mean a family will not see their moggy come home. Young children will ask where their cat is and everyone will be worried about them. We need to create a regulatory environment where, as much as possible, we value animals and their relationships with families. That is not too much to ask. Every animal matters and, importantly, every cat matters to its family.

As always before I speak in these kinds of debates, I reached out to people on social media. It will be no surprise that many people wanted to share the story of their lost cat—whether it came home, was found or is still missing in action somewhere and the owners do not know what happened. My own cat, the fantastically named Bumblesnarf—after Bumblebee from “Transformers” and Snarf from “ThunderCats”, obviously—went missing and, sadly, was found much later. I know the worry of not knowing where a cat is. We all know that cats have a mind of their own and will not do as they are told—unlike dogs, they will do as they please. Sometimes, they might just want to go out and have a play, but when they go missing there is so much heartache, worry and stress. Emma told me on social media that she was pleased that MPs are pushing for this debate. She talked about the cats that she has lost in road traffic accidents and the importance of microchipping. Others shared similar stories.

The petition calls for councils to have the same respect for cats as they have for dogs. I am proud to say that Labour-run Plymouth City Council treats cats the same as dogs in road traffic accidents. That is really important. We need to engineer out of our system the postcode framework is. Because of the level of cuts, we are asking them to clean more streets, or collect more bins, more quickly. Pausing to collect a cat adds extra work to their day, but it is important that they recognise the value of doing so; that empathy and connection—the thought that it could be their cat—is so important.

Ann Clwyd: I referred to Cardiff City Council, a large city council that is also run by Labour. In theory it reports cat deaths, but in practice it does not.

Luke Pollard: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that point. That is why it is really important not only that the regulatory framework is tightened but that training is provided so everyone who works on the frontline in our public services, from local councils upwards, understands the value of enforcing that framework and giving proper care to those cats.

Almost one in five households in Britain has a cat, making cats the second most popular pet after dogs. Many people assume that if their pet is microchipped, they will be alerted if something happens. However, we know from the stories we heard earlier and from our own constituents that that does not happen in every situation. Under the Road Traffic Act 1988, road users are required to stop and report an accident involving horses, cattle, mules, sheep, pigs, goats or dogs. I think that list partly reflects the very different role of animals in society. The social contract for how animals are used changes every day—we see that in greater demands for protection of animals—so we must ensure that that list is updated to reflect our changing views.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I heard the hon. Gentleman say that having a cat microchipped is no guarantee that it will be scanned if something happens to it. Does he therefore agree that it is not enough just to ask people to microchip their cats? To make any policy coherent, we must legally compel them to do so, as we do with dogs. Local authorities will then step up to that policy and fulfil their duties so that, when something happens to a cat, it is scanned and its owner finds out what happened to it.

Luke Pollard: One thing I have discovered since being elected two years ago is that the public really want proper rules for animal welfare that are properly enforced and properly funded. In that respect, the hon. Lady’s point is well put.

Sadly, despite being valued members of households—part of the family—cats are not afforded the same duty of care we afford to cattle, horses, mules and dogs. The life of a cat should be worth no less than that of any other animal, because of the emotional connection that animal brings to the family and its important role in a household. That needs to be addressed.

Unfortunately, road traffic accidents involving cats happen frequently. As we know, cats sometimes misjudge the distance and speed of oncoming vehicles and can be blinded by headlights at night. The law requires people to stop and report the accident if they run over a dog. That helps to save the lives of hundreds of dogs every year. We have spoken so far about reporting in the event that an animal dies, but it can help save the lives of dogs and other animals if people know they are required to stop and report that an animal has been involved in an accident. We should think not just about what happens at the end of an animal’s life but about how we prevent needless deaths along the way.
[Luke Pollard]

Petplan estimates that a quarter of road accidents involving cats are fatal. That means there is a good chance that a cat will survive if it gets the urgent care it needs, but that can happen only if there is a requirement for road users to report accidents involving cats. I would like the legislative proposals for compulsory microchipping of cats to be tightened, and I would like to see compulsory reporting where a cat is injured or involved in an accident.

Although the debate is about accidents involving pets rather than their owners, I want to take a moment to talk about the importance of drivers and other road users recognising the role of animals in communities. I represent an urban area, but Plymouth is surrounded by beautiful countryside, with many weird and varied country lanes. In such fantastic rural areas, accidents may involve different animals—a cow coming over a high fence, for example. Having the driving skills to understand what anticipatory action to take is really important both on country lanes and on major roads, so part of this debate should be about the need to teach and inform drivers, not just in their driving test and their theory test but throughout their lives, about the importance of looking out for and recognising not only pedestrians but animals on pavements and in other settings. We need to ensure that the structures on our roads are engineered to better protect animals, and we need to make our roads safer. I hope that is not lost on the Minister.

Councils across the UK should be required to follow best practice on scanning cats involved in road traffic accidents, which, as we have heard, a number of councils already do. Families deserve to know what happened to their pet if it goes missing. We need more action from the Government to make tweaks in this area. I say to the Minister, with whom I work in a number of areas, that, regardless of what happens with Brexit, nearly all things that have genuine cross-party support. I know that, as I was doing that, people thought that I had run it down, which I obviously had not. I was trying to be a good Samaritan and respond to that lady. I understood it, would be well supported.

We live on a farm. Because we own the land, whenever our animals or pets have passed away, we have been able to bury them on the farm, but that is not the case for everyone. I believe that when we are able to bury our dogs and cats on the farm, they may still roam the fields—not physically, but perhaps in their afterlife, wherever that may be.

Microchipping has helped with the abandonment of animals on some scale, but certainly more needs to be done to ensure that those who keep animals are able to do so. I have heard a few people say that homing an animal is as difficult as adopting a child. That is said tongue in cheek—let us be honest—but I am glad that it means the decision to house a pet is measured and well thought out. Assisi, where my wife volunteers, does not allocate a pet—a dog or a cat—to any home without first doing a home visit to ensure that the person is ready to give a home to a dog or cat, is in the frame of mind to do so and, let us be honest, has a home that can give the pet the freedom it needs. For many elderly people, pets can be companions, but it would not be fair for someone disabled or elderly to have a sprier spaniel—a very energetic dog—that would run them off their feet. Therefore, pets must be allocated. My wife does home visits, so she knows how important they are.

Some 140 of my constituents signed the petition, which is the reason I am here today, but I am confident that I represent many more people who did not sign the petition but agree with its sentiments. Many people want to see the issue addressed appropriately. Although the law says that people do not need to report hitting an animal with a car, the reality is that that leaves a family heartbroken, not knowing what has happened to their beloved pet.

Many years ago, I was out doing deliveries for the business that I used to have and I came up the Darragh Road in Comber. A cat had been killed that morning and the woman was standing at the side of the road in tears. She asked me whether I would scoop it up and put it in a bag, which I was happy to do. The problem was that, as I was doing that, people thought that I had run it down, which I obviously had not. I was trying to be a good Samaritan and respond to that lady. I understood how heartbroken she was, however, because that was her pet—her cat, her love and her companion.

The petition provides a simple solution. If an animal is found, an effort should be made to find the family and allow them to deal with it. To do that, we need to push for people to get their cat microchipped to ensure that any new regulations are worth it. I am glad that Cats Protection in Northern Ireland has a scheme that enables cats to be neutered for £5—many other schemes across Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom are run by volunteers and charitable groups. The offer is open to owners who are receiving state benefits, who are on a low income, who are students or pensioners and who live in Northern Ireland. Microchipping is also available under the campaign at some participating veterinary practices, which may incur a small additional £5 fee. Assisi, the charity that my wife works for, also has a policy of neutering all cats, so there is some control. We cannot ignore the good work that charity groups do across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

5.7 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for bringing forward the debate and setting the scene so well, and I thank the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for his contribution.

I am well known as a dog lover. I cannot remember not having had a dog as a pet since I was very young, many years ago in Ballywalter. My wife has volunteered at Assisi Animal Sanctuary for many years and often sees the effects of unwanted and abandoned pets. It breaks her heart and brings a lump to her throat—and perhaps even to mine—to tell me some of those stories. My wife has had cats nearly all her life. I never had a cat until we married. My dogs and her cats came together as she and I came together. I am not sure whether that is why we did so, but that is the way it happened. As a result, we have always had a love for cats.
Those who microchip their cat obviously care for the animal and deserve a modicum of care in response from their council. I have written to my local council—Ards and North Down Borough Council—to ask whether it will co-ordinate the effort put forward by Cats Protection. I served on the old Ards Borough Council for 26 years and came off it when I was elected to this place in 2010. To be fair to the council, when it is asked by the general public to call out and collect a dead dog or cat, it does so without any coercion as part of its commitment to local pet owners, not because there is a written rule, but because it wants to respond to the general public. I congratulate it on being so responsive and community-based on the matter.

In our house, we have three cats and one dog, which all came from charities. The dog came from a bad relationship and had been abused as a pup. It was nervous when it came to us, but it is now very confident and sees the house as its house, rather than anyone else’s. The cats were all strays or from charities. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport referred to the name of his cat earlier. Ours are called Nicholas—I am not sure why; it sounds very royal—Muffins and Podge. The three cats are totally different and have different personalities. Two of them stay in the house all day while the other one hunts all day. Living on a farm, I get quite annoyed when the cat brings home some of its trophies, and my wife hates it more than anybody, but that is their nature—they hunt.

There are heartbreaking posts on Facebook, in the local papers, in the provincial papers and in shop windows that ask, “Have you seen this cat?” The children get so upset, but something can be done. That is why I am happy to speak in the debate and add my voice, along with the hon. Members who have spoken and those who will speak, to the 107,062 signatories of the petition. I ask the Minister to begin the work that needs to be done to ensure that the petition’s calls are answered and that people know their loved ones have been respectfully put to rest and are not lying in a dump somewhere.

The Minister has always been responsive to our proposals. Our personal discussions with him, and the discussions of others, have indicated that he will probably give us the response that we wish for, which I look forward to. I support the petition’s calls and look forward to hearing the response that we wish for, which I look forward to. I of others, have indicated that he will probably give us our personal discussions with him, and the discussions put to rest and are not lying in a dump somewhere.

done to ensure that the petition’s calls are answered and who will speak, to the 107,062 signatories of the petition. I am happy to speak in the debate and add my voice, along with the hon. Members who have spoken and those who will speak, to the 107,062 signatories of the petition. I ask the Minister to begin the work that needs to be done to ensure that the petition’s calls are answered and that people know their loved ones have been respectfully put to rest and are not lying in a dump somewhere.

The other reason I wanted to speak in the debate is that, of anywhere in the country, the petition gathered the most support from my constituency. Heywood and Middleton topped the table with 634 signatures, so I feel duty bound to speak on behalf of those constituents who cared enough to sign it. The sad story of Gizmo also happened in my neighbouring constituency of Bury North.

I fully support the aim of the petition, which hon. Members have described as a tweak in the law—that is all. Simply, the petition’s aim is that deceased or injured cats be required by law to be scanned in the same way that dogs are, and that efforts be made to track down their owners. Despite cats being popular pets, the law does not require motorists to report running a cat over, nor is it compulsory for cats to be microchipped, although many owners do that voluntarily. According to Cats Protection, 68% of domestic cats are microchipped. Those cat owners have done that for a reason: their hope is that, if their cat goes missing, somebody will scan the chip and the cat will be returned to them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) referred to the Road Traffic Act 1988, which states that collisions causing death or injury to dogs, horses, cattle, pigs, goats, sheep, donkeys and mules, but not cats, must be reported to the police. The Government’s guidelines state that there is no requirement to report a collision involving an animal smaller than a dog, although I wonder what size of dog the Government are referring to. That guideline seems deliberately vague. The point is that the law could easily be extended to include cats.

The natural consequence of this petition is to extend compulsory microchipping to cats, to change the law to require motorists to report all accidents in which an animal is injured, and to make it a duty for local authorities to scan deceased and injured cats for microchips. I am pleased to say that my local authority—Labour-run Rochdale Borough Council—already has a policy to check deceased cats for microchips, and it makes every effort to identify pet owners. If the cat has a chip, a member of the environmental management team will contact the owner to break the sad news and arrange for the pet to be either collected or incinerated by the council—whatever the owner decides to do. If the pet does not have a chip, it is stored for up to four weeks in case it fits a description from concerned owners. Unclaimed animals are incinerated after four weeks.

My local authority’s response seems sensible and humane, and all councils should adopt it. Handheld scanners are inexpensive and take only a few minutes to use. The point has been well made that councils are already in possession of scanners because of the laws relating to dogs. It would save so much heartache if all councils adopted that practice. It would allow the pet to be buried or cremated with dignity, and would give their owners the chance to say goodbye and get closure.
The charity Cats Protection supports the compulsory microchipping of cats, which is one of its 2022 agenda priorities. It says that “cats are not political”, although some cats, such as Larry the No. 10 cat, might dispute that.

Larry frequently comments on the political issues of the day via his Twitter feed, which may have just a hint of human assistance. At the moment, Larry is extremely concerned about whether the next incumbent of No. 10 has a cat allergy. I wish that was all we had to worry about.

Cats Protection is seeking cross-party support for its 2022 agenda. Compulsory microchipping for owned cats would allow more pets to be reunited with their owners and would enable owners to be contacted if their cat is involved in a road traffic accident. It also stresses the importance of keeping microchip details up to date if the owner moves house, for example. Those proposals are supported by the Labour party’s animal welfare plan, which calls for mandatory microchipping for cats, and a requirement for motorists to report all accidents in which an animal had been injured or killed.

The natural consequence of that would be that all councils put in place a policy on scanning cats as well as dogs—a simple step that would save much heartache.

There are many good reasons to bring about this change in the law, and not one reason why we should not. It is clear that it has cross-party support, so let’s just do it.

5.24 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Like everybody else who has contributed, I am delighted to participate in this debate. I thank the Petitions Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for his well-informed and comprehensive speech to kick off the debate.

Like everybody else in the Chamber, I am hugely fond of animals. We all appreciate the importance of family pets. I may completely divide public opinion across the UK, but I wish to confess on the record that I am a cat lover and have had pet cats in the past. I had a cat call Kitty and a stray cat who my family took in at my behest. We called her Misty because she had a misty past and we did not know where she came from, but she was very keen to stay with us. Like the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), I suffer from the lack of a cat at the moment, not having sufficient time to look after and care for one in the way that cats demand. I declare an interest: I am a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cats. A number of hon. Members in the Chamber confessed to me that they did not know that there was such a group. They are all very welcome to come along.

If, as the petition calls for, all cats are scanned for a microchip when they are lost, injured or killed, it makes nothing but logical sense that all cats ought to be required by law to be microchipped if this policy is to have any real coherence. Family pets add so much value to our lives and help us to maintain better mental health, whatever our age. They play a significant role in combating loneliness, especially, but not exclusively, for older people.

Everyone understands that the compulsory microchipping of dogs has been very positive, so why is the same not the case for cats? As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) said, every animal—every cat—matters. A cat’s life is worth the same as any dog’s life. Dogs are required to be microchipped, and drivers are required to report if they are involved in an accident with them.

In an ideal world, we would all make every effort to have our cats microchipped, because there are significant benefits to cats and cat owners in doing so. The SNP Government in Scotland have long recommended the microchipping of cats as best practice in their code of practice for the welfare of cats. Responsible cat owners want to do what is best for their cat’s welfare, and it is important that they are able to avail themselves of this option. It is always better to encourage people to do something, rather than force them. If all owners were fully informed of the benefits of microchipping their cats, I am sure that the vast majority—many more than currently do so—would be keen to take up that offer.

Many cat owners do not think about losing their cat or about their cat having an accident until it happens, so they do not prioritise microchipping, and by the time they do, it is too late. If the law right across the UK required all cats to be microchipped, and councils by necessity played their part, it would save a lot of distress to cat owners and cats themselves, and in the event of loss or injury, it could save a cat’s life.

The Scottish and UK Governments have yet to be persuaded of the merits of compulsory microchipping for cats. I do not really understand why, as we already have compulsory microchipping for dogs. Those of us who believe that it is a good idea therefore need to continue to make the case to persuade them that it is the right thing to do. I believe that it is the right thing to do for cats and cat owners, and it is the right thing to do from an animal welfare perspective, from any angle we choose to look at it. If chipping is compulsory, local authorities will of necessity scan all cats that are lost, killed or injured. Given that dogs are already microchipped, this is not such a great leap from current practice, as the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton said. Clearly, some cat owners will not microchip their cat unless it is an absolute requirement, so in the end animal welfare requires us to make this a legislative matter.

Ross Thomson: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady. I want to work with her and colleagues to ensure that the law is changed, both across Scotland and in the rest of the UK. Does she agree that, if we secure compulsory microchipping and scanning, it would be beneficial to have one centralised database, so that when a missing cat or dog is found it is really easy to get the data from the database and reunite the pet with its owner? At the moment, it is far too complex. The Government really need to look at having one centralised database.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. A centralised database is particularly important for cats, rather than perhaps dogs, because cats, as we know, often wander extremely far from home, and may wander into a completely different part of the country. A centralised database would make a lot of sense. I will press the Scottish Government on compulsory microchipping.
for cats. The matter is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, and I hope that MPs representing constituencies in England will likewise press the UK Government and the Minister, who I am sure is listening carefully.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk rightly pointed out that local authorities across the UK have a confused and patchy policy on scanning for microchips. It is clear that the reason for such patchy and inconsistent practices across local authorities is because there is no compulsory microchipping. If we sort that out—local authorities will do their duty and follow the law if it is changed—it will reconcile thousands of lost, killed and injured cats with their grateful owners.

I am not a particularly prolific user of social media; I tend to post whatever I want to post and then log off. However, almost every time I log on to social media, like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) I see posts from worried pet owners—overwhelmingly cat owners—who are desperately worried about their family pet, who has wandered off and seems to be lost or worse.

Having been a pet owner myself, I completely understand, as I am sure everyone in the Chamber does, how worrying it is when a beloved pet cat does not come home, and the owner does not know whether it is lost or in distress, whether it is trapped somewhere and cannot get back home, or whether it has even met with some terrible accident. Not knowing whether we will ever see a beloved pet again is extremely distressing.

We have heard that it cannot be overestimated just how much a part of the family our pets become. It is a really distressing experience for any pet owner to go through. If a cat seems to be lost, and if it is microchipped and microchipping is enshrined by law, it is extremely likely that when it is found it will be returned to its owner, as their details will be contained in the microchip that will be scanned by the local authorities. I honestly cannot see any downside to that idea.

Compulsory microchipping and local authorities scanning microchips are inherently intertwined. The patchy and inconsistent scanning that we have heard about today cannot continue in all good conscience. We have heard from the UK Government and the Scottish Government that it is best practice to microchip a cat. If that is the case, then it must be better practice, by definition, for all cats to be microchipped—by law, if necessary. It must be even better practice for local authorities to ensure what would become a legal duty to scan cats that are lost, injured or killed, so that owners can be informed.

I have heard some people argue that this is not necessary because a cat can wear a collar with the owner’s contact details, and that works just as well. Although that is better than nothing, it is not as secure a safeguard as a microchip; collars can become loose and untangled, and be lost. There are no such worries with a microchip.

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home is unequivocal in its view that microchipping is the most effective way of ensuring that a cat can be safely reunited with its owner quickly, together with recording its medical and domestic history. In 2018, it was able to reunite 333 lost cats with their owners because they were microchipped. We can increase that number with compulsory microchipping, which will, of necessity, mean compulsory scanning by local authorities.

As we have heard, drivers are required by law to stop and report incidents of hitting a “horse, cattle, ass, mule, sheep, pig, goat or dog”, but not a cat. This seems an odd omission that must be addressed. I know several people who have found a poor dead cat at the side of a road, after it has been hit by a vehicle as it tried to cross the road. That is deeply distressing and makes the loss of a beloved pet all the more difficult to come to terms with. It is as if the poor cat, who was like a member of its own family, was discarded in a way that suggests it simply did not matter. To all of us who consider ourselves animal lovers, that cannot be right. Research has shown that over 60% of people in the UK believe that the law should be changed and that drivers who knock down a cat should have to report that as well. Why should cats continue to be excluded?

When a driver hits a dog with their car and fails to report it to the police, they can be fined up to £5,000. The fact that they are under no obligation to make a report when they hit a cat is deeply unfair. We understand that dogs are more likely to inflict damage; there is insurance and liability to consider, and dogs are supposed to be on leads on the highway, so perhaps their owners have been negligent. Despite that, the current situation continues to be deeply unfair and distressing to cats and their owners, as the hon. Member for Strangford and others indicated.

Every year, countless cats are left to die alone, sometimes slowly and in pain, before being dumped in landfill, when they could perhaps have been saved with treatment or their grieving owners could have been given the opportunity to say a proper goodbye. If drivers knock down a dog—or even an ass—they cannot flee the scene without reporting it to the police. Cats must not be seen as less worthy or less important to their owners. If it were illegal for a driver to fail to report the knocking down of a cat, a compulsory microchip in the cat would mean the owner would be notified in the appropriate way by the local authority, instead of being left to wonder what happened to their beloved family pet, perhaps for years.

Many local councils might argue that they do not have the resources to purchase scanning machines for microchipped cats. I pay tribute to Cats Protection, which has worked with local authorities across the UK for some time, donating scanning machines to those that struggle to afford or prioritise providing them. A number of local authorities have been able to commit to adhering to a scanning policy, as a direct result of those efforts. That is important as it is believed that of approximately 11 million pet cats in the UK, over 230,000 die on our roads each year. Charities such as CatsMatter believe this figure could be higher, due to under-reporting. For fear of banning one, if the law were changed to ensure compulsory microchipping, local authorities would prioritise purchasing scanning machines to comply with that law.

I pay tribute to North Ayrshire Cats Protection; it does sterling work and has some really dedicated volunteers whom I met shortly after I was elected. I had the good fortune and pleasure of meeting Fonzie the cat, with whom I was quite taken.

We have heard voices in the Chamber calling for cats to be microchipped and for improvements in scanning procedures in the event of misadventure, so that cats
Patricia Gibson

5.39 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I know that if you were not in the Chair you would be speaking in the debate, but unfortunately you have to keep mum. I hope we have done enough, and that you feel our representations have fully covered the matter.

The issue has been covered well, with excellent speeches from my hon. Friends and Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), and a number of interventions, including from my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). I should expect nothing else, as a fellow cat lover. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is as expert on this subject as on everything else, also contributed, and there were interventions from the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson). I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for introducing the debate. He covered nearly all the issues, and what he did not cover was dealt with comprehensively by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), so I am left with an unenviable task: there is nothing for me to say because it has all been said. However, I want to give some personal witness, and to make an offer to the Minister.

I shall start with the offer. As has been said, the change in question is a small amendment to the Road Traffic Act 1988. I thank Battersea, Blue Cross and Cats Protection for giving us full briefings. The amendment would insert the word “cat” into the list of animals in section 170(8) of the 1988 Act. On behalf of the Opposition, I make the offer to the Government to help them in doing that. We will play no politics in any way, and will just get the amendment in place. I do not know whether the change could be made by statutory instrument. That would be good, but we are willing to work with the Government. It would be a minor change, but an important one, which is why we are here.

The petition was signed by more than 100,000 people. For those who have had the experiences we have heard about, it is emotional. To give personal witness, I have had three cats that were knocked down: Wolfie, Tiggy and Darcy. The first and third I had to go and find myself, and the second was found and taken to the local vet. All my cats are microchipped. We were able to bury Tiggy’s ashes in the garden after he was incinerated. It is a very emotional thing. At any one time I have five cats using the catflaps in my house, and I think there are more, as we are generous with the amount of food we put out. I am a cat lover. To declare an interest, I am secretary of the all-party parliamentary group on cats—it is good to see my fellow member, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran, here. The group is not necessarily very political, but in one respect the issue is political, because we are asking the Government to change the law. The change we seek would be limited, but I hope we can see that if nothing else, it will mean that people can say goodbye to their animal if it is knocked over and dies. Alternatively, if an animal is injured, hopefully something might be done to save its life.

I will go on to my hobby-horse—although not for long—about what happens when someone knocks an animal over. Accidents happen, but most are preventable. It is purely bad driving. People drive far too fast and therefore they are responsible. My view of driving has always been that it is a privilege rather than a right. This is nothing to do with cats, but it is pertinent. There are a number of commons in my constituency, and every year cows and horses are put on to them. The Minister will know the reason for that: it is the only way to keep the grass down and maintain the quality of biodiversity on very important commons. Every year 10 to 12 cattle or horses are knocked down. If someone hits one of those animals it will not do a lot of good to their vehicle, let alone to them, but it is because they have been driving too fast. The other day at dusk I was going at about 15 to 20 mph, because it was difficult to see. Two idiots went past me doing at least 40 mph or 50 mph. They would not have had a chance of avoiding a cow or horse. It makes you think, “What planet are these people on?” Sadly, the owner of such an animal has to deal with the carcass, as it is usually dead. It is even worse if it is dying, as a vet has to be got to euthanise the animal painlessly. I do not understand why people do not see that it is their responsibility if they knock over an animal. I would widen that view to include wild animals, given the number of badgers, foxes and so on that get killed. If someone hits an animal, it is dangerous to them as well as the animal. A lot of road accidents are caused by people driving far too fast and then hitting something.

We are talking about cats. Most are somebody’s pet and really important to that person. People know when they have hit something. I am sorry, but I do not understand why people do not see that it is their responsibility if they knock over an animal. I would widen that view to include wild animals, given the number of badgers, foxes and so on that get killed. If someone hits an animal, it is dangerous to them as well as the animal. A lot of road accidents are caused by people driving far too fast and then hitting something.
We recognise that people who have a pet have a responsibility, but so do others who, perhaps in a genuine accident, knock an animal over. They should report it and ensure that the person who has undergone that loss can at least know what happened to the animal. The worst thing possible is when someone’s animal has gone missing and they do not know for days, or sometimes weeks, what has happened. There have been good cases when animals have been lost for 10 years or more and suddenly returned, although those involve very strange circumstances.

I ask the Minister in good faith whether we can make the proposed change. It may not be easy, but I hope that it could be done through secondary legislation. If it is put on the agenda, we will genuinely support it. I make that commitment. There will not be any funny games: we will not suddenly say, “We’re going to include other animals.” Let us keep it to cats. That is what the petition is about. That is what people want us to do.

I hope that the Minister will say some good things. At the moment, the Government have not committed to microchipping, as they should, for the reasons I have given, or to including cats in the list of animals that should be reportable if knocked over. It is not much to ask. Most people are horrified if they knock an animal over. Sadly, there are those who seem rather indifferent, but they should not be driving anyway, in my opinion, because they are a danger. It could be a child—that is the repercussion. We know how dangerously some people drive, and I am always mystified by how few people are banned at any one time, given how many people I see when I cycle around who seem to drive incredibly badly, and to be indifferent. We have to deal with that issue, but the debate today is on a narrower issue and we are talking about cats. If someone knocks a cat over, they should have to report it. They should deal with it, because that is the right and humane thing to do.

5.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): Sir Roger, I know that you have a real and sincere interest in this subject, so it must be difficult for you to sit in the Chair during the debate, but we know that you are with us in spirit and want to improvements to be made in this area.

This has been an important and fascinating debate. I have learned more about the names of hon. Members’ cats than I ever thought I needed to; we have heard of Muffins, Misty and Porridge, but the name that takes the biscuit, and definitely the creativity award, is Bumblesnarf. It is good to hear that we have a good posse of cat lovers here among us.

It is true that cats are cherished members of our families, bringing joy to homes up and down the country, so I understand the distress caused when they become lost or injured, or get hit by a vehicle. We have heard some harrowing stories today about the sense of loss and the need for closure from the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who gave a fantastic speech to open the debate. The hon. Member—I should say the omnipresent Member—for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about how sad it is to see lost cat posters around and families trying to find their lost ones. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) spoke of the need to take care of the needs of families and not just the animals.

I thank the Petitions Committee for giving us the opportunity to discuss the important subject of cat welfare, specifically the scanning of cats killed in road accidents. As I said, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk did an excellent job opening the debate. I too will take the opportunity to thank Cats Protection, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, Blue Cross and the scores of other organisations that provide care for cats in all circumstances. These organisations, with the help of dedicated volunteers, do everything they can to reunite and rehome cats in need.

I commend the petitioners, Helena Abrahams and the others who have been so involved with the petition, as the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith) set out in his early interventions—or perhaps I should say contributions—to the debate, on drawing attention to the importance of the scanning of cats and through that the importance of cats being microchipped. Like many Members of this House, I am sure, I was particularly taken with the examples from the Gizmo’s Legacy team and the terrible accounts of cats killed in road accidents or lost for one reason or another. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) talked about the strong support for the petition in her constituency, and of course, north Manchester is not far from Macclesfield, where I live.

In many cases, owners have been unable to discover the fate of their beloved pet, and I understand that that serves to compound their distress. I agree that local councils and their contractors should do everything they can to identify the dead pets that they come across and, where possible, notify their owners so that they are not left in a sorry state of suspense—or worse.

The issues raised in the petition on cats and road vehicles have been the subject of several recent debates in this House, not least the debate in December brought by my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), whose work championing the cause of cats I wholeheartedly commend. He was also able to raise the subject at Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs oral questions on 28 March when the Secretary of State—a cat owner himself—said very clearly, in relation to my hon. Friend’s private Member’s Bill, which we have just discussed, “Bring it on.” Some people might call that making policy on the paw—

Dr Drew: Very good.

David Rutley: —but I agree with him. We must do all we can to improve cat welfare. The benefits of microchipping are well known; that is why I am planning to issue, when I can, a call for evidence on making cat microchipping compulsory. It will be an important step forward for much-loved cats across the country. I hope that the petitioners and hon. Members here—not least the hon. Member for the beautiful constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who made a compelling speech, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and the ever-present hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew)—will recognise it as an important step that we must take.

Over 107,000 people have signed the petition, which is a reminder of just how well loved our pets are in this country and of how important their welfare is to us. I
am pleased to explain the Government’s response to key aspects raised by the petition in more detail. While the petition itself does not specifically call for compulsory microchipping of cats, in common with many animal welfare charities we recognise that microchipping is the key method for identifying a pet and linking it to its owner. On that basis, the Government recommend that any owner should microchip their cat to increase the chances of its being reunited with them if it gets lost. That is also strongly advocated by Cats Protection and other welfare organisations.

In April 2018, we updated the statutory cat welfare code with the welcome collaboration of Cats Protection and others. The code now emphasises the benefits of microchipping cats specifically, and I encourage cat owners everywhere to consider the benefits of microchipping, which can be obtained for a modest fee. In fact, microchipping can even be obtained free of charge: Blue Cross provides free microchipping services at its animal rehoming centres, hospitals and clinics, and other welfare charities do likewise. The hon. Member for Battersea mentioned how often contributing to debates on animal welfare, talked about the Assisi Animal Sanctuary in Northern Ireland, where microchipping is provided free in certain circumstances. That is an important step.

Microchipping technology has greatly improved the chances of lost pets being reunited with their owners. For a relatively small, one-off cost of around £25—or, as I have mentioned, in some cases free of charge—people can have confidence that their beloved pet could be identified if it were lost. As the head of cattery at Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, Lindsey Quinlan, said, while the microchipping procedures are short and simple, “the return on their value is immeasurable.”

The Government’s statutory cat welfare code therefore promotes microchipping on two grounds. First, microchipping gives cats the best chance of being identified when lost; secondly, and just as important, a lost cat that has a microchip is more likely to receive prompt veterinary treatment. In this way, microchipping ensures that cats are protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease, as required by the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

I am grateful to Cats Protection for its support in developing the cat welfare code. DEFRA officials remain engaged and are seeking additional opportunities to promote the benefits of cat microchipping. I intend to work closely with Cats Protection on this, which is why I met the organisation in January to explore how the Government can support this important work. Working with Cats Protection and the wider sector through the Canine and Feline Sector Group, the Government will further strengthen and protect the welfare of cats in this country.

It is because of success stories such as those we have heard today that I am so delighted that the proportion of cats that are microchipped has grown in recent years. Recent figures from the People’s Dispensary for Sick Animals show that 68% of cats are now microchipped, up from 46% in 2011. However, a saddening statistic from a recent survey by Cats Protection suggests that the majority of the cats taken to their adoption centres in the past three years were not microchipped.

Compulsory dog microchipping was introduced in England through secondary legislation in 2016, due to the public safety risk posed by stray dogs as well as the propensity for dogs to stray or get lost. Compulsory microchipping for dogs has been a real success, with a recognised reduction in stray and lost pets as a result, as the Dog’s Trust’s annual “Stray Dog Survey” can attest. That does not mean that cat welfare is less important than dog welfare: as I mentioned, I plan to issue a call for evidence on compulsory cat microchipping as soon as possible and to encourage its uptake even further.

Turning to the key aspect of the petition, the question of compulsory scanning, I recognise how painful it is to lose a pet and not to know what has happened. Under the Road Traffic Act 1988, there is a requirement for drivers to stop and report accidents involving certain working animals, as has already been discussed, including cattle, horses and dogs. As I understand it, adding cats would require primary legislation, which would be the primary responsibility of the Department for Transport, which is the lead Department. However, the highway code requires drivers to report accidents involving any animal to the police, which can help many owners to be notified if their cats are killed on roads. The Blue Cross briefing for this debate clarifies the case for cats well.

“Dogs are required by law to be kept under control i.e. on a lead, therefore RTA scanning dogs can be investigated by the police to determine whether the owner has broken the law. As cats are legally allowed to roam freely, the owner is not committing an offence.”

There are additional responsibilities for dog owners:

“Legally speaking, dogs are also considered more likely to cause damage to a vehicle, requiring the driver to report the details to the police to establish liability.”

There are differences between cats and dogs and their behaviours. Nevertheless, I am pleased that it is established good practice for local authorities to scan any dog or cat found on the streets, so that the owner can be informed. That is often included as a requirement in street cleaning contracts, as it should be. However, I realise from the information provided by the petitioners and champions of Gizmo’s Legacy that some councils may not be following this established good practice, so I will take this up with the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak). We need to agree how to encourage local authorities to work together, to promote best practice in this area, and to ensure that dead cats are scanned so that owners can be informed of their tragic loss. I will also write to the Local Government Association to set out my concerns and to seek assurances on increased adherence to the guidance.

Cats Protection found, through freedom of information requests, that 80% of respondent councils in England scan animals involved in road traffic accidents for a microchip. However, given the debate we have had, I think it is important that we have a more consistent appreciation of and approach towards this. The right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd)—[Interruption]—I always get that one wrong; Hansard will correct it. However, what I do not get wrong is my recognition of her absolute commitment to cat welfare, and animal welfare more generally. I hope she realises that we want to take action in this area and make further progress.

Highways England has clear guidelines for contractors to follow when they find a deceased cat or dog on the national road network. This process is designed with owners in mind, giving them the best chance of being
informed that the incident has occurred, and is laid out in the network management manual. I am delighted to say that, in 2015, the necessary arrangements were made in all Highways England contracts for cats and dogs killed on the strategic road network to be collected and identified and for their owners to be contacted, including retrofitting the network management manual so that both cat and dog fatalities are collected and identified where possible. This area is the responsibility of the Department for Transport, so following the debate, I will work with the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), to explore what more the Government will do to ensure that guidance is being followed and what more can be done to help owners to know the fate of their beloved cats.

The hon. Member for Stroud makes a really important point: there is a huge responsibility on all of us who drive cars to consider our speed, because of the danger excessive speed poses not only to other humans but to animals. That point was incredibly well made. A centralised database was also mentioned. We already have a broadly unified microchipping system in the UK: there are 12 databases that meet the requirements of separate regulations in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and we already have working systems that operate together and talk to each other. We can explore that more, but I wanted to reassure colleagues that there are databases that serve the function that we are concerned about today.

I think we all agree that we have had a truly interesting debate. There is clearly considerable sadness when a family pet is killed, and I understand that owners simply want to know what has happened, so that they are not haunted by the possibility that a missing pet might one day return. It is right that we do all we can to encourage local authorities and others to scan the fallen pets that they find, and I will work with colleagues across Government to see what more we can do to promote and encourage good practice in this area.

**Dr Drew:** Can these changes be made by secondary legislation, or do we need to change that Act?

**David Rutley:** I made inquiries on the basis of the points that the hon. Gentleman and others made during the debate. I understand it would need to be through primary legislation; I made the point about adding cats to that Act.

Compulsory microchipping has also been highlighted, and I am taking the first steps forward on that with a call for evidence. I hope that hon. Members, despite their broader concerns, see that we are committed to taking action here. That will be a hugely important step forward, showing our intentions and sending a clear signal to local authorities that more needs to be done, not least in Scotland; if I was in the Scottish Government I would be trembling in my boots waiting for the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran to intervene and take further action there. However, we will take these actions forward, as I discussed.

The Government’s record on animal welfare is strong, and we will continue in that vein. We have a strong commitment to introduce increased maximum penalties for animal cruelty—I am working at the highest levels to move that further forward—and to look closely at the regulation of animal rescue and rehoming centres. As always in the debates we have had over recent months, I recognise the degree of cross-party support for the action being taken. It is because of that that we are able to take much of this legislation forward, and as the hon. Member for Stroud will agree, there is more to do.

We have already introduced stronger animal welfare controls on dog breeding and the sale of pets, including on the breeding and commercial sale of cats. The implementation of Lucy’s law, which bans the third-party sale of puppies and kittens, followed hot on the heels of Government support for Finn’s law, which protects service animals. The Government are committed to protecting and enhancing the welfare of animals, including cats, and we will continue to build on our progress in the coming months and years, hopefully on a cross-party basis like we have seen in recent months.

**6.5 pm**

**Martyn Day:** It has been a pleasure to take part in today’s debate. We have had a broad range of speakers from across the House, all showing a consensual approach—a very important point to emphasise. The request from the petitioners is for a simple legislative change, moving good practice on scanning into law, and it would be readily achievable. I welcome very much the comments that the Minister made and the commitment to move forward on microchipping, but I hope that he can make progress with the Minister responsible for local government on the scanning issue, too. I will be supporting my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) in pushing for Scotland to do that as well. There is a lot of positive work there.

Much has been said about microchipping. We heard from a number of organisations before today’s debate that of the cats being presented for rehoming, between 61% and 80% have not been chipped and many others have chip details that are out of date, so there is a lot of work that we need to do. The Minister’s comments will help us to move in the right direction, and I am very grateful for that; this really needs to be done.

I had a look at the DogLost site and saw a cat that was the spitting image of mine—albeit in a completely different area—so it would be easy to mistake one cat for another, but chipping removes the uncertainty. Blue Cross has given us details of a very positive case, and I have spoken about a lot of death today, so I would like to end on a positive note. Blue Cross says that Harry the cat was reunited with his family, after being missing for 10 years, because he had a microchip. That shows that it really does pay to get one.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved.*

That this House has considered e-petition 229004 relating to the identification of pets.

**6.7 pm**

*Sitting adjourned.*
International Humanitarian Law: Protecting Civilians in Conflict


9.30 am

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the continued importance of international humanitarian law in protecting civilians in conflict.

I am pleased to be here under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

I applied for this debate to mark the 70th anniversary of the 1949 Geneva conventions and the 20th anniversary of the United Nations Security Council first putting the protection of civilians in armed conflict on its agenda. The UK is the penholder at the Security Council for that mandate.

This debate allows us to convey appreciation for what has been and is being done to protect civilians by a wide range of actors that adhere to IHL—and to interpret its provisions to prioritise civilian protection in armed conflicts. It also provides us with an important opportunity to highlight the terrible price that civilians continue to pay in such conflicts the world over, and to suggest what should be done—what must be done—including by the UK Government, to alleviate their suffering.

IHL, as detailed in the 1949 Geneva conventions, sets out the specific protection that civilians are entitled to in armed conflict. IHL requires that parties to a conflict must distinguish at all times between combatants and civilians, and must direct attacks only against combatants and other military objects. Constant care must be taken for the kind of damage that is caused to civilians, and civilian infrastructure, property and livelihoods.

Despite the frameworks in place that are meant to protect civilians in armed conflict, and their further development and consolidation, including through the UN, civilians continue to suffer in armed conflict. According to the May briefing paper of the Overseas Development Institute, “Twenty years of protection of civilians at the UN Security Council”, a century ago civilians represented about 10% to 15% of total casualties in armed conflict; by the second world war that had risen to 50%; and by the 1990s civilians accounted for between 80% and 85% of such casualties, a trend that has unfortunately continued and possibly even intensified into this century. What is going wrong?

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Does she agree that as the UN penholder, the UK has significant leverage to pressurise countries such as Iran? Does she find it as chilling as I do that a former British military officer said that without US and UK assistance Saudi Arabia could not wage war on Yemen, yet four years on we still sell arms to the Saudis? Does she agree that that should stop?

Ann Clwyd: My hon. Friend obviously knows that I totally agree with her. In fact, I have joined in the argument on that particular point at various stages. I am a member of the Committees on Arms Export Controls, and that is an issue that we certainly continue to discuss.

Last month, the UN Secretary-General published his annual report on this subject. Why, as he set out, do “civilians continue to account for the vast majority of casualties in conflict”, and suffer from a variety of “short and long-term” impacts, “including forced displacement”, forcible “starvation…unlawful denial of humanitarian access; attacks on humanitarian and medical personnel, hospitals, and other medical facilities; sexual and gender-based violence; and intentional damage and unlawful destruction of civilian infrastructure, property and livelihoods”?  

The first thing to recognise is that armed conflict has changed in many ways, some of which have put civilians in greater danger, such as a massive increase in armed groups, including non-state armed actors. Research by the International Committee of the Red Cross shows that more armed groups have emerged in the past six years than in the previous 60 years. The proliferation of armed groups, backed by a variety of partners, allies and arms providers, often leads to a dilution of responsibility, fragmentation of chains of command, an unchecked flow of weapons, and longer and more intractable armed conflicts. All that results in greater danger to civilians. In addition, there is increased use of explosive weapons in urban areas, where populations are highly concentrated, and of so-called precision weaponry which is not precise enough.

I argue, however, that the changes in the way that armed conflicts are carried out do not mean that international humanitarian law is no longer fit for purpose, but that greater efforts must be made on three fronts: to adhere to IHL; to interpret it with civilian protection at the forefront; and to ensure that those responsible for serious violations are held to account. I cannot emphasise that last one enough. As one who collected evidence on Iraqi war crimes over a period of years, I know how important it is to document such crimes, because a time will come when it is possible to prosecute people for those crimes.
There continue to be too many instances of IHL not being respected and, worryingly, a determination at times to flout legal obligations to protect civilian populations.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing this debate and on her continuing interest in this matter over many years. Does she agree that one of the issues that come up frequently in the civilian population is particular to children? Some of those involved in conflict situations across the globe make forcible use of child soldiers. That is another transgression that must be highlighted and, I hope, resolved in the near future.

Ann Clwyd: I absolutely agree. To my knowledge we have raised that issue in this Parliament on many occasions, but we still have not come to any resolution apart from to condemn it.

We can all think of armed conflicts where armed parties have deliberately targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure to try to terrorise the population into submission, such as in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. Other hon. Members will no doubt highlight such shocking and despicable crimes in their contributions. It is important to keep in mind that it is not just non-state armed actors such as IS that carry out such crimes; IHL violations are committed equally by state and non-state armed actors. In addition, states always have the primary responsibility for protecting and meeting the basic needs of the civilian population.

The second failing putting civilians at greater risk is armed parties not prioritising the protection of civilians when implementing IHL. IHL leaves room for interpretation, particularly as regards its application, as while it sets out what armed actors are supposed to do, it does not necessarily detail how those responsibilities are to be exercised. I have visited armed conflicts in various parts of the world, but in Iraq in particular I remember talking to American military personnel and emphasising to them the importance of the Geneva conventions, but being met with a blank look because they had no idea what those were. That was a great difficulty when trying to persuade them to do something differently.

All armed actors must incorporate the protection of civilians into their core military missions and strategies and must actively seek to do everything possible during military operations to ensure civilians are properly protected. They should do that in recognition that success in armed conflict is not just about fighting to control territory but about the need to ensure the safety, dignity and wellbeing of affected populations, so they are not driven to support radical and extremist ideologies and groups, further fuelling conflict, and so they are better able to contribute to sustainable peace-building and reconciliation efforts when the armed conflict is over.

To do that requires a much better understanding by armed actors of how their operations could and have had an impact on civilians, as well as much more investment in more accurate recording of civilian casualties and tracking of civilian harm. I must highlight my concern about the Ministry of Defence’s ludicrous claim that there was only one civilian casualty resulting from its operations in Mosul and Raqqa in the fight against IS, despite the RAF dropping over 4,000 munitions, of which over 70% were 500 lb bombs, primarily in urban areas. That figure indicates the UK’s inability to accurately record civilian casualties and track civilian harm, and the lack of a baseline for assessing civilian harm.

The UK wants to be a global champion on civilian protection—obviously, we would all commend that. We will not, however, be credible on the international stage until and unless we are first accountable for our own operations. We therefore need a dedicated civilian casualty mitigation and investigation team with proper resources, to understand the impact of our operations and accurately record civilian harm. We need to appoint a dedicated military chief of staff to co-ordinate civil-military issues, and a civil-military focus in all major military headquarters with a centralised role in planning and decision making, to represent the interests of civilians.

In addition, the UK must do more to uphold our positive responsibilities under IHL and clarify the British position when assisting and working with partners, whether sharing intelligence and assets, providing weapons and materiel support or training and giving advice to local forces. We sometimes still fall short, so I urge the Government yet again to rethink our support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) mentioned, to ensure that any support provided is, at the very least, more explicitly conditional on a proactive policy of adherence to civilian protection.

More generally, the Government should adopt a dedicated process of operational end-use monitoring—again, in the Committees on Arms Export Controls we have had in-depth discussions about end-use monitoring, taking examples from other countries, to analyse the operational outcomes of UK assistance, work with partners through training and education to build a foundation for civilian protection before conflict begins, and build capacity in all relevant areas, including security sector reform, neutrality of humanitarian actors and targeting. I emphasise the need for more vigilance in preserving the space for, and enabling the capacity of, neutral dedicated humanitarian actors, who work hard in extremely difficult circumstances to fill the gaps in civilian protection. We must ensure that their neutrality is not repeatedly compromised, as that opens them up to attacks; counter-terrorism measures must not risk criminalising their essential activities; their funding must remain adequate and not be tied to unreasonable or overly bureaucratic conditions; and they and their facilities must not be targeted.

Last but not least, we need to do more to address the accountability crisis. Impunity for serious IHL violations simply fuels further violations and puts civilians at even greater risk. The UK needs to support referrals to the International Criminal Court, champion ad hoc fact-finding mechanisms—including commissions of inquiry and the International Humanitarian Fact-Finding Commission—and the establishment of local courts and transitional justice mechanisms, and it must consider adopting targeted measures against those who commit such atrocities.

All Governments need to step up their efforts to protect civilians in armed conflict and recognise and adopt best practice, such as that of NATO, which is making significant efforts to make civilian protection a
key element of operational planning. That is essential if we are to see a dramatic reduction in civilian casualties and harm in the next decades.

For the UK really to make its mark on the global stage, I urge the Government not only to take the action I have called for, but to ensure the current review of its protection of civilians strategy is the beginning of a longer term process to adopt a cross-departmental strategy and whole of Government approach, so the protection of civilians is formalised as a top-line priority in UK operations and UK assistance to partners. The Government should also appoint a dedicated ambassador to champion protection of civilians on the global stage, to better utilise the UK’s position as chair of the informal expert group on protection of civilians and to work with the broadest possible range of states and relevant actors, as well as increase our influence in the UN, including through increased support and involvement with peacekeeping operations, UN missions and relevant UN agencies, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Now more than ever, armed conflicts in other parts of the world can no longer be, to paraphrase slightly, “quarrels in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing. We need to care about how civilians are affected by armed conflicts, because the horrific violations carried out against them are a stain on all humanity, and their effects are long lasting and widespread.

John Howell: (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, and a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). I have agreed with much of her speech, and I will comment on some of the things she said.

As the right hon. Lady pointed out, we are trying to deal with the effect of the Geneva convention and the protocols aimed at protecting civilians in conflict, but I was fascinated to read a report by the International Committee of the Red Cross that seemed to take that one stage further. I was actually quite shocked by the report, but it may reflect the reality of the situation. It stated that there is a level of harm to civilians that is acceptable. It set that out by reference to three key principles, including proportionality and precaution, but the idea was that there is a level of civilian casualties that is, as the report described it, acceptable “collateral damage.”

The idea that a civilian building can have a military use as well as a civilian use brings me to my first point, which is related to the situation in Gaza. What do Israeli forces do when Hamas deliberately sets up its rockets in hospitals and schools? Do they simply turn away and do nothing, or do they accept, following the doctrine I have just set out, that they can take retaliatory action, in full knowledge that there will be collateral damage—that real people will be killed? That is the first issue, which I raise to show that this whole business is not as simple as it should be.

The second area I want to deal with is Africa. In the past 20 years, there have been armed conflicts in Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Djibouti, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Liberia, Libya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda—that is probably not an exhaustive list—but where are the African participants in the IHL debate, and where are the African participants at the UN trying to take this forward?

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is making a lot of sense, especially in what he says about collateral damage. War is war. Unfortunately, a lot of innocent people are caught up in it. Surely, the message must be that the sanctions that are applied to countries that carry it out need to be enforced. Rather than condemning, we should do something about it.

John Howell: I agree. The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, which I may come to if I get that far in my speech.

Between 1990 and 2007, 88% of conflict deaths internationally happened in Africa. That may have changed subsequently, with a rise in the middle east, but it is significant that 88% of deaths happened in a continent that does not really participate in the IHL debate. Of course, that is mixed up with genocide—I think Rwanda was in that list of countries, and of course we saw a massive genocide there—but the idea of genocide developed at the same time as the fourth Geneva convention, so there is an opportunity to try to revise IHL to incorporate that and to recognise that things have developed in parallel over the years.

On the middle east, the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley mentioned Yemen. We debated Yemen recently in the main Chamber, so I will not cover it now, except to reinforce the points she made. However, I do not blame the Saudis alone; Iran has a lot to answer for with respect to its funding of the Houthis. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said “there are no good people in this conflict.”—[Official Report, 23 May 2019; Vol. 660, c. 849.]

That is very true.

The last area I want to comment on is Europe. Europe is not exempt from violations of IHL. In my intervention on the right hon. Lady, I mentioned a prime example of defiance of IHL in the Russian-occupied area of Ukraine. That needs to be stated time and again. We in the Council of Europe need assistance from the Foreign Office so we can take a stand against the Russians and ensure, at the very least, that they give back the Ukrainian sailors they took. In the occupied bits of Ukraine, the Russians have attacked the Donets water filtration system, as I mentioned, which goes against everything the right hon. Lady said about trying to protect that for the benefit of individuals, and they have attacked 42 schools. Those were not schools where the Ukrainians were hiding rockets. This is not a Gaza situation. That was a deliberate attack on 42 schools, which we need to acknowledge.

What do we do about all this? First, we need to encourage more work by academics across Africa. I am aware that there is some activity in South Africa, but we need to encourage more Africans to carry out research and projects, which the Department for International Development may need to help fund. Above all, we need to ensure that the Geneva convention is enforceable. At the moment, it is characterised by a huge amount of non-compliance. We sit back and cross our arms and say how terrible that all is, but we do very little about it. We need to do something about it if we are to stop it happening.
Lastly, we need to boost the amount of UN peacekeeping. Peacekeeping plays a vital role, and having peacekeepers on the ground is a good way of tackling this problem. I would love to see us argue for more peacekeeping, throughout the world, wherever we can play our part.

9.59 am

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Bone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) on initiating this debate. As Members will know, she chairs the all-party human rights group, and I am vice-chair of the all-party group on drones. We made a joint bid to the Backbench Business Committee, and I am pleased that we secured this debate.

Before coming here this morning I dropped in on Richard Ratcliffe. I recommend that people do that; he is outside the Iranian embassy, which did a good job of suddenly deciding its front needed painting and that it therefore needed some screens, which obstructed Richard Ratcliffe, or the view of him. I am pleased the police were not willing to move him on, which is apparently what the Iranians asked them to do. I encourage Members to visit him. In some respects, he and his wife are civilian casualties of an unofficial—well, there is not exactly a conflict or war between the UK and Iran, but there are certainly casualties.

It is right to debate this topic in the year of the 70th anniversary of the fourth Geneva convention on the protection of civilian persons in time of war. This year also marks the 20th anniversary of the protection of civilians agenda at the UN Security Council, for which the UK is currently penholder.

The protection of civilians must be a priority, and the right hon. Lady set out many reasons why. Save the Children says at least 420 million children globally are now living in areas affected by conflict, which is more than ever. That has an impact across the board. Before coming here this morning I met an organisation that before coming here this morning I met an organisation that had just come from a region where there was a massive number of civilians affected by conflict. It is estimated that 85% of war casualties are civilians, it is clear that there are perhaps risks around whether we might be—either actively or at a distance—involved in matters that affect IHL. For example, the current US campaign in Yemen is separate from the conflict, but we must consider the use of drones. The same is true in places such as Pakistan and Somalia. The all-party group on drones set up an inquiry into the use of drones, and there are concerns about British involvement in US strikes in Yemen. It has been reported that there has been UK assistance with intelligence sharing, information triangulation and the tracking of informants, via the base in Yorkshire.

The German High Court recently found that at least some of the US drone strikes are unlawful and that Germany has an obligation to protect the Yemeni plaintiffs’ right to life. The German Government also have a legal obligation to establish a mechanism to ensure that any assistance to the US adheres to IHL. I therefore hope that, when the Minister responds to the debate, he will say whether the UK Government have looked at the German High Court ruling on the US strikes and at whether they need to develop a policy or position on that. Are the Government comfortable that we could not be in the same position, given our role in Yemen?

I have three precise asks for the Minister. First, will the Government assure Members that they have considered the German case and assessed its legal implications for the UK? Secondly, as part of the forthcoming UK protection of civilians strategy, will there be a clear mandate and commitment to the protection of civilians, and specific guidance on the use of explosive weapons in urban areas and in partnerships? Finally, through our position as a penholder on civil protection at the UN, we have a unique opportunity to lead a global recommitment to civilian protection in UN forums—I know that is something to which the Minister would wish to commit.

We have a crisis of great magnitude on our hands. When up to 85% of war casualties are civilians, it is clear that the laws of war—distinction, proportionality, necessity and precaution—are being disregarded on a large scale. The time to act is now.
Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak for the first time under your benign sway, Mr Bone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) on securing the debate and on her wonderful speech. There are many issues that are before us today where there is a political division, but I submit that on humanitarian issues, the House of Commons ought to be absolutely united on what the ground rules are. Today gives us an opportunity to honour and thank those who so often put their lives in harm’s way when trying to help in the humanitarian space that we are discussing.

It is worth remembering that before the second world war, there was no specific international legal norm that aimed to protect civilians in conflicts. Philippe Sands’s outstanding book “East West Street”, which was published last year, sets out clearly the way in which history was changed after that. The horrors experienced by civilians all over the world during that war prompted the international community to adopt, in 1949, the fourth Geneva convention on the protection of civilian persons in time of war.

My submission is that today, 70 years on, our generation is facing its own crisis of civilian protection. Gareth Evans at the United Nations made great progress on the responsibility to protect—R2P—in the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda and, indeed, events in Europe. My submission today is that the responsibility to protect remains an absolutely critical international doctrine, but that it is a skeleton, and there is far too little flesh on the bones of R2P and what it means to protect civilians.

Recently, in what was widely regarded as ethnic cleansing, we saw the appalling events that took place for the Rohingya in Rakhine state. The Minister, who we are glad to see in his place, has taken a leadership role in trying to protect the people caught up in that. Threats to civilians are worsening and becoming more complex, more urban and more protracted, but perhaps the major challenge facing civilian protection today is the rise in deliberate identity-based targeting of civilian populations, not as a by-product of war but as a distinct objective. Those crimes and atrocities are abhorrent in their own right, and they can also lead to the outbreak of armed conflicts. The eight-year crisis in Syria, for example, was propelled by the deliberate perpetration of atrocities by the state, leading to protracted armed conflict and a hellish cycle of intentional violence against civilian groups by different perpetrators.

Many hon. Members will have seen the work being done by Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, a distinguished former military officer. I had the opportunity to hear from him today, just after his return from the middle east where he advises the Idlib Health Directorate of the most up-to-date circumstances in Syria and particularly Idlib. He says this:

“Nearly 700 civilians killed this year and 500,000” internally displaced people

“In Idlib many without homes living in the open and off scraps and evidence of another chemical attack. There have been 29 attacks on hospitals by Russian and Syrian aircraft with many now out of commission. A handful of hospitals and doctors are now trying to care for 3 million civilians...Because we have done nothing to prevent this atrocity the crimes against humanity of attacking hospitals and the use of chemical weapons, this will haunt us much longer than the Syrian conflict. People in Idlib, who I speak to on a regular basis, feel completely let down by the West—we might be prepared to act against Iran for attacking an oil tanker but nothing to help the humanitarian disaster in Idlib?”

I submit that we should be seeking to name and shame the aircraft attacking those hospitals, and provide evidence to the International Criminal Court for future prosecutions. As the Minister knows, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has sought to protect evidence of breaches of international humanitarian law in Syria. The advent of mobile phone technology means that we can collect evidence of the atrocities. In Khartoum, Sudan, mobile phone pictures have been taken of individual soldiers committing atrocities, breaking international humanitarian law. I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us that in Syria, where there is a long-standing FCO operation, and in Khartoum, Sudan, we are collecting that evidence and we will make sure that it is used to bring international justice to those who have perpetrated those atrocities.

On that point, I remind the Minister that General Bashir, currently in jail in Khartoum, has been for many years the subject of an indictment through the International Criminal Court. We expect the British Government to do everything in their power to ensure that that warrant is executed.

Tom Brake: With regard to Syria, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the UK Government should also be keeping records of the Russians involved, so that they too may be held to account?

Mr Mitchell: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman; he is quite right, and the Minister will have noticed what he said.

Of today’s major and emerging crises, the vast majority—Syria, Yemen, Libya, Myanmar, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, Venezuela and Xinjiang—are driven, at least in part, by the deliberate violent targeting of civilian groups by political elites. Just as the decision was taken 70 years ago, in recognition that modern war was changing, to create a convention that aimed to protect civilians during the time of war, so we must admit today that more is needed.

Mr Bone, you will have heard the Queen’s wonderful words in her toast at the banquet for President Trump. She said this:

“After the shared sacrifices of the Second World War, Britain and the United States worked with other allies to build an assembly of international institutions, to ensure that the horrors of conflict would never be repeated. While the world has changed, we are forever mindful of the original purpose of these structures: nations working together to safeguard a hard won peace.”

It is incredibly important to support international structures, particularly the UN—I draw the Minister’s attention to the comments in the House yesterday on the urgent question on Iran—and to use international bodies that were built up in the aftermath of the second world war.

The Government’s ongoing review of the UK’s protection of civilians strategy provides a welcome opportunity to ensure that British policy is fit for the challenges of modern conflict. It is, as the Minister will appreciate, an opportunity to ensure that any new strategy is in line with the substantial progress made in related areas since the previous strategy was published by the coalition Government in 2010 and last reviewed in 2012—namely, the UK’s growing commitment to the prevention of mass atrocities.
Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that in developing the strategy, it is important that the UK shows clear leadership—for example, by appointing an ambassador in that area to deliver Britain’s message to the UN and globally about the protection of civilians?

Mr Mitchell: That is true. Of course, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Britain has a highly effective ambassador who can do that work.

Introducing a concept of “preventing while protecting” into national frameworks of civilian protection would raise the ambition from not targeting civilians to an active commitment to save lives. Any modern protection of civilians framework should prioritise the capacity to assess emerging and long-term risks of atrocities, including horizon scanning, the mapping of actors and interests, and contingency planning.

Any commitment to protect civilians from armed conflict and atrocities must be consistent. I have spoken out on many occasions against what is happening in Yemen and the role of the British Government, which I think is not in the right place. I greatly welcome the Foreign Secretary’s change of emphasis on Yemen, and the fact that his first act as Foreign Secretary was to go to both Tehran and Riyadh to try and bring that appalling conflict to a close. Nevertheless, the British Government are complicit in what is happening in Yemen, and we await the judgment of the Court of Appeal—probably on Thursday—on the issue of arms sales by Britain to Saudi Arabia.

I have never called for an arms embargo, because I understand that Saudi Arabia is a country surrounded by enemies, with the wealth to purchase arms, and a British arms embargo will not protect the children who suffer from the aerial bombardment of Yemen by the Saudi air force—at least, not any time in the near future. However, the way in which Saudi Arabia has pursued its policy against Yemen has united huge numbers of us against what is effectively the bombardment and blockade of a nation, which is causing a medieval famine, with the break-up of infrastructure leading to the prevalence of diseases that we have not seen in Europe for generations. Of course, that is radicalising thousands of young Yemenis, who know from where that appalling destruction is coming.

It was a low point in a low war when, last year, we saw that school bus hit by coalition bombs. Some 40 children were murdered, and we saw the pictures of them in their UN blue smocks and satchels. I stood, some time ago now, in the funeral parlour bombed—during a funeral ceremony—by coalition aircraft; 180 people were killed, with the plane coming around again for a second attack. That was a breach of international humanitarian law, and I hope the pilot responsible for that will be held to account in the same way as the others I have mentioned.

While the UK can and must play a role through all its internationally facing Departments to help prevent these dreadful crimes and innocent loss of life, we can and must uphold the same values here at home. The UK must never be a haven for those who commit atrocities, war crimes and genocide. We must uphold our responsibilities to victims and prosecute subjects who reach our shores. In that context, I wish to draw the House’s attention to the fact that five alleged Rwandan genocidaires remain free, wandering around the British Isles, three at least claiming British benefits. They have not been held to account for the alleged crimes that they committed and perpetrated during the Rwandan genocide. Britain’s judicial system, which of course is entirely separate from politics, declined to extradite those five back to Rwanda, where they could have faced justice along with hundreds of thousands of others. There is therefore an onus on the British judicial system—our laws—to ensure that those people are held to account in this country if they are not to be extradited.

I draw that to the Minister’s attention. It is not a direct Foreign Office matter, but I can tell him this: it is not the Rwandan system of justice that is in the dock today, but the British system of justice, for not delivering justice to the many people in Rwanda who allegedly suffered at the hands of those five genocidares. I hope it will not be too long before the British judicial and legal system holds them to proper account, for their sakes, as well as for those in Rwanda who allegedly suffered at their hands.

10.22 am

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Bone. I thank the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) for securing this debate. I associate myself with the words of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who gave a clear and precise overview of the dreadful conflict in Yemen and the impact on civilians, and with those of the right hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), who spoke about Ukraine and the Russian state’s interference in and occupation of Donbass.

An example of how we need to review IHL in the context of the changing nature of warfare is the targeting of the infrastructure of the Estonian state through cyber-warfare in 2007. Government institutions were unable to deliver civilian—public—services after that direct attack on the civilian population. However, I do not think that could happen today, given that Estonians are leaders in the field of cyber-warfare.

It is important to commemorate and remember those who brought about the fourth Geneva convention. We should be thankful that we are able to be here today to discuss its 70th anniversary and the work that was done in the light of the horrors of the second world war. It is clear that IHL is a solid and extensive legal framework for protecting civilians in conflict. Nevertheless, the protection it affords is in many ways inherently qualified. It is clear from the evidence that the failure is due not to the law itself, but to the persistent failure to comply with those obligations. IHL has proven to be a practical, durable and adaptable framework for providing passive protection for civilians in the midst of conflict, but that inherent qualification means that we must review it in the light of changing technologies and methods of warfare.

There have been elements of failure. The genocide in Srebrenica in 1995 and the genocide of the Tutsis in 1994 made it clear that we need to ask ourselves consistently how valuable and effective the framework is. In the light of the increase in civilian casualties, which was well documented by the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley,
we must redouble our efforts proactively to protect civilians in a range of spheres. I hope the Minister will say something about that later. Civilians must be protected now, not just in the air war but in the cyber-sphere. I am a member of the Defence Committee, and I note that NATO has thankfully recognised the importance of making civilian protection a key element of operational planning, and has published a protection of civilians strategy.

I have three questions for the Minister. First, although the UK seems to have been slow in following NATO’s moves on the protection of civilians in operational planning, will he assure Members that the Government are moving in the same direction as our NATO allies? If he is unable to furnish us with that answer, will he ask the Ministry of Defence to write to Members?

Secondly, do the Government recognise that investment is required to respond to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of different groups—specifically, women, children, the disabled and the elderly? Finally, does the Minister agree that the continued abuse of the Security Council veto undermines not just IHL but the rule of international law itself?

10.26 am

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab):
It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Bone. I thank the Members who brought this fundamentally important issue to the Chamber. I have known the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) since I came to this place in 2001, and she has done phenomenally well in holding our consciences to account. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who represents the royal borough of Sutton Coldfield—

Mr Mitchell: Town.

Mr Mahmood: The royal town of Sutton Coldfield—it is close to Birmingham; that is as far as I will go. The right hon. Gentleman certainly made a great contribution during his tenure as Secretary of State for International Development. The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) was the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for international development from 2002, and has done great work since then, particularly as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on drones.

Today, we are celebrating the Geneva convention, which was created almost 70 years ago. It was a skilful piece of drafting of international law that sought to move forward from the severity of what we had suffered during the two world wars. We decided to bring nations together to look at how we could continue to operate. It was adopted by the United Nations Security Council, and everybody welcomed that.

I am not sure people realised when it was put together 70 years ago how much worse the situation would become. The implementation of that international law was a great achievement, but who knew how tragic things would become in the past 50 years? Certainly, since the start of the century, that great legislation has been set aside and people have suffered. We must address that, which is important. It is the purpose of the Geneva convention to resolve those things, and we have not done enough to address some of them. There are some issues that Save the Children want to encourage the...
Government to look at, to see how they can be dealt with. They include the importance of child-specific expertise in peace support and military operations. How can we cater for that, and record those issues? Several Members have referred to committing to avoiding the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, which is another key thing we should continue to push for when we take sides and support military action. Members have also mentioned what Save the Children says about creating civilian harm tracking procedures, and we should strongly focus on that.

As for improving and championing accountability for violation of children’s rights, it is difficult for us to get full accountability and a full assessment of what happens on the ground. However, as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield said, where there are people—in particular the people in question from Rwanda—who have committed genocide and have still not been held accountable, and who are still walking around in the United Kingdom, never mind anywhere else, we should be looking to hold them to account, and thinking about how to do that.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman will obviously want to make it clear that those are allegations, but that it is in the interest of those who are accused, as well as everyone else, that they should have their day in court so that justice can take its course.

Mr Mahmood: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, who makes a valid point. That was perhaps a slip of my tongue, which I should clarify, and I thank him for correcting me.

Save the Children also advocates a commitment to share expertise. In a conflict area we must be able to address some of the issues it has raised.

I declare an interest as I begin the next section of my remarks, about Kashmir—a region that has not been mentioned by many speakers in the debate—and human rights. The situation there has continued for 70 years, over the period we have been considering. Protection is given by the Indian state to the military and it cannot be held accountable in a court of law within the civil structure of India. Abuses happen day in, day out, and mass graves have been found. Torture is commonplace—including of children, women and people with disabilities. We need an open arena where the issues can be discussed, rather than just pointing fingers. However, people must be held accountable. The country that purports to be the largest democracy in the world should be held to account for the way it treats its people. My constituents from Punjab in India raise significant issues in that respect and we should be keen for development and progress on those issues.

It is also important to reiterate the role of the United Nations. The hon. Member for Henley mentioned peacekeepers in relation to the United Nations, and it is important that we consider that, but the United Nations should be not just a peacekeeper, but a peacemaker.

Part of the failure of the United Nations is due to the partisan issues that have arisen in the Security Council and the inability to get resolutions through. There should be a far greater presence of the United Nations in these conflict areas, to avoid further escalation of violence there. That would certainly help. There has been too much political side-taking by different nations and countries—again, I point to where that has happened in the Security Council—but, if the purposes of the United Nations are to be fulfilled, the organisation must be fit for purpose. Over the 19 years of this century, at least, we have seen huge conflicts escalate.

We, as countries and nations, must also understand that when we put arms into an arena, when we do not like someone and want to support the fighters against them, we add additional weaponry to that arena. We have no guarantee who gets hold of that weaponry and no say over what they will do with it. It is important to recognise that fact in terms of Syria. The US needs to learn some lessons on this and perhaps we, in some instances, need to learn lessons on it: if we are prepared to put more arms into those conflict areas, they will get used, and we cannot be guarantors of who gets to use them and how things move forward.

I have asked the Minister a lot of the questions that Save the Children has raised and other hon. Members have raised. In addition, we need to understand that, after 70 years of this great legislation that we are here to support, it would be far better for countries and nations to have more jaw-jaw and less war-war.

10.41 am

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am grateful, as I am sure we all are, to the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) for securing this debate, and to all other right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I shall try, in the course of a slightly longer speech, to respond to all the points raised.

As the right hon. Lady said, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) reiterated, this year marks the 70th anniversary of the Geneva conventions, which were designed, after the terror and the horror of the second world war, to serve as a founding pillar of what we know today as international humanitarian law. They represent a clear affirmation that the principles of international humanitarian law are both neutral and universally recognised.

Today’s motion rightly highlights the central place of IHL in international efforts to protect civilians affected by conflict in our world today. There is little doubt that, as conflicts become increasingly complex, IHL will become ever more important and will expand as a body of law. Its underlying principles—the distinction between civilians, those hors de combat and combatants; the principle of necessity and the prohibition on the infliction of unnecessary suffering; the principle of proportionality; the observance of precautions in attack; and the principle of humanity—are all clear and unambiguous.

However, as many speakers have rightly pointed out, the nature of conflict is changing. Too often, the distinction between combatants and civilians, between a target that is legitimate and one that is not, has become blurred. Too often, civilians, including aid workers, are deliberately targeted. In almost all modern wars, it is not the combatants who suffer most, but the civilians. Indeed, as a number of hon. Members brought up, current patterns of violent conflict worldwide show that 90% of all casualties today are civilian. As urbanisation increases, the International Committee of the Red Cross has reported that there are “some 50 million people worldwide affected by armed conflict in cities.”
The changing nature of conflict presents challenges for states such as the United Kingdom and our allies, who seek to provide humanitarian assistance and make a positive contribution to preserving international peace and security, and to ending conflict, including, where necessary, through military action. The UK Government are committed to facing those challenges, because we all take very seriously our commitments to international humanitarian law and to the protection of civilians in our operations and in the humanitarian contexts where we provide assistance.

Adherence to IHL is a paramount consideration in our approach to conflict, and when we encounter potential violations, we strongly support engaging the appropriate mechanisms to deal with them, while ensuring that we have a domestic legal framework that makes certain that our armed forces are fully accountable. A number of hon. Members will recognise that the Ministry of Defence has an important part to play in some of the questions I will come to in a moment or two, and those really relate to that Government Department.

The UK military is at pains to operate to the highest standards. It closely monitors and verifies the impact of our military activity. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield rightly pointed out that the increased use of social media provides a mechanism for not only the long-term maintenance of evidence, but, on a day-to-day basis, a recognition of where military or other individuals have gone beyond what is acceptable.

The protection of civilians is and will remain a central pillar of the UK’s approach to our humanitarian efforts and to managing conflict. It has been pointed out that we have played a leading role in the UN Security Council over 20 years in developing that international approach. If I might respond to what my hon. Friend for Henley (John Howell) said earlier, South Africa is currently the African nation on the Security Council, but Tunisia will join, and I very much hope it will play an important part in this, given the recent conflicts that have taken place there.

My hon. Friend will perhaps be aware that the Asian nations currently on the Security Council—Indonesia and Vietnam—have made questions around peacekeeping and the rights of combatants and civilians in war an important part of what they hope to achieve. I hope we will work together with those countries and others in the UN Security Council to raise the profile of many of those issues during the next two years and beyond.

To coincide with the 20th anniversary of the first resolution on this issue, we are undertaking a review of our approach to the protection of civilians in armed conflict, to ensure that it is fit for purpose in the context of modern conflicts and that it addresses all civilians, including children and other particularly vulnerable people, which goes to the heart of the point made by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire—

**Martin Docherty-Hughes:** West.

**Mark Field:** I think the hon. Gentleman has a supporter in the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake).

The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire made a good point about recognising issues around disability, children and other groups. We do not want simply to look upon civilians as a single group, and part of what we are trying to achieve here is focused on what I think is a public demand on all these matters.

Our approach to the review embraces a cross-Whitehall consultation, as proposed by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield, as well as consultations with civil society—we have made reference to Save the Children, but a number of other charities will play an important part in the review. When completed, we hope it will contain an agreed Government-wide position that will take account of all Government Departments.

To demonstrate what that means in practice, I will focus on three main areas: our international engagement, our work on international peacekeeping, and our domestic activity to promote and uphold international humanitarian law. On the international stage, as a number of hon. Members have pointed out, our permanent seat on the UN Security Council bestows on us an important responsibility to protect civilians and uphold IHL, wherever and wherever international peace and security are under threat. We have not shied away from those responsibilities.

**John Howell:** In terms of the review, is the Minister aware that the World Bank has changed from a system of trying to put out today’s fires to one of trying to identify what fires will occur tomorrow and to prevent them? Should we not adopt something similar for the UN?

**Mark Field:** To an extent, I agree. Obviously, predictions of the future are always fraught with difficulty; a number of the conflicts I am going to touch on now might have been predictable 10 or 15 years ago, but others have arisen unexpectedly. We need a flexible system, but there is some sense in having that forward-looking approach at the UN as well as at the World Bank.

In Iraq, the UK has been at the forefront of efforts to ensure accountability for the crimes committed by Daesh, the so-called Islamic State. Through a Security Council resolution adopted in 2017, we helped to establish a UN investigative team to support the Iraqi Government in the collection, preservation and storage of evidence linked to Daesh crimes.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield pointed out on Syria, we co-sponsored the UN General Assembly resolution in December 2016 that established the international impartial and independent mechanism for Syria, which was designed to deliver accountability for horrific atrocities, including the deliberate targeting of civilians and the use of chemical weapons.

On Myanmar, the UK was the penholder at the UN Security Council that co-sponsored the creation of the UN fact-finding mission, which concluded that ethnic cleansing had been carried out against the Rohingya by the Myanmar military and could amount to genocide. We worked in the UN Human Rights Council to establish a unique investigative mechanism to collect and preserve evidence of atrocities for future prosecutions, recognising—tragically, I am afraid, in certain cases—that those who need to be brought to account will possibly remain in
office for many years to come. None the less, we have a
reliable and legally watertight mechanism to hold them
to account. I would like to think that our country has
played a leadership role, but, of course, we do not do
this alone; we work with like-minded partners to address
conflict situations, such as in Sudan, Yemen, Libya and
the horn of Africa.

Let me come on to some of the contributions made in
the debate. Risks around serious or major violations of
international humanitarian law, or abuse of human rights,
are a key part of our assessment against the IHL
consolidation criteria. In relation to arms exports, a
licence will not be issued to any country if so to do
would be inconsistent with any provision of the mandatory
criteria, including where we assess that there is a clear
risk that arms might be used in the commission of a
serious violation of IHL. The situation is kept under
careful and continual review. We examine every application
rigorously, on a case-by-case basis. That applies in
Yemen, with Saudi Arabia, but also in many other
walks. The test is designed to be forward looking. A
licence will not be issued to Saudi Arabia or any other
country if to do so would be inconsistent with any
provision of the consolidated EU or national arms
export licensing criteria.

Ann Clwyd: On arms exports, unless there is proper
end-use management—which we do not do—we cannot
be confident in the assertions that the Minister makes.

Mark Field: I was coming on to that very point. I
know it is one that the right hon. Lady made earlier.

Mr Mitchell: While the Minister is collecting points
to come on to, does he agree that it is not a good idea
for investigations into breaches of international
humanitarian law to be undertaken by one of the
parties to the conflict, namely Saudi Arabia? Is it not
better to agree that, under UN auspices, any such
inquiries should be neutral? Otherwise, it is akin to a
student marking their own homework.

Mark Field: I wish I had homework that I could mark
these days—it is more my children’s homework that I
have to do that with now. My right hon. Friend makes a
valid point. Above all, the issue is less to do with
whether that is desirable, and more about the credibility
in the international community of such outcomes. He
makes a fair point.

To return to the point made by the right hon. Member
for Cynon Valley, the operational end-use monitoring
and the establishment of a dedicated civilian casualty
mitigation and investigation team are an MOD lead. I
will ensure that her speech is passed to my friends over
in that Department, although I am sure they are well
aware of the concerns raised here today. The issue
relates to operations in the field and is therefore an
MOD matter. From our side, we are trying to improve
data collection, as I referred to, in other parts of the
world. We feel that that may have an important part of
play. There is project underway with the University of
Manchester looking at many of these related issues,
and I hope the right hon. Lady will be able to feed into
that.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell),
who is no longer in his place, made a point about child
soldiers. The UK is firmly committed to ending the
recruitment and use of child soldiers and to the protection
of all children affected by armed conflict. We are an
active member of the United Nations Security Council
working group on children and armed conflict. I believe
it will be an important part of the Indonesian presidency
next year that they want to address this terrible issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley talked about
Africa, and I have discussed the Security Council issues
a little. Uganda, Senegal and Ghana—I am not sure
they are all on his hit list, and I have put them in reverse
alphabetical order—are working with the US and other
countries, looking at positive reform of the International
Criminal Court. We would obviously like to see more
activity in Africa, given the prevalence of concerns that
have arisen from that part of the world, as my hon.
Friend rightly pointed out.

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington
made an important point about drones, their legality
and the implications of the German High Court ruling.
The MOD leads on this, but we will look closely at that
German High Court ruling. Upholding IHL is already
integral to any assistance that we would provide to
other states. This matter is under review at the moment
through the MOD.

Tom Brake: On that point, I and other Members here
today would like something in writing from the Minister,
once those discussions have been completed.

Mark Field: I am happy to undertake to do that.

I want to talk about the challenges that our UN
peacekeepers face. In today’s modern conflicts, missions
are facing increasing asymmetric and physical threats,
and they can be targets themselves. The importance
of finding political solutions remains paramount. We are
committed to improvements in peacekeeping. We will
continue to call for support to improve the three Ps of
peacekeeping—planning, pledges and performance—as
we, along with 63 nations, set out in a communiqué at
the 2016 UN peacekeeping Defence ministerial meeting
in London.

I realise that time is getting tight, and if there are
matters that I have not been able to bring up, I will
respond in writing. I will make sure my team looks
through the Hansard transcript.

A key approach is that there should be no impunity.
Primary responsibility for investigation and prosecution
of the most serious international crimes rests with
states themselves, but where those states are unable or
unwilling to fulfil their responsibilities, other justice
mechanisms, such as the International Criminal Court,
have an important role to play. The UK remains one of
the foremost contributors to the ICC, and we will work
to ensure that the court undergoes the necessary reforms
to enable it to fulfil its mandate as the court of last
resort, as intended under the Rome statute. We have
been strong advocates of ad hoc and hybrid international
tribunals, such as the International Criminal Tribunal
for the Former Yugoslavia and its successor, as well as
the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and the Residual
Special Court for Sierra Leone.
UN peacekeeping is an important aspect of the protection of civilians, and we will continue to work with the international community on it. In addition to our international efforts, we are working domestically to ensure that we are doing all we can to uphold IHL in the interests of protecting civilians. We have established a centre of excellence for human security, which will deliver extended training on the protection of civilians; women, peace and security; human trafficking and sexual exploitation; and cultural property protection. Ours is the first military in the world to have a dedicated national defence policy on human security. The centre will help other militaries. We have also had a safe schools declaration, to support the continuation of education during armed conflict, and the publication of our “Voluntary Report on the Implementation of International Humanitarian Law at Domestic Level”.

Mr Bone, I appreciate that you want to ensure that the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley has a moment to speak at the end of the debate, but, if I may, I want to conclude by saying that our support, recognised, I think, by everyone in the House, for the principles, rules and instruments of international humanitarian law remains unswerving. The robust framework is designed with the protection of civilians in mind. We take our responsibilities seriously, and I am glad that the House feels as strongly as we do. The review is under way, and I am convinced it will be a great success, not least because it will have input from Members here and from a range of bodies with these interests at heart. I hope we can discuss these matters again in the House before too long.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Does the right hon. Lady want to wind up?

Ann Clwyd indicated dissent.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the continued importance of international humanitarian law in protecting civilians in conflict.

Diplomatic Representation in Wales

11 am

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered attracting diplomatic representation to Wales.

I am delighted to have secured this debate, which is of huge interest to me, as I am sure it is to any hon. Member from Wales. This matter has gained in importance in recent times, thanks in part to the turbulent situation in which we find ourselves—a political context that has made Wales’s place in the world more uncertain than ever. However, the development that triggered—or, dare I say it, inspired—the application for the debate was the decision earlier this year of the Irish Government to reopen their consulate general in Cardiff, which was rightly heralded at the time as a promising development for Wales.

The reopening of the consulate, following a 10-year leave of absence, offers a valuable opportunity to strengthen the cultural, economic and social ties that have woven together the histories of our two nations for centuries. It may also provide some impetus to other nations to follow Ireland’s lead and develop their diplomatic presence in Wales. Given that we live in such turbulent times, with Brexit uncertainty lingering into the foreseeable future, this endeavour is worthy of serious and sustained effort. The question before us is how we build upon this and encourage more Governments to develop their presence in Wales, to deepen social and cultural links and to encourage companies from across the world to invest in Wales.

After all, Wales is no stranger to the diplomatic sphere; indeed, in the middle ages, France’s efforts to increase its influence on the island of Britain were often manifested in diplomatic overtures to Welsh leaders. Such efforts continued well beyond the death of Llywelyn Ein Llyw Olaf in 1282, perhaps exemplified most famously by Owain Glyndŵr, who sent diplomats to the French court and who, in his Pennal letter of 1406, sought to strengthen the cause of Welsh independence by aligning himself with the French king, Charles VI, on the pressing matter of the papacy. Although his efforts to charm the French were ultimately unsuccessful—indeed, I do not think he ever received a reply from the French king—they nevertheless serve as useful reminders that there is precedent, albeit historic, for the idea of Wales nurturing its own diplomatic connections, and of doing so for a higher purpose; for in the Pennal letter, Glyndŵr set out his plans for establishing a Welsh Church and two Welsh universities—an enlightened vision of a prosperous and autonomous Wales.

Fortunately, and unlike the exertions of Owain Glyndŵr, any new effort to develop Wales’s diplomatic links will have strong foundations to build on. The Welsh Government already have offices across the world, from Belgium and France to Japan and the United States, and recently appointed Eluned Morgan AM as a Minister with some responsibility for international relations. This can be seen as part of a wider trend that in recent years has seen stateless nations increasingly becoming important actors in diplomacy—or perhaps paradiplomacy, the term more usually applied to the diplomatic capacity of sub-state Governments.
Without doubt, EU membership has exposed Wales to opportunities to increase its international standing, through such institutions as the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions and the Welsh Government’s office in Brussels. However, with our relationship with the rest of Europe perhaps more uncertain than ever, we must now look to other ways of strengthening these international relationships. One way of doing so would be by encouraging greater foreign diplomatic representation in Wales itself.

There is currently an extensive network of honorary consuls in Wales, which is organised as the Consular Association in Wales, which was formed over 100 years ago and whose current president, Mr Michael Rye, has set a sterling example as a champion of promoting consular representation to Wales. By way of background, honorary consuls differ from ambassadors, in that they are not usually employed by their respective nations, even though they do undertake quite a lot of work on their behalf, but are more honorary appointments under the terms of the Vienna convention on consular relations. Their role is broad-ranging, encompassing such tasks as co-operating closely with embassies to co-ordinate official visits to Wales; providing background and contextual briefings to enable closer bilateral relationships to be formed; and assisting nationals of their country who require aid, such as in cases of accident, illness, injury or the loss of personal travel documents. They also serve an important role in validating those same travel documents.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am very interested in what my hon. Friend says and greatly appreciate that he has been able to secure the debate. Does he agree that any means of strengthening the contact between Wales and Argentina should be welcomed, particularly given the ongoing diplomatic quandary of finding a way of transporting Eisteddfod chairs from Y Wladfa back to Wales? It could also facilitate visits between Wales and the Welsh community in Patagonia.

Ben Lake: I thank my right hon. Friend—this is the first occasion I have had to greet her as such—for that important point. It is not always well known, but Patagonia, in southern Argentina, and Wales share a very close history. People can be found there called González-Jones, who speak both Spanish and Welsh, which is a pretty unique situation. There are also shared cultural links, most notably with the matter of the Eisteddfod, and if we were to have closer diplomatic links we might be able to facilitate the transportation of those important Eisteddfod chairs back to the homeland.

While embassy personnel tend to change every three to five years, honorary consuls have their accreditation renewed every three to five years, unless they retire or if their respective country changes its attitude to the particular individual. In that sense, consuls can provide much-needed continuity, with their longer terms allowing for deep and long-lasting relationships with civic, political and business leaders to be forged, regardless of any political turmoil or changes. Simply put, as a collective, honorary consuls help bring the best of the world to Wales, as well as the best of Wales to the world. While their work is vital for diplomatic relations, it would be unrealistic and grossly unfair to expect them to undertake the full range of duties associated with staffed diplomatic missions.

For this reason, we should be enticing Governments to set up consulates general in Wales, as Ireland has done, with paid personnel tasked with developing ever-closer links between Wales and the rest of the world. The benefits of doing so are not solely cultural and social. Stronger diplomatic representation could help boost inward investment, the rate of which has been steadily reducing in recent years, with Wales attracting 57 inward investment projects in 2017-18, compared with 85 in 2016-17. No data is yet available for 2018-19.

The development of a thriving international quarter in Cardiff, with consulates general from all over the world, underpinned by an even broader network of honorary consuls, could offer a substantial boost to the Welsh economy. Before coming to this place, the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) used to do a lot of work with the rural development board of Wales, as well as the Welsh Development Agency, which in some form acted with quasi-diplomatic status in attracting those closer links with companies from across the world and was very successful in bringing companies from as far afield as Japan and America to locate themselves in Wales. So there is economic potential in this endeavour.

There are many examples that we could follow. We could look to countries such as Catalonia, Quebec and the Basque country, which have all worked proactively in recent years to encourage Governments to establish a presence in their capital cities. The Public Diplomacy Council of Catalonia, known as Diplocat, offers a useful model for Wales’s diplomatic overseas, and perhaps a potential strategy for all those overseas offices that the Welsh Government have opened.

Diplocat is a public-private consortium, formed by representatives from different Catalan authorities and organisations, including chambers of commerce and universities. Through active engagement with the international community, Barcelona has established itself as an international hub for businesses and organisations. Barcelona has 38 consulates general and consulates, while Bilbao, in the Basque country, has seven. Montreal has 42. The UK Government have an office in all those cities, so why not start our efforts to reintroduce Wales to the world by encouraging those nations to replicate Ireland’s example by opening an office in Cardiff?

With a slightly different focus from the strategy pursued by Barcelona and the Catalan authorities, the Quebec Government’s international policy has at its heart a desire to attract international organisations, diplomatic and consular offices and international students and research conferences to Quebec. That has in recent years led to several international organisations establishing themselves in Montreal, most importantly, perhaps, the International Civil Aviation Organisation—a United Nations specialised agency that works to make the civil aviation sector safe and efficient worldwide and to ensure that the sector develops in a more economically and environmentally sustainable manner. Other major international organisations located in Quebec include the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the International Air Transport Association, the World Anti-Doping Agency and the Institut de la Francophonie pour le développement durable—a apologies for my pronunciation.

In Wales, the onus would of course fall, to some extent at least, on the Welsh Government, who I believe should be sending frequent delegations around the world
to establish closer links with businesses and international organisations. The honorary consuls whom we already have in Wales are ideally placed to facilitate the process. However, I fear that the Welsh Government have still to realise the true potential of the Consular Association in Wales to strengthen cultural, economic and social connections around the world.

Therefore, an important first step for Wales’s re-entry into the diplomatic theatre would be the formalisation of the relationship between the Welsh Government and our existing honorary consuls. Only then can we look to build on that by enticing larger diplomatic missions to establish themselves, and to co-ordinate with Wales’s existing overseas officers to put into action an international strategy for Wales that focuses, perhaps, on certain key objectives or themes. Those could include becoming global leaders in the protection of minority languages, for example, or promoting the incredible potential that we have in the realms of renewable energy technology and research and the benefits that their development would deliver for the entire world as well as for Wales.

Of course, it cannot be denied that the UK Government have a role to play, too. In Quebec, we have a fine example. The Government of Quebec and the Government of Canada work closely together to establish favourable conditions for hosting in Montreal some of the most important international organisations. Might there be an opportunity, I wonder, for the UK Government to look to offer more opportunities for the Welsh Government to co-locate their overseas offices with those of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office—I know that already happens to some extent—and likewise to facilitate diplomatic delegations from London to Cardiff, perhaps by raising the prospect of shared office spaces or hubs, or even just trade delegations, which could come from time to time to meet representatives of Welsh industries and businesses at first hand?

The Irish consulate general is a first step towards developing a more visible international presence in Wales, but that will require putting aside old-fashioned notions of diplomacy and will require the realisation that in an era of multi-track diplomacy and para-diplomacy, all levels of Government, as well as businesses, universities, civic organisations and non-governmental organisations, have a role to play and must be involved.

My only ask today is whether the Minister will consider working with the Welsh Government and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to encourage more Governments to open consulates in Wales, so as to boost Wales’s international presence. I reiterate that the Consular Association in Wales seems to me a natural starting point. Its knowledge and connections can be harnessed to revolutionise the way that Wales is seen by the rest of the world.

11.14 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) on securing the debate. I thank hon. Members for their valuable contributions and particularly for the trip that we had through the diplomatic history of Wales in the medieval period, which certainly helped to expand my knowledge.

Attracting diplomatic representation to Wales is an important issue. I particularly welcome, as the hon. Member for Ceredigion did, the recent announcement by the Government of Ireland and representatives of the Republic of Ireland and representatives in Cardiff. That is a step to building closer relationships, particularly given the key trade routes between Holyhead and Fishguard—with the Irish Republic.

It is important that we take this opportunity to pay tribute to the network of more than 20 honorary consuls in Wales, who work tirelessly to strengthen, build and maintain our relationships with the rest of the world. Those include honorary consuls from our more traditional European partners, such as Italy, Germany and France, but the network has recently expanded to include countries such as Lesotho and Tunisia. Further expansion of the network is a matter for the respective countries, based on their individual national interests, but I am sure that Argentina will have heard the passionate plea for a representative in Cardiff, given the strong links with Patagonia. The cultural traditions are important as well. This is not just about the economy and, shall we say, hard power; it is also about some of the great cultural links between the nations.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales has already spoken to the new chair of the Consular Association in Wales about how the UK Government can work closely with the honorary consul network in Wales in the future. In addition, I have met the Jordanian ambassador at the Wales Office to have a conversation about how links could be strengthened and improved.

Ultimately, attracting greater diplomatic representation is about forging greater links between Wales, as a strong nation within the United Kingdom, and countries around the world. It is critical that we capitalise on the opportunities that EU exit presents us with in this regard. Of course we want to maintain our strong links with our European partners. The issue of the EU’s presence in the UK after exit day is a matter for discussion and agreement between the UK Government and the EU. I would like to assure hon. Members that those discussions are ongoing, particularly in relation to what presence it may have in Wales in the future.

Ben Lake: I have been remiss: I do not believe that I have welcomed the Minister to his position in the Wales Office, but I do so heartily now. On the matter of a European presence in Wales post Brexit, does the Minister agree that one idea that European nations might think of looking at is co-location? I know that they do that in other countries across the world. What comes to mind is New Zealand, where different European nations share the same types of issue. At the same time, we maintain a distinct and separate presence that is easily recognisable to those who visit. Certainly we would be only too
happy to talk with countries, if they wanted to look at this in Cardiff, about how it could be supported and what opportunities would be available to them. Let us not forget that it does not necessarily have to be Cardiff. There are other great towns and cities in Wales where they may look to have or may have economic interests, particularly in the north of Wales, that they need to service and where they need to provide support to their citizens.

We want Wales, all parts of the UK, and the UK as a whole to be open and outward looking, building new relationships in Europe and beyond. As foreign affairs are a reserved matter, the Government represent the interests of the whole United Kingdom, and we will continue to deliver for Wales and all parts of the UK overseas.

We believe that Wales approaches EU exit from a position of strength and continues to be an attractive location for business and investment. Last year, more than 3,000 jobs came to Wales through foreign direct investment, from 57 projects. The Office of the Secretary of State for Wales will continue to work closely with the Department for International Trade to support that work and attract new opportunities.

Welsh businesses continue to export their products across the globe. I was pleased to note that the value of Welsh exports for the year ending March 2019 was up £1.2 billion over the previous year, with growth in exports to EU and non-EU countries alike. Our exporting success is testament to our great exporting businesses. I am thinking of businesses such as Babi Pur, based in Gwynedd, which has grown to be one of the leading retailers in fair trade and organic children’s products, selling all over the world—it was ably promoted to me by the two local Members of Parliament, the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), when I met them to discuss the North Wales growth deal—and Llanllyr Source, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Ceredigion, selling spring water globally.

Alongside the strong economic links with other countries, it is important that we recognise the cultural ones. I welcome plans by the Thai embassy to hold the first Thai festival in Wales next month to help to raise awareness of the links that exist between Thailand and Wales. We should be clear that organising events with another nation to promote the country does not automatically mean organising events in London; that can happen across the rest of our United Kingdom as well. I am particularly pleased that the Thai embassy has decided to hold this event in Cardiff.

The Secretary of State for Wales has regular meetings with overseas diplomats, to discuss opportunities to strengthen the links between Wales and countries across the globe. He also promotes Wales abroad and has done so recently in Hong Kong, Japan, the US, Qatar and elsewhere. These trade missions are vital in ensuring that our long-term aspirations for the Welsh economy are secured. He has also worked extensively with the Department for International Trade to launch the Wales portfolio at MIPIM—the marché international des professionnels de l’immobilier, the world’s largest property and investment event, in March. The six projects in the portfolio, from across Wales, showcase our potential.

In response to the specific query that was made, we want to continue working closely with the Welsh Government in marketing Wales to the world. The Secretary of State has a positive relationship with both the Welsh Minister for Economy and Transport, and the deputy Minister with responsibility for international relations in the Welsh Government, and has invited them to join him on trade missions in order to demonstrate a joined-up approach to our prospective partners.

Businesses in Wales rightly have access to support in 108 markets globally through the Department for International Trade. I would be happy to look at how we can expand that sort of work further, so that Welsh businesses are heard in our international trade work. We are also working with the Department of International Trade to consider how best they can boost their resource and presence in Wales. DIT is a Department for the entire UK, and basing key staff in Wales, to work with stakeholders and the Welsh Government, can help grow our exports.

All of that is important, because, after we have left the EU, the UK will have an independent trade policy for the first time in more than four decades. I know that you will particularly welcome that, Mr Bone.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. While I sit in this Chair, I have no views on anything.

Kevin Foster: I am sure you would merely welcome the fact that this was a thorough debate, Mr Bone.

We will play a full and active role on trade policy on the global stage, working closely with friends old and new. That freedom will allow us to deploy all the tools at our disposal, tailoring our trade policy to the strengths and requirements of the UK economy, and supporting the industrial strategy. The voice of Wales will be heard at all stages of these negotiations, from mandate design to the final agreement.

The Government are making good progress in preparations for the UK’s independent trade policy, including ensuring continuity for our current trading arrangements. Just last week, the UK Government and the South Korean Government announced the transitioning of the existing EU-South Korea free trade agreement.

While the UK Government will negotiate trade deals on behalf of the United Kingdom, we have been clear from the start that the devolved Administrations should be closely involved throughout the negotiations process. That is already happening. Last year, I was in New Zealand with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. A delegation was there from Wales, already engaging on some of the challenges and opportunities that a free trade agreement with New Zealand may present to the Welsh economy, particularly in relation to agriculture.

Indeed, the Prime Minister committed to an “enhanced role” for the devolved Administrations in the next phase, respecting their competence and vital interests in these negotiations, along with the devolved Assemblies, which we will need to engage with, too. We are working closely with the devolved Administrations to deliver this, and Ministers from the UK, Welsh and Scottish Governments regularly discuss how this would work in practice, in meetings such as the ministerial forum on EU negotiations.

To be clear, we would include an executive from Northern
Ireland, if the devolved Government is restored. At the moment, the Northern Ireland civil service represents Northern Ireland there. We hope that, in the near future, we can engage with a Northern Ireland Administration again in relation to these issues.

In conclusion, we want Wales to be part of a strong, outward looking United Kingdom outside of the European Union. The UK’s departure from the EU provides significant opportunities to foster and strengthen links, both diplomatic and economic, with countries around the world. In doing so, I believe we can attract significant global representation into Wales, to help to develop those links and support the whole drive to ensure that the United Kingdom, with Wales at its core, is a prosperous and successful country post Brexit.

Question put and agreed to.

11.24 am
Sitting suspended.

History Curriculum: Migration

[SIR GARY STREETER in the Chair]

2.30 pm
Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered teaching migration in the history curriculum.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Gary. At the end of last year, I joined a group of young students, members of the brilliant Advocacy Academy in my constituency, in a protest outside the Department for Education. They were delivering a letter to the Secretary of State, and their message was simple:

“Our history is British history.”

Their history—that of a diverse group of young south Londoners—is the history of our nation, and the history curriculum taught in our schools should reflect that.

I was extremely disappointed with the Minister’s response to that letter. It did not really acknowledge any deficiency in the current curriculum; it pointed to flexibility within the curriculum as evidence that there is no problem, and confirmed that the Government have no plans to change it. I am pleased to have secured this debate, because the Minister’s response ignored some really significant issues.

In preparing for the debate, I have drawn on research by the Runnymede Trust and the Royal Historical Society and on engagement work undertaken by the parliamentary digital engagement team. I thank everyone who took part in the online survey on this topic, the results of which I will return to later.

More than one in six children aged nought to 15 in England and Wales is from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. BAME young people make up more than a quarter of state-funded primary and secondary school pupils in England, but despite Britain’s increasingly diverse classrooms, and notwithstanding some recent changes in the options available in the curriculum, the history taught in schools remains focused on narrow and celebrated accounts of “our island story”. As one young person who responded to the Runnymede Trust’s consultation said,

“it’s the Tudors and the Tudors and the Tudors”.

The approach that predominates in history teaching often results in an understanding that is incomplete and inaccurate. Students struggle to connect different periods in our history, to connect British history to the wider global story, or to place themselves within the narrative. Yet British history is the history of migration to these islands. None of our families was always here. Whether our ancestors were Roman invaders, Normans from northern France, Huguenots fleeing persecution or Irish immigrants fleeing starvation during the potato famine, whether our family story is rooted in the painful, shameful history of the colonisation of parts of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, or whether our forebears came to the UK as freed slaves in the 19th century or as Commonwealth citizens after the second world war, all of us can find our story in the history of migration. Teaching that history from every possible perspective helps us to find that story.
Migration has shaped not only individual family stories, but places and communities. The town where I grew up, Ormskirk in Lancashire, has a Viking name. We have Roman cities such as Bath; cities such as Liverpool and Bristol with links to the shameful history of slavery; and Spitalfields, which has been formed, shaped and sustained by successive generations of migrants, as is powerfully illustrated by the mosque on Brick Lane, which was previously a synagogue and, before that, a Huguenot chapel. Every community, as well as every family, has a migration story.

A migration-focused approach to British history both globalises it, placing it within a wider international context, and localises it, opening up previously marginalised and untold stories about specific times and places, yet the history curriculum is struggling to engage students from all backgrounds. The Royal Historical Society’s race, ethnicity and equality report, which was published in October 2018, highlights the low uptake of history as a school subject by BAME pupils and the low levels of undergraduate history admissions for BAME students.

Racial and ethnic inequality affects history more acutely than most other disciplines. What we were taught in history lessons in school has a huge impact on our understanding of history, yet history is not a science; it is never complete and is never completely objective. Sources and perspectives matter. Whose story is told, and from which perspective, informs our understanding of who was important and powerful, who contributed, who were the heroes and who were the villains. A partial telling can leave people and communities entirely invisible and leave stories that affected hundreds of thousands of people completely untold. The way in which history is currently taught contains too many artificial binaries, such as world versus British history, or BAME versus British history. World history is British history, and BAME history is British history too.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friends on securing this debate. She is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that, to genuinely recognise the contribution of communities that have come to the United Kingdom, we need to teach an honest history of Britain, including the repression and exploitation that has occurred in its name, alongside the positive and progressive parts?

Helen Hayes: That is exactly the argument I will go on to make: a migration-focused articulation of British history is also a more accurate, rigorous and—as my hon. Friend rightly says—honest version of British history. That is a really important point.

The understanding that we derive from history lessons in school informs our sense of national identity. It informs the internal narrative that runs in each of our minds when we hear the word “British”—who is included in that term, and who is not. Too often, what we are taught in school leads to a characterisation of Britishness that is only partial. During the Windrush scandal last year, Ministers had to be reminded again and again in the House of Commons and the House of Lords that the citizens who had been denied their right to be in the UK by the Home Office were not foreign nationals whose status was in doubt, but British citizens. They had come to the UK as British citizens as a consequence of the British Nationality Act 1948, which granted citizenship to Commonwealth citizens—itself a consequence of the long and painful history of British colonialism.

The current history curriculum offers some opportunity to teach migration, but there is little explicit focus on internal racial and ethnic diversity within Britain. It also tends to downplay our internal diverse histories; in addition to race, they include gender, class, sexuality and religion.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this subject to Westminster Hall. When we talk about migration, we cannot ignore the fact that our great nation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, came together with the integration of the Ulsterman and the Ulsterwoman from Northern Ireland, the Scots, the Welsh and, to a lesser degree, people from the Republic of Ireland. All those five nations coming together as one—surely that tells us how we can do things if we do them the right way. It is unfortunate that none of our Scots Nats friends is here to hear this, because it is important that we say it and say it often: we are better together.

Helen Hayes: The hon. Gentleman makes a strong point.

In 2016, two new OCR and AQA exam board units on migration to Britain were introduced at GCSE level, both of which include some coverage of empire. They offer exciting and innovative opportunities to engage with important British histories, but they remain optional, and there are some structural barriers to take-up that I hope the Minister might address.

Over the past 10 years, in partnership with Manchester and Cambridge Universities, the Runnymede Trust has led a number of projects to engage young people and teachers with more expansive, representative and inclusive histories of Britain. The lesson from that work is that there is a strong appetite among young people from all backgrounds for history teaching that reflects a broader range of voices and experiences, and there is interest among teachers in engaging with more representative histories of Britain. But there is also a lack of confidence, support and resources for teachers who want to embed those histories in their practice, and teachers feel constrained by the increasing demands on their time and energies in a fast-changing teaching climate.

The appetite for change is also evident in feedback received by the parliamentary digital engagement team in response to a survey posted ahead of this debate. Joanne, a teacher, wrote: “This would enrich the curriculum by demonstrating that migration had a key role to play in the formation of a more inclusive national identity. It would also offer opportunities for a wider range of voices and perspectives to be heard and valued within our history teaching—crucial for us as a nation moving forward.”

Nick, who is also a teacher, wrote: “I find that students are usually interested in migration but it is often very new to them, reflecting a wider lack of knowledge about migration in wider society. It helps students realise the connections between history and geography and provides a glimpse of the big answers about the composition of modern society, culture, language and food.”

Interest also extends beyond the teaching profession. John, an immigration solicitor, wrote:
“It’s amazing to think how little we are taught about our awful past relationship with the colonies and indeed our closest neighbouring country, Ireland. Had more people been educated about the colonies and Ireland, there may be more understanding now of the issues we face in modern times, including the Windrush scandal and the Brexit disagreements over the Irish border issue. Forgetting our past is a real failing.

Following the work of the Runnymede Trust, a web-based resource called Our Migration Story was launched in 2016, in direct response to requests from teachers for classroom-ready materials on histories of empire and migration. Our Migration Story was built in collaboration with more than 80 academic and local historians; local and national museums and archives, including the Imperial War Museum, the National Archives, the Black Cultural Archives, the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Migration Museum; and exam boards, teachers and professional history associations.

Our Migration Story is a one-stop shop on Britain’s long migration history, from Roman invasion to the present day. Through a series of case studies driven by historical research and primary source material it presents the stories of the people, ideas and objects from near and far that have travelled to and then shaped the British Isles over the last 2,000 years.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way again; her speech, including its introduction, is excellent. Does she agree that it is essential that our children understand the importance of how migrants have flocked to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland for years and have integrated well into our systems? It is important to understand that not all immigrants wish to have “their” country and “our” country; indeed, our country is made up of those who live here, integrate and raise their children to be British, and who have made this nation as great as it is today. In my constituency, there are Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Indians, Chinese, people from eastern Europe, and people from Nigeria and Kenya. All those people together have made this nation great.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. Interventions must be brief.

Helen Hayes: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and his point is very well made. If we teach our history with a migration narrative, everybody in our society can understand exactly the diversity of which he spoke so well.

Our Migration Story challenges us to rethink British history by capturing the histories of ordinary and otherwise marginalised Britons; by charting histories of welcome and inclusion, as well as those of rejection, exclusion, inequality and violence; by placing histories and conditions of global connectedness at its core; and by making mainstream British identity inseparable from 2,000 years of migration and settlement. The site connects its content with the national curriculum, and it has received several awards. It adopts a rigorous and academically recognised approach; in fact, it reflects the way that history is already often taught at universities.

Even in some of the most diverse communities, such as those in my constituency, our understanding of the history of migration is often limited. Lambeth Archives has just opened a fantastic exhibition at Lambeth town hall called “Before and After Windrush: 350 years of Black People in Lambeth”. It has been curated in response to the assumption that many people made during last year’s celebration of the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Windrush that there had been no black people living in Lambeth prior to 1948, and it charts the area’s history from the first record of a black person living in Lambeth in 1661 to the present day. That longevity is so significant for our current community. We have always been diverse; people from across the world have always contributed to community life in Lambeth. People from everywhere belong here. As the Windrush anniversary logo, which was designed by young people from Brixton, reflected, the Windrush generation are part of our DNA, but long before 1948 our DNA was international.

My plea to the Minister today is not to dismiss this research, as he did back in January, but to engage with it. In our society, which is both diverse and riven with divisions, we need the teaching of history to be inclusive, we need everyone to be able to find their place in it and we need our definition of “British”, based on our understanding of history, to be inclusive. That means not only making migration content available, but signposting it effectively and considering making more of it compulsory. It also means making additional training and continuing professional development available to teachers to equip them with the confidence to teach new material. To return to where I started, it means working to realise a vision in which everyone in our diverse country, whatever their heritage, can say with pride and confidence: “Our history is British history.”

2.45 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary.

It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), but I will take a slightly different approach to her on this issue. Before I do so, however, I should declare an interest: I am a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, and I state that now because I will use examples from the Royal Geographical Society as I continue.

The point I want to make is essentially this: what the hon. Lady has described as “history” is really “geography”. I know that we could argue for ages about the difference between the two, but I agree that what she has described is appropriate for teaching. I just think that it should be taught under a geographical syllabus rather than under a historical one. I will also give some examples of what the Royal Geographical Society already offers, which schools are already taking up to take forward the teaching of these issues.

The first example is an international one, which is material that is made available to answer the question, “Why has unprecedented migration occurred in the Mediterranean in recent years?” The sort of material that the RGS has produced is related to the work of Professor Heaven Crawley, who has done a lot of work with 500 migrants; that is the actual physical work of interviewing them and talking to them. They have shared their experience of what has driven them to migrate, and of how they went about migrating. That is a valuable lesson to be learned from migrants. Professor Crawley has concentrated a lot on the UK, so let me turn to some of the things on offer from the UK.
One of them is about migration and the skills and job market. What it sets out to do is to get students thinking about who is migrating, about the impacts that migration has made, and about how the current financial crisis may affect patterns and volumes of migration. That brings the course right up to date, to include a lot of the political aspects of migration, because geography is about the current politics and sociology of the situation.

I will give another example. Our Migration Story has made available to schools a series of courses that answer the question, “How has our local area been shaped by migration?” That includes a lot of the historical background that the hon. Lady mentioned, and the sort of questions that it asks include, “How might migrant groups change the local area?” It also asks, “What evidence is there to show how migrant groups have changed the local area over time?” And it goes on to ask, “How has that changed over time and how can we identify the different parts of it?”

Our Migration Story also looks at the background of migrants, including the fact that many of them have come from a small number of countries over the years, although that number is now increasing. So, comparisons can be made between the two—that is, between the UK and other countries.

Another example that I think will appeal to Opposition Members is “Migrants on the margins.” That too is produced by the Royal Geographical Society and includes a range of posters, podcasts, animations, videos, factsheets and lesson plans for teachers. It has been funded by the global learning programme, and provides the context for the idea of migrants on the margins, covering things such as how cities are changing, the causes of migration and why people move. The materials being produced by the Royal Geographical Society are very good and should not go unnoticed.

Jim Shannon: Does the Royal Geographical Society take cognisance of the persecution of those with religious beliefs across the world, in particular Christians, and of how they have migrated because of that? Is that part of the background that the society uses? If it is not, may I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he proposes, as a member of the society, that it should be?

John Howell: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I have not seen in any of the material any detailed work on that, but I suspect that it is included as part of the thinking that goes on to produce the result. The subject that he identifies is valuable in teaching, in understanding not just how things have happened historically but how they are still happening to Christian groups around the world. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point.

The last Royal Geographical Society project is a complex one, but it starts from the position that although migration to Britain in the past has been overwhelmingly for raising that point. I have not seen in any of the material any detailed work on that, but I suspect that it is included as part of the thinking that goes on to produce the result. The subject that he identifies is valuable in teaching, in understanding not just how things have happened historically but how they are still happening to Christian groups around the world. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point.

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happened over the Irish sea in places I did not recognise but if I had been taught about it I would have understood where the troubles began. That, essentially, is what I am getting to.

Coming back to my upbringing in south Wales, on every street corner there was a Bacchetta, a Gamberini, a Sidoli; the Italian community migrated into south Wales and set up cafés, ice cream parlours and other things. The story of south Wales is also the story of migration. Many of the pits and steelworks came about from people migrating in for the work, yet we never talked about that. Interestingly, I grew up in Lower Bailey Street in Wattstown in the Rhondda but I did not know who Bailey was. He was a guy called Crawshay Bailey, a landowner from Northumberland who had never visited south Wales.

What is so important about these migrant stories—we see this with the Windrush generation as well—is the question of how many of us sit down with a relative or an elderly friend and record their experiences. Their experiences are the experiences of Great Britain, and that is what I am talking about in my example of the Fleur de Lys local history society. We were sitting there just as Tower colliery was closed—the last deep mine in south Wales. The number of people who remember the mines and have experience of working underground is getting smaller, and we need to sit down and record those experiences, because once they are gone they are gone forever. I urge everyone here to sit down with a friend or relative and talk about their experiences. I direct this to the Minister: this is something we should seriously look at having on the curriculum. We should get schoolchildren to speak to their relatives, and ask them to keep an archive of those relatives’ experiences, especially as they are now getting old.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an interesting point about migration and the history of those coming into communities in south Wales. Of course, many from south Wales went to Chile and other parts of the world, to mine there. So we have had migration out of the country, when people have been seeking employment.

**Chris Evans**: My favourite fact is always that in Pennsylvania in the 1920s there were more Welsh speakers than in Wales. That came from Welsh migrants going to West Virginia and Pennsylvania to work in the mines. We also have the famous colony in Patagonia, which was set out in the famous novel “How Green Was My Valley”.

We need to be a bit braver about our history, about our history as an island race, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) said. We have to accept that slavery happened. We talk about it a lot when we talk about American history. We touched on it a lot when I was at university—

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman indicated that we should be a bit more brave in remembering our history. Does he agree that it is sometimes regrettable that in recent years we have seen student campaigns in a small number of educational establishment to remove links to Rhodesia, for example, because of the perception of what happened there? Is it not much better to recognise and acknowledge that those things happened, whether we agree or disagree, rather than trying to obliterate them, particularly in seats of learning?

**Chris Evans**: That is the whole point of this debate: we cannot whitewash our past. These things happened; we should recognise them, and we should learn lessons so they never happen again.

The Department for Education itself said in 2014 that the teaching of Britain’s involvement in the slave trade was considered patchy. We should accept that for well over 300 years, whether we like it or not, Britain played a leading role in forcing Africans on to slave ships for transportation across the Atlantic ocean. It is not just America that has to take the blame for the slave trade; it is this country. When Britain abolished slavery in its colonies in 1830, it paid the slave owners financial compensation. The enslaved people themselves received absolutely nothing—okay, that was a long time ago, but there were 46,000 slave owners, and 3,500 lived in Britain. Those are truths that we should not be afraid to address.

In response to the earlier intervention from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I made a point about not understanding history until I got to university and studied it in more depth. I understand Dr Deana Heath, who teaches southern Asian, imperial, colonial and global history at the University of Liverpool, when she says:

“I face an uphill struggle at the start of each new academic year. Many of the undergraduates who greet me know virtually nothing about any of the subjects I teach.”

When I went to university to study history, I was one of those undergraduates. It was not just Irish history that I did not know about; it was British history, and the terrible record of the colonies.

This issue is really important, so I have two asks of the Minister. First, I hope that he takes seriously the idea of putting oral history at the front and centre of the curriculum. Secondly, although we have a great history, we should also shine a light on those things that are uncomfortable for us, because if we do not learn from those mistakes, we run the serious risk of repeating them. I urge the Minister, who I know is a good and thoughtful man, to take those points on board.

**Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary, and it is a real honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), who made a passionate and pertinent speech. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing today’s debate, and for her superb opening speech.

Three of my four grandparents were Irish, and my much-loved brother-in-law is of Jamaican descent. Without him, I would not have my very beloved niece. Migration is central to who we are as a family, and it is also central to who we are as a nation. Only by understanding where we come from can we truly understand where we are going and where we are now. Including stories about migration in our history lessons is a central part of that, and I am proud that Labour has committed to creating an emancipation educational trust to support that work.
[Lyn Brown]

It is hardly news to many of us that migration has shaped our country for centuries, because we have grown up in diverse communities and have ourselves been shaped by that history. However, the history of different types of migration is not taught as widely as it should be. So many people do not know that there were hundreds of free African people living and working during the Tudor period, and some were even at Elizabeth I’s court. We seem to think that migration is only a very recent thing, but that is a nonsense. We need to embrace and understand our history much better than we currently do.

I am going to take a different approach from that of the other Members who have given speeches so far, because I will talk about West Ham. In my maiden speech in 2005, I talked about one example of how migration has helped in Newham. In the 1980s, we were suffering from the dying docks and the ravages of Thatcherism. Green Street was dying on its feet; the only two things that were doing well were West Ham United football club—which had its best ever season in 1986—and, sadly, the local jobcentre. However, a few traders got together, who were overwhelmingly Asian and African-Caribbean, and took a risk. They got some money together and started rejuvenating the area through their businesses. First they sold food, then fabrics—things that the big chains would not touch—and then businesses focused on designer fashion and jewellery came slowly on to Green Street.

Now, Green Street is a one-stop wedding shop, serving not only the local community but people from all over the country and, indeed, much of Europe. Without migration, those community-spirited and canny traders would not have been in Newham, and our local economy would have suffered an even worse decline. My kitchen would have certainly declined, because there was nowhere that I could buy turmeric, chillies, coriander, cumin or the other exotic items in the new cookbooks that were stocking my shelves at that time. On Christmas day, I remember having to pop out a number of times to grab that thing that I had not managed to put in my basket before. That is a recent history, but none the less an important history, and one that risks being lost unless we make an effort to ensure it is remembered and celebrated.

Whenever I think about stuff like this, I think about Eastside Community Heritage. Eastside has always been clear that letting people own and tell their stories is the best way of collecting testimonies and engaging communities in their past, and that is exactly what they do. Unsurprisingly, many of their projects are focused on the contribution of migrants—people such as Kamal Chunchie, who was born in Sri Lanka and served in the Army’s 3rd Middlesex Regiment during the first world war alongside members of my family, witnessing horrifying conditions in the trenches. He was gassed twice and shot once, and served right up until the end of the war. After the war, he came back to Canning Town and served that community for the rest of his life. He established the Colourful Men’s Institute and provided solidarity and means of support for black and Asian families living around the docks. Disgracefully, racism was common at that time, and many living in and around those docks were denied a home and a living. Kamal’s institute became a community centre that served all the poor and needy in Canning Town, providing shelter, regular meals, Christmas celebrations and toys for children. Over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, his work prevented destitution, alleviated poverty and built solidarity. For that, he was greatly and rightly loved.

Eastside has created a number of projects, including those on the Ugandan Asian community; on the role of nurses from the Caribbean in building our NHS, such as my brother-in-law’s mum, Lucy; and on historic communities in Newham, such as the Chinese and Bengali communities. I have attended lots and lots of Eastside’s events, which are wonderfully informative, telling stories that would otherwise be simply forgotten. Several of those projects have been created in collaboration with our schools, including Sarah Bonnell and Forest Gate, so that our children understand the rich diversity of their history. Students helped create exhibitions about African and Caribbean fashion and the role it has played in the local economy, our culture and our lives. I would have loved to take part in projects like that, growing up; I was always really excited by the beautiful clothes that my Asian friends wore, and I remember learning how to dance in the sixth-form common room. Such projects bring our history alive for children from all backgrounds, and help us to understand the current social problems that we have.

One pressing social problem today is that across the world, we are witnessing a resurgence in far-right politics—a politics of hatred and division, which offers only scapegoats, not solutions. All too often across the world, migrants—even asylum seekers, the most vulnerable of us all—have been targeted. I do not have to remind people in this Chamber about Trump, whether it is his nonsense about Sadiq Khan, his attempt to enforce a Muslim ban, or his constant scaremongering about central American families fleeing to safety. I do not have to remind people in this Chamber about Netanyahu, who describes African refugees as, “illegal infiltrators flooding the country.”

Brazil’s Bolsonaro described the residents of a black settlement as, “not even good for procreation.” It happens in so many ways in so many places, and all of it is linked. It is more important than ever that our young people understand the bits of this country’s history that we do not celebrate enough and the rich diversity of our home’s past and future. We need all of our citizens to understand the contributions and the lives of the people that migration has brought, and we have to build solidarity among the different parts of our communities, just as Kamal did in the 1920s.

In my constituency, Newham Council has done wonderful work to counter and prevent the rise of the far right. It has done it for decades and it set up a holocaust memorial exhibition as a response to the rise of the far right in the 1980s and ’90s. It celebrates Black History Month and still makes sure that the children’s education focuses on Holocaust Memorial Day.

Chris Evans: As usual, my hon. Friend makes a powerful speech. Will she join me in encouraging everybody to visit the Mary Seacole statue, which is just across the road outside St Thomas’ Hospital, to see the wonderful contribution that she made as a British Jamaican woman to nursing in this country?
The work of the council continues today. As we all remember, the theme for the previous Holocaust Memorial Day was “Torn from home”. Schools in Newham not only used it to reflect on the experiences of the Jewish community who were forced to leave everything behind, incredibly important as that absolutely is, but used it as a theme for creative inspiration—for the writing of poetry, performances of plays and the composing of songs about the lives of their families and the communities that they had come from, which, in many cases, had also been torn from home. Their experiences today are reflected sadly in our history.

Many have forgotten that Irish migrants were subjected to terrible xenophobia and discrimination during the 19th century and into the 20th. We forget that Jewish refugees. The world did not come to a stop when those learnt not to think of the Huguenots from France as refugees. We include Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Indians, Africans, Caribbeans, Irish and many others in our number. When we hosted the Olympic games—it was not a London Olympics, but a West Ham Olympics—we believed that we had a resident representative from every participating country living right there in West Ham. Many in my community have immigrant backgrounds, as do some of my closest and dearest family. It simply would not be the place that I love so dearly without them; and we would be much poorer, not only economically but creatively, in terms of the ideas and perspectives that we can draw on. We would be able to communicate so much worse if we did not have those communities living with us, talking with each other and learning from perspectives. Imbuing the cultures and the stories helps us to communicate so much better as a society. That is why it is really important to me that children are taught to see migration for what it is—not just economically beneficial and not just a charitable act, but unreservedly good for our communities and absolutely essential for our future.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench wind-up speeches, after which Helen Hayes will have the final two minutes.

3.15 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir Gary. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this important debate. She made an absolutely barnstorming speech, as is her custom, on teaching migration in the history curriculum. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), although I am not sure I agree that migration should be taught as human geography or ethnographic studies. I think it enriches our history when we talk about migration, and it should sit within the history curriculum.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) made powerful points about how the mining community of south Wales has influenced North and South America, but we have to remember how the South Americans have also influenced West Ham. The Chilean, Manuel Pellegrini, and the Argentinian, Pablo Zabaleta, led West Ham to one of its best seasons in many a year, although I would say they were mainly immigrants from Manchester and Manchester City.

I am pleased to be able to respond to the debate, whose subject is close to my heart. Manchester, where I am from, has a rich tradition of inward migration. It was originally founded in AD 79 by the general Agricola, a Gallo-Roman immigrant to Britain, who some said was black. My city has a long history of welcoming migrants from around the world. I am a Mancunian son of two Irish immigrants who settled there as part of a large Irish community in the north-west of England. Britain’s second largest Jewish community calls Manchester home. We have a large Somali community, and Wythenshawe and Sale East, which I represent, has a thriving Chagossian community. We de-populated the Chagos Islands in the late 1960s to give the land to the Americans for the Diego Garcia airbase—the mother of all injustices inflicted on any settlement on the planet in modern times. We recently had an International Court of Justice judgment against the UK, so we are still seeking justice after 50 or 60 years, but the Chagossians bring a rich tapestry to life in south Manchester.

More recently, we have had immigration from India, and the Keralan community has come to populate our hospitals with nurses. Suddenly, on a huge council estate in Wythenshawe, we have Keralans who believe that St Thomas the Apostle directly proselytised their people when he left Jerusalem after the ascension of Christ. Thousands descend on our community to decorate our church and parade in our streets, and they make a huge contribution both culturally and to our NHS.

I have seen at first hand how important it is to teach a curriculum that represents and is relevant to our children. When I was a primary teacher in a school on the banks of the Bridgewater Canal, where I was the history co-ordinator, we did not teach the industrial revolution; we taught the Manchester revolution. We taught about the Duke of Bridgewater building his canal in 1661 and about how that brought coal from the Cheshire plain to Manchester city centre to power Arkwright’s mill on Miller Street 20 years later, which changed the face of the world. I was also the history co-ordinator who introduced Black History Month when it came into being, and we dedicated the month of October to it. A tailored, local approach to history teaching needs to include an accurate and representative British history and the important part that migration has played in the development of our country.
As my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood said, 27% of BAME students in state-funded schools currently have a low take-up of history at key stage 4 and beyond. Research by the Royal Historical Society shows that racial and ethnic inequality affect history more acutely than most disciplines. As has already been said, the Runnymede Trust has shown that, although the national curriculum in theory offers a broader range of diverse histories, in practice there are constraints on what is taught. Labour has pledged to ensure that schools teach black history—we celebrate Black History Month in October—and that would give us an important opportunity to understand the role and legacy of the British empire, colonialism and slavery. The British history taught in schools needs to move beyond binaries of black history versus British history. As has been said, black history is British history. To allow a full, accurate and representative British history to be taught, we must lift the structural constraints holding back teachers. They need to be given access to the resources, teacher training and support necessary to teach a complete version of our national story.

I was pleased to be able to sponsor one of the great consultants in my local hospital, Binita Kane, who was a star in the show about partition that some Members may have seen. The BBC did a show on the 70th anniversary of partition and its impact on the nations of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Imagine, Sir Gary, that you had been in Manchester on Sunday. Oh my word, there were only 26,000 tickets for the global show of India versus Pakistan—the most globally viewed sporting event ever, we think. On the night of the local government elections, I was at the place where we hold them, in Trafford, chatting to the chief executive of Lancashire Cricket Club, and he said that 1.2 million people had applied for tickets for the game. But how many of our young people know how the conflict was driven and what happened to millions of people in the area during partition?

To allow a full, accurate and representative British history to be taught, we must lift the structural constraints. Labour’s schools policy would tackle that. We announced at the National Education Union conference earlier this year that Labour will scrap key stage 1 and key stage 2 SATs, replacing them with a more flexible and practical primary assessment system. The new system will free teachers up so that they can better deliver a rich and varied curriculum. We also committed, in our manifesto, to launching a commission on the curriculum, which will give politicians a chance to listen to everyone. The commission will allow input from experts across all subjects, including on issues such as the one we are debating. It is not good enough in this day and age that the way to change society should be for MPs to raise curriculum change in this place. That is how change was made to the sex and relationships curriculum—on the back of an amendment to the Children and Social Work Act 2017. We have to do better than that when it comes to designing the country’s curriculum.

Evidence shows that when children are taught a wide-ranging curriculum and encouraged to be creative and to develop their imagination, they do better at the core elements of literacy and numeracy too.

We cannot ignore the pressures of the Government’s sustained funding cuts. The figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies could not be clearer: they show an 8% real-terms cut since the last Labour Government. We cannot expect teachers to be able to teach the curriculum they want, including a more diverse history of migration, when they face such huge pressures. Labour’s national education service will re-fund our schools, ensuring that all the fantastic teachers have the resources they need to give our children a proper, world-class education. It will also provide practical help for today’s migrants. It will end cuts to English for speakers of other languages—a vital resource for refugees who have sought asylum in Britain. The Government talk about the importance of ensuring that everyone has the chance to learn English, but over the past decade funding for ESOL has been drastically cut. More than £100 million has been taken from the budget—a real-terms cut of almost 60%.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) has noted, victims of trafficking and modern slavery are freed in Britain—the Prime Minister must be thanked for her work on that—are often denied access to education by the Government’s rules. We must learn the lessons of the Windrush scandal. Denying the victims an education is both cruel and senseless. The Windrush scandal has been a shame on our country. It was born as a result of the Home Office’s hostile environment—this Government’s policy. It is a story of injustices and migration that highlights the importance of teaching migration in schools so that the Ministers of the future do not make the same mistake. In Labour’s national education service, every child will have not only access to a world-leading school system, but the opportunity to engage in a wide-ranging, accurate and reflective curriculum.

3.24 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship yet again, Sir Gary. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing the debate and on an excellent opening speech. I am aware that she has a deep interest in the topic of migration, and that her interests also extend to teaching and schools.

Migration has been a part of our country’s history as long as we have been able to record it. The different waves of migration to these islands have helped to form our national identity and created and developed distinct regional and local identities, as we have heard in some excellent speeches. There are many opportunities within the scope of the framework of the national curriculum for teaching about migration and its causes and effects, both within the history curriculum and in other subject areas. As my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) pointed out, it can come within geography.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood cited a pupil who complained that the history curriculum was focused on “the Tudors and the Tudors and the Tudors”. I share that concern about what is a consequence of a skills-based rather than knowledge-based history curriculum, introduced in the revision of 2007. However, that approach was also predominant before the last Labour Government in the 1990s and it is probably the reason the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) was not taught about de Valera, whereas I had been taught, of course, about him and about the whole issue of Ireland. We have sought since 2010 to ensure that the
curriculum is knowledge-based and does not just focus on a narrow range of knowledge as a vehicle for teaching a range of so-called historical skills.

The hon. Member for Islwyn talked about key stage 3 and said we only teach the good. At key stage 3 there are some non-statutory examples in the history programme of things that are not necessarily—or definitely not—good things. For example the transatlantic slave trade and Ireland and home rule are in that curriculum. The development of the British empire is also an example of an in-depth study.

I listened carefully to the hugely interesting speech of the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) who gave examples of the effect on her community of different phases of immigration over the years. That gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to Sir Robin Wales who, when he was the directly elected Labour Mayor of Newham, did so much to raise education standards in Newham's schools. It is now one of the highest-performing education authorities, particularly for the teaching of reading and phonics. I like to take an opportunity to praise Sir Robin whenever I can.

The Government believe that all children and young people should, as part of a broad and balanced education, acquire a firm grasp of the history of the country in which they live, and how different events and periods relate to each other. The reformed history curriculum has been taught since September 2014. It sets out the core knowledge that will enable pupils to know and understand the history of Britain from its first settlers to the development of the institutions that help to define our national life today. We have also included history and geography in the English baccalaureate school performance measure. Since the EBacc was introduced in 2010, the proportion of pupils taking history or geography GCSE has increased from 47.7% in 2010 to 78.3% last year. Provisional entry data recently released by Ofqual indicate that that trend will continue in 2019.

The programmes of study for history set the framework for the teaching of the subject in schools in terms of the broad time periods to be taught. Within that framework, the Government have ensured that decisions about the detail of what will be taught, and choices about teaching approaches and resources, are for schools and teachers to determine. One of the key aims of the history curriculum is to ensure that pupils know and understand how Britain has influenced and been influenced by the wider world. That aim supports teachers to teach about migration and to teach pupils about how different cultures and different groups have contributed to the development of Britain at key stages of our country’s history.

Let me highlight examples of where teaching about migration might be included within different key stages of the national curriculum. At key stage 1, pupils should be taught about events that are significant nationally or globally; about the names and lives of significant individuals in the past who have contributed to national and international achievements; about significant historical events; and about people and places in their own locality. An example of migration in that framework is that teachers can teach the life stories of refugees.

Within key stage 2, pupils should be taught about the changes in Britain from the stone age to the iron age; the Roman empire—including Agricola—and its effect on Britain; Britain’s settlement by Anglo-Saxons and Scots; and how the Vikings affected Britain and its development. Teachers can teach pupils about the connection between migration and those aspects of the curriculum. At key stage 3—that is secondary school—pupils should be taught about the history of Britain from 1066 to the present day, and the effect over time of the migration of people to, from and within the British Isles. The end of the British empire, and social and cultural change in post-war British society are given as specific examples of what can be taught at key stage 3. As part of a compulsory unit on a broad aspect or theme in British history, 11 to 14-year-olds may study an aspect of social history. That could focus on migration as a particular area to help to understand key changes in our history.

At GCSE, specifications in history should support students to learn more about the history of Britain and the wider world, and to deepen their understanding of the people, periods and events studied. There are clear opportunities to include migration as part of the rich subject knowledge that we expect pupils to be taught. Awarding organisations and exam boards have flexibility to offer a greater focus on particular knowledge areas within the GCSE subject content, and modules on migration form part of the GCSEs offered by a number of exam boards. The influence and effect of migration locally can also be explored within the curriculum.

As part of the new GCSE history syllabus introduced in 2016 by OCR and AQA, there are now modules on migration in Britain. That gives teachers the chance sensitively to explore the fact that migration to Britain is not new but has evolved over centuries, largely because of people’s desire to have a better life for themselves or, in many cases, to seek refuge from war or hostile situations. Within the OCR GCSE, the British thematic study, “Migration to Britain circa 1000 to circa 2010”, focuses on patterns of change and continuity over a long period of British history. The study is divided into three eras. Those eras are divided into broad sections that have been chosen as vehicles through which pupils can gain knowledge about a number of key themes.

Examples of those themes include: “The reasons for immigration—differing political, economic, social and religious reasons”, and “From circa 1500: ideas of national ‘identity’—how we have come to define ‘Englishness’ and ‘Britishness’ over time”. Examples of content are time-period specific. For example, in the era circa 1000 to 1500 students should be taught content including, “Immigrants in England during the middle ages; their treatment by the authorities and the population generally; the extent to which they integrated”. For the period 1900 to around 2010, students should be taught content such as, “Immigration as a political issue circa 1900 to circa 2010: the debate over a ‘multi-cultural society’; attitudes towards, and treatment of, political refugees and asylum seekers; the issues raised by EU ‘open borders’”. Those are only some of the topic areas available within that module.

As OCR highlighted, there was an unprecedented high take-up of that option when it was introduced. In 2018, 25% of schools chose to offer OCR’s GCSE History A, and nearly 1.5 million students were taught migration as an optional topic with OCR on GCSE History B. The AQA GCSE includes an option for a thematic study on, “Migration, empires and the people: circa 790 to the present day”. The study will enable students to gain an
understanding of how the identity of the people of Britain has been shaped by their interaction with the wider world.

There are many opportunities for teachers to teach about migration within the framework of the history curriculum, and as such migration could be seen as already part of the national curriculum—I hope that reassures hon. Members. The Government have also committed to making no further reforms to the curriculum, or to GCSEs and A-levels for the remainder of this Parliament—however long it may last—beyond those already announced. We have recently reformed GCSEs and A-levels to establish a rigorous suite of new qualifications that are in line with expected standards in countries with high performing education systems. That followed a review of our national curriculum, and we believe that those extensive changes will need time to settle in, because schools and teachers want stability.

The Government welcome high-quality resources and materials being shared with teachers to support them in this subject, and more resources are becoming available for teachers. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley pointed out, it could also be included in geography lessons.

For example, the Windrush Foundation has developed the free resource called Our Migration Story, which supports history teachers, and features video and text summaries of significant events in each era.

The Runnymede Trust has developed the History Lessons Project, and a guide for teachers called “History Lessons—Making British Histories” provides teachers with the content needed to navigate parts of the new history curriculum. It also offers resources to help teachers use the local history element of the history curriculum. As I stated previously, the local aspect of understanding history is a common thread across all key stages of the national curriculum. Significant migration points are supported by resources such as those that highlight the experiences of the Windrush generation. For example, the Windrush Foundation has developed the definitive Empire Windrush education resource for key stage 2, and an e-book about the 70 Windrush pioneers and champions. The Historical Association offers a wide collection of resources on migration, spanning different areas and stages of the curriculum.

I have picked out just a few examples, and no doubt there will be more. As the hon. Lady highlighted, the Runnymede Trust plans further to develop its work on supporting teachers to teach migration and diversity, including by supporting continuing professional development. I have focused on history in my speech, but the issue of migration features in other parts of the national curriculum such as religious education and citizenship education. As my hon. Friend the Member for Henley pointed out, it could also be included in geography lessons.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood for raising this important matter, and I welcome the opportunity to set out how migration is already supported within the national curriculum. As a truly diverse country it is important for children and young people to gain knowledge about how Britain has migration at its core. Our global outlook has both shaped the world and been shaped by it.

3.37 pm

Helen Hayes: I am hugely grateful to all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate. We have heard powerful examples of untold migration stories in the communities of those who have spoken, which include West Ham, Welsh mining communities, and Wythenshawe, and all those examples serve to emphasise the importance of this agenda. As the daughter of a geographer, and someone who is married to a geographer, I will not argue with the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), who said that migration is an important prism through which to teach geography. However, this is not about either/or—our whole curriculum should be inclusive within all the different disciplines on offer to students today, and the resources that he mentioned are welcome.

I am a little disappointed that the Minister did not acknowledge the need for change, which is illustrated most powerfully in the low take-up of history as a discipline by students from BAME backgrounds at GCSE, A-level and degree level. Will the Minister reflect on the need for further promotion of migration curriculum content for history, on the need for more training and CPD to give teachers confidence to teach this curriculum, and on possibly making some of that content compulsory? I hope the Minister will continue to listen to the voices of young people across the country, and to the rigorous academic research from organisations such as the Runnymede Trust, which clearly states that there is a need for change, notwithstanding some of the changes made in recent years.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered teaching migration in the history curriculum.
Transport Infrastructure: Redditch

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

4 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered transport infrastructure in Redditch.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to raise this issue. As the MP for Redditch, I have one simple aim: to work with my colleagues in local government—in town hall and Worcester city hall—to unlock Redditch. I want to unlock the full potential of our great town. Naturally, that aim is multifaceted. I welcome the recent cut in business rates and investment in housing stock, and I am actively promoting the regeneration of our town centre, but a critical part of our strategy to truly unlock our town is improved transport infrastructure.

These are exciting times for Redditch. Growth is good and the future is bright. Our manufacturing businesses, such as Mettis Aerospace, are second to none, but new commercial enterprises are developing all the time, too. Now is the time to invest in our town’s future, boost productivity, drive prosperity, create new jobs, increase people’s earning power and ensure that our town remains a great place to live, work and raise a family.

With respect to transport, my vision is of a cleaner, greener Redditch with upgraded rail infrastructure, improved bus services and better pedestrian facilities. A considerable amount of work is already taking place, thanks to the local enterprise partnership, Worcestershire County Council and Redditch Borough Council. Due to their hard work and the strategy they have put in place, plans are already under way. The local Conservative council has secured investment for the upgrade of Redditch station, with possible plans including a second platform, additional parking and a better link into the Kingfisher centre. That is a really positive development for our town’s future. Currently, as people arrive at the station, they do not get the optimal impression of the kind of place Redditch aspires to be. We want to make that first impression on people. Momentum must be maintained, and I urge the county council to continue to pursue its strategy apace. I raise that regularly in my meetings with county councillors.

I am pleased that the rail strategy recognises the need for better connections with Birmingham in the longer term. Does the Minister agree that towns such as Redditch rely on regular, fast commuter connections into the city, because many of our residents work in Birmingham or travel there for shopping and leisure, and that we should continue to look at how to provide those connections? Surely, connectivity across all our metropolitan regions is vital to boosting our economic growth. We have already seen investment in HS2, which will provide connectivity between London and Birmingham, but secondary links with urban centres outside the main city centres are vital to jobs and investment too.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that bus services are key to a multi-modal approach? At the moment, the attitude of county councils around the country is to try to take away subsidy for bus services, which has left the vulnerable unable to get about. What does she want to do in that respect for Redditch?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for making that good point. I will come on to bus services, but I certainly agree with him. We all know that local authorities’ budgets are under pressure, which means that they find it difficult to maintain services that are loss-making but are vital to constituents in remote rural areas. That is especially true for elderly and vulnerable people, who rely on those services to take part in day-to-day activities, with all the benefits for an independent life that they bring. I thank him for making that point, and I am glad he agrees with me. I will come on to bus services directly, so his intervention was timely.

I receive a lot of correspondence from constituents about bus services in Redditch. I hold a bus tour to Parliament—to this very room—one a fortnight. A number of constituents come to see me, and we do a question and answer session. We always start with Brexit, but we go straight from that to buses. My constituents are really interested in bus services, and they are desperate for a better service.

The service in Redditch is run by Diamond Bus. I thank it for its constructive approach to criticism—it takes the time to look into the issues we raise—but, as my hon. Friend said, local bus services should be a higher priority for support from central Government. That would enable local authorities to commission improved services, especially in rural areas, that they cannot deliver with the funding that is available at the moment.

I therefore call on the Government to recognise our local authorities’ challenges and support them. Many bus routes do not make a profit, but they are an absolute lifeline. My constituency covers not only the town of Redditch, which is an urban area, but the rural ward of Wychavon. For elderly residents who cannot drive, the lack of bus services hinders their capacity to live an independent life, which is what we all want for our elderly constituents.

In the west midlands generally, the West Midlands Combined Authority has invested more than £100 million in upgrading its bus fleet, which now includes brand-new buses with some of the cleanest engines on the market. Unfortunately, areas such as Redditch do not have the critical mass of such a large transport authority, so we do not benefit from the same level of investment. Andy Street, the West Midlands Combined Authority Mayor, has called for buses across the entire metro area to meet the latest Euro 6 emissions standard. Will the Minister please outline the Department’s thinking on supporting cleaner vehicles for smaller areas such as Redditch?

We are all aware that air quality is a critical issue, and that dangerous small particles emitted by vehicles penetrate deep into people’s lungs and cause harm in the long term. I welcome the Government’s commitment to reducing emissions to net zero, but they should focus too, hand in hand with that, on the quality of the air we breathe. We know that polluted air can cause long-term health conditions, and our citizens—especially our children—should be protected from that. Of course, public transport must play its part in achieving that objective.

As well as addressing issues with public transport and longer commutes, we should focus on improving shorter journeys, so I wholeheartedly welcome the
Government’s ambition to make cycling and walking the natural choices for shorter journeys by 2040. Of course, a lot of work has to take place to make those realistic options for people. Redditch is perfectly placed to take advantage of that—we have beautiful green spaces around every corner, plus a network of easily accessed routes—but much more can be done to encourage more residents to leave their cars behind and take to two wheels or two legs.

The benefits are immense. We know that investment in walking and cycling can improve people’s access to green space, tackle loneliness and reduce health inequalities. The Government are rightly prioritising cycling and walking, and have allocated £476 million for cycling and walking infrastructure from the local growth fund for local enterprise partnerships. An important component of that is the requirement for local government to invest around 15% of local transport infrastructure funding in cycling and walking infrastructure. That kind of investment can really help to integrate communities, improve people’s access to green space, tackle loneliness, improve social housing and reduce health inequalities.

I pay tribute to the Church Hill Big Local group, which has launched a programme of weekly local walks. People from across the area join the group for a walk around the neighbourhood, often visiting hidden beauty spots, enjoying an hour outside in a green environment and making new friends. It is simple, free and open to all. It is growing in popularity and building a genuine, strong sense of community in the area, which is welcome. We know that if people are not accustomed to taking walks and do not know the area well enough, they may lack the confidence to go out. Going out with a group or with family, turning off the TV and leaving the screens behind—even for only an hour—has huge benefits for mental and physical health, which we all need in our busy lives these days.

There is such an opportunity to join up the initiatives with the new focus on social prescribing by GPs. Simple steps, such as walking and cycling, have a positive impact on mental and physical health. There is an opportunity to harness technology. We can have more apps on phones to direct local residents to their quickest cycling and walking routes. There is an opportunity to work with Ordnance Survey, especially in a new town such as Redditch, where mapping has not always caught up with house building programmes. Technology can play a part in opening up opportunities for local residents who have newly moved to the area to access green space and all the benefits that that brings.

I want to touch on the future of driving. The Government are committed to ending the sale of conventional petrol and diesel cars and vans by 2040, but there is a lot of work to do to ensure that we have the infrastructure and technology to enable people to harness cleaner, greener vehicles that are better for the environment and cheaper. Recently, we have had discussions with the local borough councils about how they will ensure that we have enough charging points for electric vehicles in a town such as Redditch. How do we develop the batteries to ensure that the cars are fit for purpose and can genuinely replace a petrol or diesel car? Colleagues may be interested to know—I learned this just this week on one of my bus tours—that people with pacemakers cannot recharge electric cars. I was not aware of that, and clearly we need to look at that if we want people to use electric cars. Those fitted with a pacemaker cannot approach a charging point, so we need to change something to help people take advantage of the technology. There clearly are enormous opportunities that will bring enormous benefits to my constituency of Redditch and to others up and down the country.

We all need transport to live our daily lives, and at the same time we need to look to the future and make long-term plans. We have the comprehensive spending review coming up. Sometimes transport is seen as a poor relation. Everyone thinks that other priorities such as policing, schools, education and hospitals are top of the list, and I cannot disagree with that, but we need to think about these more mundane—pedestrian, perhaps—projects that are so important day to day and make a real difference to people’s quality of life. I very much thank the Minister for coming to respond to my debate, and I look forward to his remarks.

4.13 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) on securing this debate on transport infrastructure in Redditch. She is a doughty campaigner and constituency representative for Redditch, and I commend her work in that regard. She is absolutely right that transport infrastructure is seminal and of considerable importance, not only because it helps people to get from point A to point B, but because it helps our economy and our health and wellbeing, and it helps our entire society to function.

Redditch sits right at the heart of a dynamic region that is key to the UK economy. The midlands is home to more than 10 million people, more than 815,000 businesses, 21 universities and two international airports. Its economy is worth £237 billion to the UK as a whole, and it generates more than 13% of the UK’s gross value added. Her area and region are of extreme importance.

There is a lot going on in the midlands. There are the 2022 Commonwealth games. Coventry is our 2021 city of culture, which I had something to do with as Culture Minister. To capitalise on the region’s strengths, the Government have established the midlands engine partnership, with the goal of creating a midlands engine that powers the UK economy and truly competes on a world stage. We want to make the midlands an even better place to live, work, study and do business, improving opportunities and quality of life for the people of the region.

My hon. Friend’s region sits at the heart of our transport network. Investment is not just critical for regional success, but is key to our national success. That is why, among other things, we are building High Speed 2, which will be the new backbone of the national rail network, improving capacity, connectivity and growth. The midlands will be the first region to benefit from that new railway.

That covers rail, but we are also investing £1.8 billion in the region’s roads, motorways and trunk roads. We are investing £1.7 billion from the local growth fund, which includes investments in transport schemes across the midlands region. Our £1.8 billion investment in
strategic roads includes a major investment on the M42, which my hon. Friend knows provides Redditch with vital connectivity to the wider motorway network. That investment will create a smart motorway at the interchange of the M42 and M40, helping to ease congestion and smooth traffic flows. Work is expected to begin on that important scheme as soon as next March.

My hon. Friend will not need me to tell her that local transport and local issues more generally are often at the front of people’s minds. The local highway network is one of the most valuable national assets and an essential component of our economy. To that end, the Government are investing more than £6 billion in local highway authorities outside London between 2015 and 2021. The £6.6 billion of funding includes nearly £300 million for a pothole action fund, which is being allocated to local highway authorities between 2016 and 2021 to help repair potholes or stop them forming in the first place. Funding from the pothole action fund and 2021 to help repair potholes or stop them forming was £300 million for a pothole action fund, which is being allocated to local highway authorities between 2016 and 2021 to help repair potholes or stop them forming in the first place. Funding from the pothole action fund is enough to repair, or stop from forming, more than 5.9 million potholes on average. That funding is not ring-fenced; its use is entirely at the discretion of highway authorities outside London between 2015 and 2021. The £6.6 billion of funding includes nearly £300 million for a pothole action fund, which is being allocated to local highway authorities between 2016 and 2021 to help repair potholes or stop them forming in the first place. Funding from the pothole action fund is enough to repair, or stop from forming, more than 5.9 million potholes on average. That funding is not ring-fenced; its use is entirely at the discretion of highway authorities, based on their local needs and priorities. Between 2015-16 and 2019-20, Worcestershire will receive more than £85 million to help maintain its local road network alone. That includes more than £12 million for small-scale transport improvements.

With the creation of the major road network—comprising around 5,000 miles of our most important A roads—the most important local authority roads are now in scope for new funding from the national roads fund for upgrades and improvements. Regional prioritisation of improvements to such roads is the responsibility of some sub-national transport bodies. Roads that serve Redditch—the A448, A441, A435 and A4023—are part of the major road network and could be eligible for that funding. I encourage my hon. Friend and her local authority to look into that, because that funding, subject to regional prioritisation, could apply to those roads.

As my hon. Friend will know, Redditch forms the southern terminus of the cross-city line, which provides a regular train service from Redditch to Birmingham New Street and on to Lichfield Trent Valley. I am sure she has used the service more than once. Local rail users are now benefiting from the £100 million Redditch branch enhancement, which was completed in late 2014. That has allowed for a more frequent train service, rising from two trains each hour to three trains each hour in each direction. Passenger numbers at Redditch have since grown from just below 900,000 in 2014—889,366, to be precise—to nearly a million in 2018.

Rail services to Redditch are now operated by West Midlands Trains, which started running the franchise in December 2017. As part of the franchise agreement, it has committed to deliver £700 million of investment in new and refurbished trains, which matters a great deal to commuters and rail passengers. That includes 400 brand-new carriages, of which 100 will be for the cross-city line, which serves Redditch. Those carriages will offer metro-style services, with increased space to carry more passengers, and wider doors for quicker access.

The existing Class 323 trains on the cross-city line are currently undergoing a major overhaul to improve the experience for passengers. Customers will benefit from accessibility improvements, upgraded passenger information screens, new seat covers and a deep clean of the interior. Thanks to Government investment, those improvements will make travelling on routes relevant to my hon. Friend’s constituency more enjoyable and easier for those requiring accessible facilities. The improvements will bring the inside of the units up to modern standards, after 25 years of operating on the route.

As part of its franchise, West Midlands Trains will also invest more than £60 million in station improvements, which will deliver more than 1,000 new car parking spaces and thousands more cycle parking spaces, as I announced in the last couple of days. West Midlands Trains will also deliver more than 800 new digital information screens, provide real-time journey information and free wi-fi, introduce compensation for delays of more than 15 minutes, and invest more than £70 million in new and existing depots to improve train reliability.

Redditch will also benefit from earlier and later services to and from Birmingham, as well as more frequent Sunday services from 2021 onwards. The Government are investing in transport infrastructure in the Redditch area and across the country. We see that in both road and rail improvements.

Alongside rail, local bus services remain central to people’s transport choices, accounting for around 59% of all public transport journeys. My hon. Friend asked for acknowledgment that Redditch relies on regular, fast commuter connections. I, of course, acknowledge that. The Government remain committed to improving bus services. Each year, my Department provides a quarter of a billion pounds in direct revenue support for bus services in England via the bus service operators grant scheme. Of that sum, more than £43 million is paid directly to local councils outside London to support buses that would otherwise not be commercially viable, but which local authorities and services consider socially necessary. The rest goes to commercial bus operators. Worcestershire County Council—my hon. Friend’s local county council—receives more than £530,000 in that grant. Without that support, I venture to say that fares would certainly increase and marginal services would disappear.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Minister for that information. The subsidies that he describes are essential. Are there any incentives or grants in operation to enable bus operators to upgrade their fleets and exchange them for greener and cleaner vehicles?

Michael Ellis: Government funding supports the approximately £1 billion spent by local authorities on concessionary bus passes every year, and the Government have committed to protecting, at first, the very popular national bus travel concession, which is of huge benefit to around 10 million people, allowing free off-peak local travel anywhere in England. On the clean environment, the Government want the UK to be the best place in the world to build and own electric vehicles, which my hon. Friend mentioned, and have already supported the installation of more than 100,000 home charge points. So we are investing in all manner of ways to support such things.

The bus concession is something we have been investing in. It provides older and disabled people with greater freedom, independence and a lifeline to their community. Local authorities are best placed to decide how to
provide support for bus services, reflecting local needs within available budgets. The deregulated bus market works well across much of the country, although in some areas the deregulated market has not always responded effectively to the changing needs of the population. However, to answer my hon. Friend’s question directly, the Government have spent nearly a quarter of a billion pounds—some £240 million—on greener buses since 2010, when we came into office. That is of course very positive.

I am pleased that Worcestershire County Council plans to launch a public consultation, with a view to developing a new passenger transport strategy that meets the needs of residents in Redditch and the wider region. The Bus Services Act 2017 contains a range of options for local authorities to improve local bus services and drive up passenger numbers. In addition to franchising, there are new and improved options to allow local transport authorities to enter into partnerships with their local bus operators, with a view to improving services for passengers.

Accessible information powers in the 2017 Act will require all operators of local bus services to provide audio and visual route and next stop announcements on board their buses across Great Britain, helping to remove barriers to bus travel, particularly for those with disabilities or accessibility needs. We are also pioneering technology such as our forthcoming bus open data digital service, to overhaul bus services across England and give passengers the information that they need to travel with confidence.

I am pleased that Swift, the west midlands travel smartcard, now has more than 3.5 million users, and has transformed how people use public transport in Redditch and the west midlands. Data from Transport Focus, the independent transport user watchdog, shows that congestion and roadworks are among the top factors that passengers think affect the length of their bus journeys. Together, local authorities and bus companies can identify the congestion hotspots that disrupt bus journeys and, through partnership commitments, do something about them.

I hope that I have assured my hon. Friend of my, and my Department’s, strong commitment to transport in Redditch, Worcestershire, the midlands and this country. I commend her for her work and advocacy on behalf of her constituency.

Question put and agreed to.
John Howell (Henley) (Con): One of the groups of victims at that point included people who had suffered sexual violence in conflict. I know the British embassy in Bogotá had started a human rights programme. Has the hon. Lady assessed how successful that has been in dealing with people who had suffered sexual violence in conflict?

Jo Stevens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. It is something on which I hope the Minister will be able to elaborate in his response to the debate, because the UK and Colombia are friends. We wield enormous influence over what goes on in Colombia, and that is one of the programmes that I hope will continue, so that we can ensure that that particular group of victims does not suffer further.

In 2013 President Uribe co-founded a new political party, the Centro Democrático or Democratic Centre, largely to oppose the peace process in the 2014 Colombian elections. Despite the extremely narrow rejection of the peace agreement in that plebiscite, a revised agreement was ratified by the Colombian Congress shortly afterwards, in December 2016. That final agreement, for which the UK is the penholder on behalf of the UN Security Council, was structured around six areas. The first was comprehensive rural land reform. The Government promised to provide 3 million hectares of land to the landless or land-poor peasants, and to formalise legal property titles on another 7 million hectares, in addition to heavily investing in infrastructure projects and state-building in previously FARC-controlled areas.

The second area was political participation. As I said previously, FARC became a legal political party, and was guaranteed a minimum of five seats in Congress and five in the House of Representatives for two legislative terms, starting in 2018. After that point, FARC will have to win seats competitively in elections.

The third area was the ending of the conflict, disarmament of FARC, transition to civilian life and reincorporation, and guaranteed security conditions for former combatants and communities in UN-monitored reincorporation zones. In August 2018 I visited one of those zones, a specific camp in Filipinas in the Arauca region on the north-eastern border with Venezuela. I saw what little progress had been made in establishing those zones and getting former combatants to a position in which they could make a living and fend for themselves.

The fourth area was ending the drug trade, which will obviously have an impact on drug consumption in the country. FARC will help farmers to stop growing coca and instead grow legal crops in order to make a living and fend for themselves.

The fifth area was justice for victims of the conflict, which the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) touched on. A transitional justice system called the JEP would be established. Special tribunals would adjudicate war crimes and other atrocities committed by Government security forces, paramilitaries and guerrillas, with reduced sentences for people who came forward. The emphasis of the HEP would be on restorative justice and ensuring the rights of victims.

The sixth and final area was the implementation and verification of the peace agreement, which is a really critical part. The UN special political verification mission would take an oversight role, and a commission would be set up to follow up the implementation process. It would be known by its Spanish abbreviation, CSIVI, and consist of three senior Government members and three senior FARC members.

At first, the peace agreement implementation seemed to be working. There was a significant drop in violence in 2017, Colombia’s safest year since 1975. However, there was a very significant change in direction in 2018 with the election of Iván Duque as the new President. He is a protégé of Uribe, and ran on a platform of dismantling parts of the agreement, particularly in relation to political participation by FARC and the work of the JEP. Since his election, he has systematically attempted to undermine the JEP, despite its being recognised by the international community and, most importantly, by the victims of the conflict as a way to provide truth, justice and reconciliation for victims on all sides and an end to the impunity that has operated for decades. That has resulted in a significant stalling of the process, which is threatening the very existence of the peace agreement.

After the United States, we are the second-largest investor in Colombia. As a penholder to the peace agreement, we play a particular role in the process. The UN Security Council warned on 16 April that the peace process “stands at a critical juncture”.

All sections of the peace agreement are crucial, but I want to focus a few remarks on three of them—ending the conflict, political participation and the role of the JEP. One third of the peace agreement’s 578 stipulations have not even begun to be implemented, and an estimated 1,700 former guerrillas have returned to armed struggle. The arrival of President Duque in London yesterday is very timely. I know the Minister is meeting the President later today, so I hope Opposition Members have questions for the Minister and issues that he can raise with President Duque when he sees him.

I now turn to the armed conflict. Colombian human rights organisations estimate that 591 social leaders have been assassinated since the signing of the agreement, and 236 of those assassinations have happened in the 10 months since the President took office.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know that I went on delegations to Colombia in 2007, when Uribe was still in power, and in 2012. We heard widespread evidence of human rights abuses, and I am really disappointed to hear that slow progress has been made with the peace process. Does she agree that it is time for our Government to step up and work with human rights defenders to bring about a country-specific plan to protect human rights defenders in Colombia?

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the questions I have for the Minister is on the help that we have been giving to the Colombian Government and their Ministry of Justice and Law in training their lawyers in investigation and disclosure. It does not seem to be working, because impunity continues.

An estimated 135 former FARC combatants have been murdered since they laid down their weapons in the disarmament process. One of the most recent victims was Dimar Torres, who is alleged to have been murdered...
by Colombian soldiers. The local community found his body next to a recently dug grave, raising suspicions that the soldiers were attempting to make his body disappear, which is what we saw over years and years, prior to the signing of the peace agreement.

A recent statement by the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial executions and the UN working group on enforced disappearances urged the Colombian Government to “cease inciting violence against demobilised individuals of the FARC...and to meet the guarantees that were made to them during the negotiations in Havana, most importantly respect of the right to life.”

The Minister responsible for peace implementation, Emilio Archila, reacted by responding that the statement was “badly intentioned” and rejected the conclusions, while former President Uribe attacked the UN on his Twitter account.

That follows revelations from The New York Times in late May that the army has reinstated orders to soldiers to show results of the killings of armed groups, with performance-related pay. That is a chilling reminder of the military’s involvement in the “false positives” scandal under Uribe’s Administration, during which thousands of civilians were murdered by the military and dressed up in army fatigues as though they had been guerrilla fighters killed in combat. After a huge outcry, the Colombian Ministry of Defence said that it would amend the orders, but concerns remain. Last week, the Senate voted to promote General Martinez Espinel, even though he was second-in-command of a brigade accused of murdering 23 civilians in that way between 2004 and 2006.

The Colombian Government recently claimed that there had been a 32% reduction in killings of social leaders, but that is in direct contradiction of the evidence from the many reports of human rights organisations on the ground. Uribe recently said that 5,000 FARC members had returned to the mountains—a coded reference to their taking up arms again. That claim is completely fake, with no evidence to substantiate it. It is not supported by anyone involved in the monitoring of the peace process and is a deliberate attempt to diminish the authority of the JEP by the Government party. There has been a deliberate attempt to diminish the authority of the JEP in particular. There has undoubtedly been political interference in the JEP by the Colombian Government, most notably by the actions of former Attorney General Néstor Humberto Martínez, who recently resigned following the long-awaited release from prison of Congressman Santrich.

Jesús Santrich was a key negotiator of the Colombian peace agreement, a member of the FARC delegation to the negotiations, and an architect of the agreement. At the time of his arrest in April 2018, he was a member of the CSIVI, the implementation committee that I mentioned earlier. He was due to take his seat in the House of Representatives in July 2018, as part of the FARC’s 10 representatives in the Colombian Congress, which was a specific part of the peace agreement. However, in April 2018 he was arrested on the order of an international arrest warrant requesting extradition, issued by a New York court. It alleged that he had conspired to smuggle 10 tonnes of cocaine out of Colombia in an aeroplane. He categorically denied the accusation, but was imprisoned in solitary confinement in La Picota high-security prison in Bogotá.

Last August, I visited Santrich in his prison cell. He is blind, suffers from a degenerative eye condition so severe that his sight is almost non-existent, and has other major health problems. He spent 13 months in La Picota prison, during which time he undertook a lengthy hunger strike to draw attention to his plight. When I met him, he was extremely frail, in declining health, and was being refused access to essential medical care. No adjustments were made to accommodate his disability. When I returned to the UK I met the Minister, and I am pleased to say that shortly afterwards, some disability aids were provided for Congressman Santrich. At no point was any evidence disclosed to his lawyers to back up the allegations against him, the basis on which the extradition warrant had been issued.

Santrich has since presented his case to the JEP, arguing that it had jurisdiction, rather than the Colombian criminal court. The then Attorney General challenged the case and lost. The Attorney General was asked by the JEP to provide evidence to substantiate imprisonment and the proposed extradition, but none was forthcoming. The US Department of Justice did not provide any evidence, either. On 15 May this year, the JEP gave its ruling, guaranteeing that there would be no extradition. It ordered that Jesús Santrich be freed. The Colombian Procurator’s Office appealed the decision, but the JEP insisted on Santrich’s release. The Attorney General refused to sign the order for release and has since resigned, saying that he is not prepared to sign the order. Santrich was kept in prison until 19 May, and on his arrival outside the prison gates, he was immediately re-arrested and taken to the Attorney General’s building by helicopter. Ten days later, on 29 May, the Supreme Court ordered his release and eventually, on 11 June, he was sworn in office.

I went into detail about that because the entire process has been carried out in the context of strong opposition to the JEP by the Government party. There has been a deliberate attempt to diminish the authority of the JEP that has wide-ranging consequences for its proper
functioning and authority. Unsurprisingly, the case has caused huge concern among defenders of the peace process, which adds to the considerable concerns about the lack of implementation of the process, the rise in murders of civilians and continuing impunity.

As a key member of the negotiating team who was due to occupy one of the 10 seats in Congress guaranteed to FARC, Santrich has become symbolic for the peace process. That is why I hope that the Minister will tonight seek an explanation from President Duque about his Government’s conduct in this case—the conduct of the former Attorney General in particular—and ask what reassurances can be given about Jesús Santrich’s freedom and ability to carry out his democratic role in the future.

Finally, I will return to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) about the UK’s role in assisting in Colombia. It has been mentioned in past debates that we have given support to the Fiscalía to help it learn about investigation and disclosure. If we are still doing that, why are we doing so when the JEP is being politicised and abused in such a way?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate may last until 5.30. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench speakers no later than seven minutes past 5, and the guideline limits are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition, and 10 minutes for the Minister. If the Minister would be kind enough to allow Jo Stevens three minutes at the end to sum up, that would be appreciated. Until seven minutes past 5, it is Back-Bench time, and I have one hon. Member seeking to contribute: Jim Shannon.

4.48 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. It is always a pleasure to speak in these debates, but I will try not to prolong my speech beyond the time that you have so kindly given me.

The hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) has presented the case for the Colombian peace process very well. She referred to my colleagues, my right hon. Friend the Member for Foyle, Mark Durkan. They were, individually and collectively, involved in trying to progress the peace process—I, too, am a member of the Parliamentary Friends of Colombia group. Both my colleagues were invited to Colombia to speak and to tell their story about Northern Ireland. The reason was obviously what we—I say “we”, because everyone together made it happen—have done in Northern Ireland, although the political process has stalled at the moment. We ended the violence, started a political process and found a methodology to take that process forward. It was an example for the rest of the world, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley has spoken about it in many countries, one of them being Colombia.

I have a deep interest in Colombia, and I hope that its people will see the peace we have in many places across the world. As my party’s spokesperson on human rights and equality issues where they pertain to religious persecution, I am aware that some groups in Colombia—those who are Christians—have been targeted because of their religious persuasion. Peasants have also been targeted, although I use the word “peasants” in a general sense; it is meant not as a marker for anything, but for the people who live on the land and depend on it for their survival, livelihood and income.

Some of the things that have happened in Colombia are quite unbelievable. I have an interest in the country, which I believe has real potential and an appetite for change. With a bit more effort from the Government and everyone involved, Colombia could move from where we are to a peace process that can actually do something. My hope, prayers and ambitions are for that to happen. I believe in prayer—I say that because it is true—and I have prayed for peace in Colombia and across the world.

About this time last year, I asked a written parliamentary question:

“To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what discussions has the Minister had with the Columbian Government on progress on the peace process in that country.”

I received a full answer from the Minister present. He always responds well, and I am not just saying that because he is here—he does, and he has a deep passion for and interest in Colombia, as is the case with many other countries of the world. He is keen to see progress, peace and prosperity. His response was:

“The UK has assisted the peace process since 2012, contributing over £28m in Conflict Stability and Security Funding since 2015 and holding the pen in the UN Security Council. I have had numerous discussions with the Colombian Government during that time on progress, most recently with the Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs on 21 June.”

Clearly, the Minister and our Government have made a financial input, have an interest in the process and have regular discussions with the Colombian Government. This nation—the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—has made clear attempts and taken strides in the past to be a help and a guide in such scenarios, but equally clearly, almost a year down the line from that question, the journey to peace still needs a wee knock-on or a nudge—perhaps a detour—and more to be done.

To say that Colombia is a war-torn nation is an understatement. The national victims unit, which was set up in 2011, and which records crimes that have occurred since 1985 in the context of the armed conflict, registered almost 280,000 killings, the majority of them involving civilians. That number is horrific, and it gives an indication of a genocide that has taken place—the slaughter of innocents. More than 46,500 people have been forcibly disappeared. By 1 November 2016, more than 7 million people had been forced to flee their homes. The actual figures are expected to be considerably higher; these are guesstimations of what has taken place, but they indicate the magnitude of the issue.

Over the years, I have had the chance to have direct contact with people with the friends of Colombia group. We have had meetings in London, here in Westminster, and elsewhere on such matters. We have had meetings in Belfast, back home in Northern Ireland, and people wanted to have an idea of how the peace process worked and was taken forward. Such meetings gave me an insight into what took place. Some of the people we met told horrific stories of what had happened to their relatives and friends—some had disappeared and never been found.
The nation of Colombia needs peace, medical care, education systems, social welfare, housing and initiatives to take people out of poverty. We have an advisory role, and perhaps even a clear practical role, in helping to achieve that. A fair and democratic process, and a commitment to that process, are needed. I do not want to be unfair, but I sometimes feel, looking at the situation from the outside in, in an observational way, that the commitment of all those involved in the process has not as been as transparent as it perhaps could be. However, I believe that we are not that far away from moving things forward. In Northern Ireland, when the process moved forward, it was by small steps—but those steps then led to big strides. That is what we need.

We need to see an end to the land grabs—to the theft of land from people who depend on it for their living. The killings that have taken place need an explanation and an investigation, because those who carried them out should be accountable for their crimes. No one can carry out crimes and expect to get away with them.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): On justice and holding those who have committed horrendous crimes to account, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the establishment of the unit to dismantle the paramilitaries is a particular priority, and should be brought forward with due haste by the Duque Administration?

Jim Shannon: I agree with the hon. Lady. Clearly, paramilitary groups think that they are above the law, and they are carrying out atrocities. They need to be accountable and to stop that; if the peace process is to go forward, we need to ensure that those who have the power are doing their best to stop these things.

There have been kidnappings, and people have gone missing. In Northern Ireland, we always wished for the remains of those who were kidnapped, murdered or disappeared to be found and returned to their families. It is important to have that in place—for families to have the final resolution of being able to bury their loved ones in graves, and to have time to grieve for people who had disappeared. The hon. Member for Cardiff Central referred to many examples of people being disappeared, although in one case the person was found because the security forces were still trying to dispose of his body.

I am my party’s spokesperson for human rights, and they feature at the top of my agenda, in whichever country they are being abused. We need action to stop women being sexually abused and horribly tortured by security forces. We also need to help those activists—we have been aware of some of them for a number of years—who have been kidnapped and disappeared. Some journalists, who are spokespeople for human rights issues and who have made the world aware of what is going on, have disappeared and never been found—any dissent has been trampled on right away.

I am not any smarter than anyone else—far from it—but coming from Northern Ireland and having a personal knowledge of the country, I perhaps understand more than some others in this place the emotional trauma that is passed from generation to generation of those who have suffered at the hands of paramilitaries, as well as the impact and lasting legacy the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) referred to in her intervention. That can only be dealt with in two parts. First, we must allow time for wounds to heal over without anyone picking open the scabs. That means an end to violence and the threat of it, so that people can grieve and learn how to exist in a new nation where everyone is equal. Secondly, opportunities are required for things to be different—for children to be educated and get paying jobs, for skills to be taught, for work to be made available so that people can earn a wage, and for communities to recover.

We should do more, while not overstepping. I look to the Minister, whom I respect greatly, and who understands my passion for these issues, to explain the view of the Department, in particular, and the steps that can be taken so that we can play a small but valuable part in this process for peace.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I have two observations to make. First, rarely can a country-specific debate have been held immediately before a presidential audience to which the Minister of State responding has been invited. Secondly, we have a little more time available for the Front-Bench speeches than we thought. As long as the process is not abused, I am prepared to be flexible with the guideline limits for the Front-Bench speeches.

4.59 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone; as always, your advice is extremely diligent and welcome. I will not speak for desperately long because this is the second debate on Colombia that we have had in recent months, after the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) secured a full debate in September. I declare an interest in this subject because, at the time, he and I had just returned from a visit to Colombia hosted by ABColombia, which is a platform made up of the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, Trócaire and a couple of other organisations to provide research and advocacy of the human rights situation in that country. The hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), whom I congratulate on securing this debate, also contributed to that debate back in September.

This debate has proven to be a welcome opportunity to reflect on how things have changed since then, particularly in the context of the President’s visit. As the hon. Member for Cardiff Central laid out in considerable detail, the situation has changed even in those few months: progress towards peace has become slower and pretty precarious, and there is a risk of the situation deteriorating. The case of Jesús Santrich is emblematic of that.

The bombings that have taken place have led to further deterioration of that peace process, particularly the bombing of the police academy in Bogotá on 17 January that claimed 20 innocent lives and is just one example of sporadic but increasing violence and tension across the country, particularly in rural areas, where poverty and the legacy of conflict are most acute. That is perhaps exemplified most significantly in the dramatic increase in the number of killings, threats, and instances of intimidation of human rights defenders.

During our visit, we had the privilege of meeting several human rights defenders in different parts of the country that we travelled to. The Minister will be aware
that the hon. Member for Rhondda and I have written to him about a couple of specific cases of individuals we met who received direct threats of intimidation, violence and death. I hope he will be able to respond, if not directly in his speech then in writing, and will look up that letter in advance of his meeting with the President this evening.

The lack of security for human rights defenders, especially those working in rural areas on the implementation of the peace accord and on practical aspects of land restitution, environmental issues and crop substitution, are incredibly concerning. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) outlined in detail some statistics that should worry and alarm us all. As we all know, Colombia is the worst country in the world for the killing of human rights defenders. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, more than 110 were murdered in 2018, and that trend has continued into this year, with an average of three defenders killed a week.

Colombia is also one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. There has been growing global attention to the hugely important role that those members of the community play in speaking up and defending the rights of others who they represent. They take huge personal risks to speak out against injustice and abuse of human rights in their countries, often by their Governments or by other non-state actors. It is hugely important that we recognise around the world the particularly acute situation in Colombia.

The Scottish Government remain committed to protecting human rights worldwide. As part of that commitment, last year they saw the launch of the Scottish human rights defender fellowship, which offers human rights defenders the chance to work with the Scottish Government, Scottish universities and civil society organisations to share expertise and work together to protect fundamental rights across the globe. I believe it may be of interest to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), who is sitting next to me, that it is hosted at the University of Dundee. We echo Amnesty International’s support for human rights defenders across the world and support its call for a flagging system to facilitate visa applications and allow them to travel more easily to the UK for work or respite and relief.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is clear research that Colombia is the most dangerous place in the world to be a trade union activist?

Patrick Grady: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; I was going to reflect on that towards the end of my remarks. I know that he met the general secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress last week, and had a full debrief of the Justice for Colombia peace monitoring delegation that visited the country towards the end of May, which included the STUC general secretary and the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). The role of our civil society to hold both Governments to account is hugely important.

It is important that we take the opportunity to engage appropriately with President Duque, especially while he is here. I fully endorse everything that the hon. Member for Cardiff Central said about the special jurisdiction for peace; related to that is how to deal with land restitution, which is a key issue for sustainable peace across the country. There have been attempts to undermine the amount of land that should be up for restitution by the Government, despite the effort of many non-governmental organisations. That law needs to be fully extended, so that time is properly available to restitute the land to those who need it.

We should welcome the UK Government’s efforts, through its embassies, to support the JEP programme and to highlight its centrality as a pillar of the peace agreement. It is important that they continue to guarantee the rights of victims to truth, justice, reparations and non-repetition. The two important UN mandates that are operating must be renewed this autumn to their full strength and for as long as possible, so that their important work can continue. I finish by echoing the points about the importance of ensuring that civil society is fully engaged. I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is very nice to see you in the chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on securing this timely debate, and I thank Justice for Colombia for organising my visit at the end of May. In Bogotá we met members of the Government and members of the Opposition and civil society, but we also went out into the countryside. We went down to Cauca in the south-west, which is a very troubled area, and up to the north-east. When we got to Cauca, we went to a village and I was shocked: on the wall they had pinned up photographs of 30 human rights defenders who had been killed. The reason I was shocked was that they had all been killed in the past year.

That speaks to the first challenge: in the areas that the FARC have vacated, the Government have not put sufficient resource in to build up the criminal justice system. That is why paramilitaries and criminals have come in. For example, we met an old lady who said that people walked around her house at night with guns, and she had no idea who they were. The UN says that last year, 116 human rights defenders were killed; this year, it thinks that the number will be even higher. The first thing that the Colombian Government need to do is strengthen the criminal justice system in the rural areas.

The root of the problem, as hon. Members have said, is land. What has happened in Colombia in the 20th century is akin to what happened in the highland clearances in the 18th and 19th century. First, we saw people taking land from the campesinos to build sugar and banana plantations, but now that has shifted, and people are stealing land from indigenous people for very aggressive mining. We met people who had not been given what they had been promised as part of the peace settlement—coca farmers who wanted to switch but were not being given the capital and equipment to do so. It is really important that the August deadline that was set for achieving change is extended, because the promises have not been fulfilled. In Tierra Grata in the north, one of the zones where things were supposed to be going so well, we went to a village where there was no running water, no connection to electricity and no roads. That is also extremely problematic.

The third challenge is about the Government’s lack of respect for the transitional justice process, which my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central described
[Helen Goodman]

in some detail. Building on experience in Northern Ireland and South Africa, it was decided to right past wrongs through the JEP, through a truth commission and through the unit for the disappeared. The under-resourcing of the JEP by the Government is so severe that lawyers who work there have a caseload of 600 cases. It is not working as it should do.

I know that the new Government face a situation that is intrinsically difficult and complex; they have been in power for only 10 months and they have to cope with 1.5 million refugees from Venezuela. That is not straightforward. It is important that those people who gave up their weapons—the UN oversaw the process of disarmament; it says that it was done properly, and that people did it truthfully—are rewarded, so that there is an incentive for the FARC people who have yet to join the peace process to join in and for the ELN, which is a more extreme group, to get on board with it. That will happen only if the Government fulfil their promises. It is important that the international community continues to support them.

I will tell the Minister the things that I think the British Government could do that would be helpful. First of all, they could send election monitors for the local elections in the autumn. That is very important, because they have privatised the electoral roll. Secondly, the UK is the penholder. The UN Security Council will make a visit in July, and it is really important that when its representatives are there, they meet trade unionists and human rights defenders and go out into the countryside. Thirdly, it is really important that the mandate and the budget for the UN is extended beyond October, in order to have that neutral, impartial and fair overview of what is going on.

Fourthly, I would like the Government to include case studies from Colombia in the two forthcoming conferences that they are organising, on journalism and on sexual violence in conflict. It would be worth studying Colombia in that. Fifthly, they should maintain the work that the embassy has done on minerals and the environment, and co-operating via the OECD. Sixthly, they should deliver the messages to the Colombian Government that I set out—the three key points.

Finally, the Government should remind the Americans that they too sat in the Security Council, supported and agreed the peace process and are signed up to it. They should not undermine it, as they do when they take away the right to visas of judges in the JEP who make judgments that they do not like. That is interfering in another country’s judicial process and is extremely unhelpful.

I do not know whether you have been to Colombia, Mr Hollobone. It is a very beautiful country. The people we met were extremely welcoming. They deserve better. We cannot do everything for them, but I think that we can help, and I hope that the Minister will do so.

5.13 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Thank you for chairing our proceedings, Mr Hollobone. I genuinely thank the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) for securing the debate, which, as she says, is impeccably timed to coincide with President Duque’s two-day official visit. It allows me to recognise the hon. Lady’s longstanding engagement with the issue and her obvious, genuine and passionate commitment to justice in Colombia, which we all applaud.

I welcome the opportunity to give the Government’s assessment of the direction of the peace process. The majority of the commitments made by the FARC and the Colombian Government as part of the peace accords are being implemented. FARC is no longer an armed group—it has laid down its weapons—and, for their part, the Colombian Government have made the constitutional and legislative changes necessary to enable the peace process.

In 2018, the FARC took part in elections that had a record turnout and were noted as being the safest for decades; it now has members serving in Congress. The Colombian Government are setting up the legal structures that will govern the Special Jurisprudence for Peace—the JEP. This should pave the way for a transitional justice system that can offer justice for the victims of the conflict.

In the context of a five decade-long armed conflict, all of this is hugely significant, but it is also difficult. Inevitably, there have been, and there will continue to be, bumps in the road, particularly around transitional justice. This is a contentious but critical part of the peace process and it is crucial that it enjoys both political and public legitimacy. We were pleased that President Duque signed the legal basis of the transitional justice system earlier this month.

Some of the wider and more practical aspects of the peace deal are yet to be fully implemented. New momentum is now needed, for instance to bring greater security and prosperity to post-conflict areas, especially in rural districts. As the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) said—I commend her for her best ever speech—the UN and observers should focus properly on the rural areas; I find that argument compelling. It is important that all Colombians, particularly those living in rural areas, see that the peace agreement is being consistently applied, and know that they will all benefit from it.

Reintegration of former combatants, on the scale necessary in Colombia, is another challenging issue. More than 13,000 former FARC fighters and militia have registered for civilian reintegration. Regrettably, slow progress with training, fear of reprisals and long waiting times have led many to join disident and criminal groups. The murder rate in Colombia has fallen to its lowest level in over 40 years, but the delay in reintegrating former combatants risks undermining that positive record. Indeed, we raised our concerns about killings by criminal groups at the UN Security Council in January, and at the UN Human Rights Council in March.

Tragically, as we have heard, those who speak out for the rights of local communities are often singled out for attack. The UN reports that at least 115 human rights defenders and community leaders were killed last year, as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland mentioned in her speech. Amnesty International has described Colombia as the most dangerous country in the world for human rights defenders.

The Colombian Government accepted all the UK’s recommendations to improve the protection of human rights defenders at their universal periodic review of
human rights in May 2018. We welcome this, but much work remains to be done. We are supporting that work. We regularly meet with human rights defenders and have spent more than £3 million since 2011 on projects to support them. Those projects are making a real difference to the lives of human rights defenders, social leaders and importantly, victims of sexual violence.

The ELN perpetuates insecurity in Colombia. We should not forget the 20 innocent people killed in the ELN attack on a police academy in Bogota in January. The ELN was not party to the 2016 peace agreement. It is a cause for regret that it rejected President Duque’s conditions for a return to peace talks in September. It is perfectly clear that the ELN and other criminal gangs are more interested in conducting a campaign of violence, extortion and intimidation in order to control illegal mining and profit from the record levels of coca production. We urge the ELN to reinstate its ceasefire and end its campaign of violence.

We have supported the Colombian peace process every step of the way, and we will continue to do so. We are proud to be the penholder at the UN Security Council. We are the largest donor to the UN fund that supports the implementation of the peace agreement and a significant donor to the UN Office for Human Rights and the Organisation of American States peace monitoring mission.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Minister for his contribution and other hon. Members for what has been a good debate. Will he acknowledge in particular the role of women human rights defenders in Colombia? I know that Amnesty International in particular has been doing some fantastic work, and they are often those under particular threat.

Sir Alan Duncan: I will acknowledge them very fulsomely. We particularly support the women’s network, which assists women who have been victims of sexual violence, which is often the most repulsive and hideous aspect of the violence that they suffer.

Returning to what we are doing, through our conflict, stability and security fund alone we have spent over £40 million since 2015 on projects and programmes that help to cement a lasting peace. President Duque’s visit this week has been an important opportunity to strengthen our relationship with the Colombian Government across the board—he has many Ministers with him for the two days of his visit. The Prime Minister expressed her full support for implementation of the peace accords in her meeting yesterday, as did the Foreign Secretary when he and I met the President earlier today.

Our discussions of course went much further than that, covering the full range of co-operation, from climate change and trade to security and human rights. It is a sign of how our relationship is evolving towards a genuine strategic partnership through which we will work together to address the shared challenges we face.

Later today, we will announce a memorandum of understanding for a sustainable growth partnership, through which both countries will commit to meeting ambitious targets on halting deforestation and environmental crime and to working together on the low-carbon transition. President Duque was clear at his Canning House lecture yesterday: deforestation in Colombia must stop. I am confident that our new sustainable growth partnership will be an important weapon in Colombia’s arsenal with which to fight deforestation and environmental crime.

It is worth noting the programmes that the UK undertakes in rural areas of Colombia, which directly benefit communities there and their environment. UK-funded programmes in Colombia work across the country, at national, regional and municipal level. Recovery of post-conflict rural communities is a priority focus for the cross-Government conflict security and stability fund programme that supports the peace process throughout the country. It directly supports 18 organisations working in rural parts of the country, while the cross-Government prosperity fund also works with six local rural partners. Our international climate finance programmes work with partner organisations in rural areas, and directly with farms and indigenous communities.

On the wider issue of business and the environment, honourable Members may wish to be aware of UK action in the extractive sector in Colombia. The UK has sought to address human rights risks in the Colombian mining industry by encouraging compliance with the OECD’s due diligence guidance and by fostering partnerships between the private sector and international organisations, local government and civil society to support responsible mining practices.

Helen Goodman: That is very important, because it is the new source of conflict in Colombia. I would like the Minister to consider that we perhaps need to have some sanctions on people who do not abide by the OECD guidance; I do not think there are any at the moment. Could he possibly take that away?

Sir Alan Duncan: I must say that I found the hon. Lady’s thesis about the importance of land very well thought through, very important and very significant. In terms of sanctions, as she well appreciates, from the legislation—

Helen Goodman: Not those kinds of sanctions—penalties.

Sir Alan Duncan: To complete my logic, at the moment we do actual sanctions with the European Union, although we will be able to do that soon, but I understand what the hon. Lady says about penalties; removing impunity for bad behaviour and bad conduct is, I think, what she is saying.

We funded a “train the trainer” project in the country on due diligence guidance for responsible supply chains. In addition, the UK has funded a project to support the engagement of the private sector with Colombia’s Truth Commission in its work as part of Colombia’s transitional justice process. The project developed methodologies, tools and recommendations aimed at addressing and promoting the role of the private sector in the transitional justice process.

Our £25 million prosperity fund programme also supports projects to help to develop Colombia’s national infrastructure and to build capacity in agritech and local government. This work will have important knock-on benefits for the Colombian economy and environment and for the peace process.

I also want to put on record, as has been mentioned today, our appreciation for Colombia’s generosity in hosting more than 1.5 million Venezuelans who have
been forced to flee their home country. We are playing a part in the regional response by supporting it with an £8 million contribution to the global concessional financing facility.

We commend Colombia for the progress it has made following the peace accords, but we recognise that more needs to be done to implement them in full, to bring security and prosperity to all areas of the country and, crucially, to protect human rights. As an international partner and an old, long-standing friend of Colombia, the UK will continue to support the implementation of the peace agreement and to work with Colombia across a broad range of issues to promote prosperity and opportunity for all its people.

5.25 pm

Jo Stevens: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I think that we have covered off all six areas of the peace agreement in detail. I thought all the contributions, whether speeches or interventions, were made in a very thoughtful and knowledgeable way, and I am very grateful to colleagues for their participation. I also thank the Minister for his response. There were some very helpful and useful suggestions from the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), which I hope the Minister will take up with the Colombian Government, although I might have got my timings wrong about when the Minister was seeing President Duque today—

Sir Alan Duncan: Twice today, and again tonight.

Jo Stevens: That is good. That is excellent. So he will be able to raise with the President the points that we have raised today. We all have a shared interest in the peace process and its success, so when we raise our concerns it is because we are genuinely concerned about what will happen to Colombia in the future. I thank, again, all colleagues for participating in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Colombia peace process.

5.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 19 June 2019

[Ms Karen Buck in the Chair]

Free Schools

9.30 am

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the future of free schools.

It gives me great pleasure to open this debate. I want to start by quoting Kavit, a year 11 pupil at Michaela Community School in Wembley—a free school that I co-founded in 2011, opened in 2014 and chaired until 2017:

“I have been at Michaela, our unique and inspiring free school for five years. I was in the first cohort of pupils and remember when there were just 120 of us here. Now we have 600 pupils and in 2 years, we will have over 800.

I have been given so many opportunities to become a better person. Michaela is like nowhere else. Firstly, there is no bullying in the school. Our high standards of behaviour have led to a friendly environment where younger pupils can go to older pupils for help. We all feel safe and cared for by our teachers at school.

Our teachers are extremely hard working. They stay for hours after school helping pupils who may be unsure on a topic and create new booklets to use in lessons.

I transformed from primary to secondary school. My parents saw me reading smaller books, revising more, helping more at home and I was a much nicer person overall. Michaela inspired me to reach for the top. My aim is to graduate from Cambridge. It would be a dream come true.”

That illustrates the power of a great education and how dedicated teaching changes lives and empowers a new generation, regardless of their background.

What is special about Kavit and Michaela is that the inventive teaching methods pioneered at the school in terms of curriculum, behaviour and leadership, thanks to the autonomy inherent in these state-funded comprehensive schools, would simply not have been possible without the free schools policy introduced in 2010. Set up by the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) and the Member for Woking (John Redwood), led by David Cameron, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, and supported by the Prime Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma) and the Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman), free schools are changing the landscape of education in England.

Our teachers are more likely to locate in deprived areas and can be vehicles to address behavioural problems that cause youth violence, thanks to the freedoms allowed to teaching staff. They are changing the landscape of education in England for the better. While the free schools policy has been an undeniable success since its inception in 2010, nine years later it is necessary to breathe new momentum into the programme, which is in danger of stalling. We need to take free schools from success to scale.

In 2010, the English education system was hampered by poor results and languishing in the international league tables. Twenty per cent. of our 16-year-olds were unable to functionally read or do basic maths. Under the Conservatives, thankfully, those stories are no longer the norm. Led by David Cameron, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) and the Minister, free schools were a fundamental part of our charge to drive up standards, unlock innovation and improve discipline and leadership.

In the years following their introduction, free schools have been an unqualified success. The latest figures reveal that a free school is 50% more likely to be rated outstanding when compared with other types of state school. They are the most popular type of school among parents, attracting more first preferences than any other. Although free schools represent no more than 2% of all schools in England, four of the top 10 schools in the country are free schools, when measured by Progress 8 scores. Disadvantaged children do better at free schools than at other types of state school. Free schools are more likely to be located in deprived areas and can be vehicles to address behavioural problems that cause youth violence, thanks to the freedoms allowed to teaching staff. There is also emerging evidence of the competitive benefit that free schools generate, raising the quality of neighbouring schools through healthy challenge.

Despite those successes, the pace at which new free schools are entering the education system has slowed to a crawl. In a paper that I have authored, which is due to be published soon, I found that two thirds of parents do not live within reasonable commuting distance of a free school, because of a lack of geographic distribution. I also found that, at the current rate, it would be another 12 years before free schools made up just 10% of all English schools—two decades after the programme began. The first four years of the programme saw significantly higher numbers opening than in the most recent four years.

Thanks to the robust knowledge-based curriculum pioneered by the teachers at Michaela, our pupils have been known to make two years of progress in reading in the space of one year or double the normal progress in maths. Some have even made up to five years of reading progress in a single academic year, and others have even come off their special education needs support. That is one reason why Michaela was rated outstanding by Ofsted in 2017. Michaela is one example of how free schools are changing the landscape of education in England for the better. The children of Wembley are lucky to have Michaela in their community, and I am pleased that we now have permission, announced last week, to open a second school in Stevenage.

I could wax lyrical for hours about Michaela, and I know the Minister is a fan and a doughty supporter of our school, but I want to talk more about how free schools overall are faring and about how I would like our next Prime Minister to commit to expanding their reach so that it is not just the lucky few in disparate parts of the country who have access to them. I want a country where every town has a free school, every parent has real school choice and every child has the chance to thrive. While the free schools policy has been an undeniable success since its inception in 2010, nine years later it is necessary to breathe new momentum into the programme, which is in danger of stalling. We need to take free schools from success to scale.
The 2017 Conservative manifesto aimed to increase the expansion of free schools through the building of at least 100 new free schools a year, but that has not been achieved. There used to be multiple application waves per year; now, there are longer gaps between the waves, and the number of approvals is falling. I was delighted to see the announcement of 22 new free schools last week, but that number is a reduction compared with waves 11 and 12. We risk losing the opportunities presented by free schools if that trend continues.

Today, I am making the case for scaling up free schools. There are several practical ways in which the slowdown could and should be reversed. First, we need to revisit the original purpose of free schools and broaden the approval criteria by which they are chosen. Free schools should be able to open wherever there is parental demand. Basing the criteria exclusively around a shortfall in school places severely restricts the opportunities for underperforming areas to have access to a free school. If we really value school choice, we need to genuinely provide it.

Secondly, a future Government should place innovation squarely at the centre of their school roll-out strategy, ensuring the approval of free schools that demonstrate an innovative and potentially useful approach, thereby reducing the cost of education and bringing about a net benefit to the overall education system.

Thirdly, to overcome some of the teething problems faced by newly established free schools and to disperse their location, we could develop a more proactive outreach programme, identifying teams of teachers, community leaders, business people and parents in areas that do not have a free school, and build their capacity to successfully apply for and open one. It is a bewildering process and requires much support. The New Schools Network has been excellent in that regard, providing support to promoters groups, but it should be tasked more explicitly and supported more widely with the talent-spotting resources needed to get a free school application team ready.

Fourthly, I need to mention the disappointing performance of studio schools and university technical colleges. Two strands of the free school programme that offer more technical or vocational qualifications, which have suffered a disproportionate number of closures. We need to overhaul the fortunes of those institutions. Far from abandoning them, we need to make changes to ensure that the public do not lose faith in this essential kind of education. By changing the recruitment age to 16 so it is in line with the rest of the system, and allowing selection to be used in those schools, we can ensure that they operate on a level playing field.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, we need compelling ideas about how to deliver more free schools affordably. The Conservatives have done remarkable work to deliver new free schools at a cost a third lower than under the Labour Government’s Building Schools for the Future programme, but the issue of capital investment needs to be addressed. We could also explore how to allow free schools more choice over how they use their allocated funding. We could, for example, allow a school to choose to take lower ongoing per capita funding—90% or 95% of the funding it would otherwise receive during its first two decades—and plough the savings back into its ongoing capital costs.

Those ideas will be fleshed out in my paper, which I am sure you are eagerly awaiting, Ms Buck. The next Prime Minister and Education Secretary have a golden opportunity to—[Interruption.] I have no doubt that Ms Buck will be waiting with bated breath for my report. I will send her a personalised copy. The next Prime Minister and Education Secretary have a golden opportunity to galvanise free schools and, in so doing, to galvanise the education of our young people. We are at a turning point, and I hope they seize the initiative to create the legacy of a school system that provides all our children with life-changing opportunities. For children like Kavit in Wembley with dreams and aspirations, we need to take free schools from success to scale.

9.42 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) on securing this important debate, and I look forward to reading her report.

It is fair to say that I wholeheartedly disagree with just about everything the hon. Lady said. Her comments about the concept of people getting a financial return from investing in local education establishments make me fearful. Education should not be considered as a business. The money-making, business and enterprise element of even the academies programme has served only to put additional pressure on schools and families. Parents have to finance so many of their children’s additional activities in the education environment. That simply did not happen to the same degree prior to the academisation programme.

I am delighted that Kavit, whom the hon. Lady mentioned, has had such an enriching educational experience, but I deeply believe that Kavit’s experience should be everyone’s experience, and that the responsibility for education lies not with a few well-meaning local residents or capable parents but with the state. It is our responsibility. We in this place should take responsibility for ensuring the very highest standards in our state education system. For that and many other reasons, which I will come to, I cannot understand the enthusiasm for the free schools programme. Some £15,000 more per primary school pupil and nearly £20,000 more per secondary school pupil goes into free schools compared with those in the state system. That is a ridiculous amount of money.

The hon. Lady talked about “undeniable success”. Sir Peter Lampl, who founded the Sutton Trust, said: “Free schools were supposed to bring new and innovative providers into the education sector, to drive up standards and improve school choice. But as our research shows, very few are fulfilling that original purpose.”
Carole Willis, chief executive of the National Foundation for Educational Research, said that the Sutton Trust report “shows that the government’s free schools programme has not been very successful at bringing innovation to the education system and encouraging more parents and teachers to set up new schools. What it does highlight is that those new free schools that are opening are increasingly set up and led by multi-academy trusts and are used as a way to meet rising pupil numbers. So, if the government is still committed to the programme’s original purpose then it should review and clarify the mission of free schools.”

Can it really be an undeniable success that a trust set up by a Conservative peer and former so-called policy supremo of David Cameron’s was given £340,000 for two free school projects that never even got off the ground? Is that really the definition of success for the education of our children? I do not think it is. The Floreat Education Academies Trust, which was founded by the now Health Minister, Lord O’Shaughnessy—I do not know whether that is still accurate—received cash to set up new primary schools in London, but the plans were abandoned in March 2018. Those primaries were among 44 free school projects that were cancelled without teaching a single pupil between 2013 and 2017. What an utter disgrace of a waste of taxpayers’ money. That money should be going to our kids in the education system now, not on the fanciful ideas of people sitting in the other House who cannot even deliver.

There simply is not enough scrutiny in the application process for free schools. I had the same concern about the level of accountability and transparency in academies, but free schools, particularly under the umbrella of multi-academy trusts, are increasingly becoming completely unaccountable and untransparent fiefdomains at the heart of our communities. There is nothing that local people can do to challenge them when they are failing. And what happens when they do fail, having had all that money put into them? The state picks up the pieces.

Suella Braverman: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Melanie Onn: I will not, because the hon. Lady had a good 20 minutes to set out her case. I am sure she will cover these things extensively in her report or in summing up at the end of the debate.

Cancelled schemes were given £8.7 million of funding by the Department for Education. That money has now been written off. It could have been used to help struggling state schools, or even to reward schools in the state system that are succeeding and excelling and that deserve to expand, rather than being funneled into these local community projects run by well-meaning individuals. The idea that improved financial self-management will in any way resolve those problems is for the birds.

In Great Grimsby, we have been fully academised at secondary school level for about five years. Even in that academised system, there are concerns about the level of exclusions, temporary and permanent. Some schools—if they are in the wrong area—feel they are a dumping ground for other schools that cannot cope with the diverse needs of their student body. We have also seen an increase in provision through pupil referral units.

I went recently to Phoenix House pupil referral unit in my constituency. I saw young people who would have struggled in mainstream education—whether a free school, an academy trust or the comprehensive system—but who are now in an environment that works well for them. Where they might previously not have gone on to sit their GCSEs, they are now sitting them and engaging with their school community. They are forming friendships and respecting their local community. That school is going round begging for and borrowing facilities. It has a fantastic workshop where the kids can work on a car chassis, build it up from scratch and take it apart again. The school has to go to local scrapyards and car dealers to beg for things for that facility, yet we are wasting hundreds of thousands of pounds on free schools that often do not deliver for their pupils.

There are all kinds of statistics on the representation of young people in free schools who are eligible for free school meals, compared with those in academies, and that goes to the heart of the matter. If the Government really want to improve education, they should not turn the system even more into a marketplace. Education is not a marketplace; education is about the future of our young people and our country. We should give headteachers who are already in the system the flexibility offered to those in free schools to deliver well for their students, pupils and wider community, and we should properly fund them, rather than diverting cash to vanity projects that do not work for the local community. I therefore do not support the idea that we should introduce free schools all around the country.

9.51 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I wish to speak about Europa School UK in Culham in my constituency, but this is not an attempt to get one over on the Minister—quite the opposite. The Minister has been incredibly helpful with that school, and his recent letter to it was a model of assistance that I am told helped to make a significant impact on the heads of other national delegations—it does have the word “Europe” in the title, so I thank him for that.

I disagree with what the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) has just said—I suspect this will go backwards and forwards across the Chamber. Europa School UK was founded as a free school because local people wanted it, not because the Government or any other institution wanted it. It could not be provided for by the local authority because of the way that it teaches the children who attend—I will say something about that in a moment. It also could not be provided for because it teaches the European baccalaureate, rather than any other baccalaureate or GCSEs and A-levels. It now has permission to continue teaching the European baccalaureate until 2021, subject to the European Commission, which effectively owns the copyright. That gives an enormous advantage to children who started when they were five with the expectation of taking the European baccalaureate, and who will now work through the school until 2021.

The school is also a good example of how petitions can work. I presented a petition that had been signed by parents and friends of the school to Parliament, and it had a big effect. Perhaps a message can go out from this debate that parliamentary petitions—as opposed to the petitions that we debate in Westminster Hall on Mondays—are not a waste of time, because that petition put the issues raised firmly on the table at the Department for Education, and helped to crystallise them.
Under the terms of the free school, parents have agreed to the provision of a certain type of education, which I am about to describe. The importance of this school began in 2011, when I started getting people together to get permission for the free school to go ahead. At its core was a proposal to do something that has never been offered before in the UK or, incidentally, in the European Union school system. The proposal was to offer a complete, thoroughgoing commitment to full bilingual education from reception until finishing school. Pupils would not simply learn another language; they would learn through that language, which is an important distinction. They would learn the linguistic rhythm of a language and have truly deep language learning, not just acquire a second language overlaid on the first.

Europa School UK was set up as a free school because that is what parents wanted. I remember holding discussions with them at the time, and parents wanted that type of education. It is not only those parents of European origin who work at the Culham Science Centre or at Harwell who enjoy this school; it has become so attractive that it appeals to British-born parents who live in the area and are looking to provide the education that their children need. During Education questions I asked the Minister whether he accepted that Europa School UK was proving popular with all kinds of parents, and he kindly replied that he shared my admiration for the school.

How does it work? A pupil will go in and have a history lesson in German, or geography in French, and they will be taught through those languages throughout the day. It is not a question of picking up the language as one goes along; this is about fully immersing oneself in that language, and it works—I have seen it work, and I will soon go to the school to participate in the presentation of certificates and prizes.

The freedom offered by the free schools programme to allow schools to set their own curriculum has been essential. The founders of Europa School UK adopted the curriculum of the previous European school, which the Commission did not want to fund any more, and modified that with the mandatory elements of the English national curriculum. I mention that because it shows that free schools are what parents want, and they provide something different from what the local authority wants. The success of Europa School UK can be seen in the national curriculum. I mention that because it shows that parents, and he kindly replied that he shared my admiration for the school.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): My hon. Friend’s references to Europa School UK remind me of Northampton International Academy, which as a fairly new free school attempts to achieve that ethos. He referred to the ability to drive excellence through parental choice, and Northampton School for Boys has just been granted permission to go for free school status, which comes off the back of being a school that local parents recognise as a provider of excellence. Does my hon. Friend agree that this programme provides an opportunity for that parental view to be broadened and spread across local communities?

John Howell: I agree with my hon. Friend, who has hit on the key word that describes the whole programme—choice. It is about parental choice. What I have described has worked well for my school and I hope it works well for his.

There is not much more I can add. The Europa School UK is a model school that everyone is welcome to visit to see how the teaching is done. Of course, they will have to speak Italian, German and Spanish to understand the courses being delivered, but I am sure that will not cause any problems for hon. Members in this multilingual Chamber.

10 am

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) on securing the debate and on her excellent job application. When the future Prime Minister is appointed, I am sure she will be given serious consideration after such a loyal speech.

I will devote my contribution to the urgent need for a new secondary school in Radcliffe in my constituency. Radcliffe is an old industrial town that was on the frontline of the industrial revolution. When the paper mills shut down in the 1990s, not only did people lose their jobs, but the town lost its sense of identity. That was made worse by the loss of its secondary school and a sense that it was failing to get a fair deal from the council in Bury or the Government in Westminster. If we are to truly give Radcliffe families hope for a bright future, it is essential that they get the school they deserve and were promised.

First, I agree with much of what my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) said about the Government’s ideological preference for free schools, which is predicated on a myth that keeps being repeated—that schools are subject to interference from local councils. That has not been the case for decades; in the real world, headteachers and governors run schools.

For a long time, the support provided by an excellent local education authority in Bury added value to school leadership and made a key contribution to raising standards. In recent years, the withering on the vine of the active LEA, especially the loss of expert advisers due to cuts, has contributed to previously excellent schools ending up in special measures or requiring improvement. I do not claim that all local education authorities were adding value to schools, but those that were should have been invested in, not effectively dismantled.

The fragmentation of the school system has led to a dearth of accountability, as my hon. Friend said, and has made no discernible difference to raising standards. Those who claim that new Labour is somehow to blame because it introduced academies are guilty of rewriting history. We created academies in communities where, despite extra funding and changes in leadership, long-term underperformance had blighted young people’s life chances. Our passion was to break the shameful and enduring link between social class and educational attainment that continues to blight the country’s success. I believe that breaking that link is the Government’s objective too, but forcing academisation on all schools and insisting that all new schools are free schools will not necessarily achieve that.

Despite those misgivings, I make no apologies for working with the council and the Government to develop a proposal for a free school for Radcliffe. Government policy means that we have a stark choice: a free school or no school. In those circumstances, I will work night and day to secure a secondary school through the free school programme.
I often state that the worst thing that has happened in my political career is the betrayal of the promise that Radcliffe would have a new state-of-the-art secondary school. It is a shocking story, and many lies have been told about how it came to pass, so I want to put the record straight. In 2009, Bury Council had three sites at its disposal: the former Radcliffe High School site, the former Coney Green High School site and the former East Lancashire paper mill site. A developer had agreed to purchase all three sites and I had secured £5 million from what was then the Department for Education and Skills to enable the proposed school to go ahead on the East Lancs paper mill site. Work on the school was ready to go.

The Labour leadership of the council was concerned that the Conservatives would take control at that year's local elections and abandon plans for the new school, but senior officers assured them that a legal heads of agreement had been signed with the developer, which meant that nothing could prevent the school project going ahead. That turned out to be untrue and on taking office, the Tories suspended the school project. Without any consultation with affected parents, they proposed that Derbsy High School be relocated to Radcliffe; that proposal was ultimately rejected by parents.

The Conservatives then reduced the size of the proposed school and refused to proceed with the original funding package. In addition, they relocated Millwood School to one of the sites. They claimed that the school could go ahead only if the then Government's Building Schools for the Future programme provided the funding, but they were fully aware that Bury would not become eligible for that funding for many years. The developer lost patience and walked away, publicly expressing his anger at the council's conduct.

Meanwhile, the continued uncertainty and broken promises seriously affected student numbers at the existing Radcliffe Riverside School. Understandably, parents were voting with their feet and sending their children to schools outside Radcliffe. Having blighted the school, the then controlling group had the audacity to claim that there was no demand for a school in Radcliffe. In 2010, the incoming Tory-Lib Dem Government scrapped the Future Schools for the Future programme. In 2014, Radcliffe Riverside School closed due to dwindling numbers. The promise of a new secondary school had turned to dust, and worse still, Radcliffe now had no secondary school at all.

That history matters because some people promote the narrative that the council has neglected Radcliffe and does not care about its future. Some of the most vocal promoters of that view were members of the controlling group that blighted and then scrapped the school. They ought to hang their heads in shame for their hypocrisy and failure to stand up for Radcliffe when they had the political power.

I and the council leader, Councillor Rishi Shori, have made it clear that a new secondary school must be a top priority for the town and the entire borough of Bury. To that end, we had a highly constructive meeting with Education Minister Lord Agnew in April. I place on record my thanks, which I ask the Minister to pass on, for his guidance and understanding about why Radcliffe should be a priority. He made no guarantees about what would happen in the future, but he understood the importance of a new school as a driver of change in a disadvantaged community.

We are in the process of selecting a suitable partner, as required by the free schools programme, and will submit a funding bid to the Government in the autumn. We are confident that we meet all the relevant requirements specified by the Government and, crucially—the predominant issue in terms of being successful—that we can demonstrate future demand for student places.

My vision remains the same: a new secondary school at the heart of a revitalised Radcliffe community that offers the highest educational standards and is a key hub for intergenerational community activities. Radcliffe is the destination of choice for many people seeking affordable housing with good transport links in the vicinity of Manchester and Bury. The new food-based events at Radcliffe market and the council's investment plans for the town centre are positive steps forward. I would also like there to be a new focus on heritage and cultural regeneration in the town as a key driver for its future. As we host the cricket world cup, few are aware that the great West Indian cricketer Sir Garfield Sobers spent the early years of his career playing for Radcliffe cricket club, or that Radcliffe was the birthplace and family home of Danny Boyle.

The new school promised in 2009 is long overdue. I hope the Minister will assure me that the Government will continue to work with me and Bury Council to make the Radcliffe school happen and create a renewed sense of hope and optimism in the town. Radcliffe is an almost classic example of towns that are close to cities that have benefited from our country's growth in the last 30 years that feel left behind, and that they have not benefited from the economic growth. Delivering the school is absolutely essential to turning around the perception of many that the community has been forgotten and left behind. The school is not only important in raising educational standards; it is the key to the community’s future sense of identity and regeneration.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) on the comprehensive way in which she introduced the debate. Although I do not necessarily agree with my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), she presented the arguments against free schools skilfully. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) made a good point about the Europa School. Free schools present an opportunity to vary the educational system and encourage different sorts of school. I sent all my children to the French Lycée, which is a state school, and I have never regretted that.

I want to talk about one community that wants to open free schools. The Minister will not be surprised by what I am about to go on about. In 2017, the Conservative party made a solemn manifesto commitment to lift the faith cap on free schools. Manifesto commitments are supposed to be very important. For instance, nobody has ever dared to break our commitment to spend 0.7% of GDP on international aid, and the same applies to pensioner benefits. However, there was one manifesto commitment that we broke: the commitment to end the 50% faith cap.

The Minister knows—I hope he will respond to this—that the cap uniquely disadvantages the Catholic community. There are 2,142 Catholic schools in England, covering
every level of education. They make up 10% of the national total of state-funded schools. Everybody accepts that they are the most diverse schools, that they are the most willing to provide for all educational standards, and that they never impose academic selection. Despite all that, the 50% faith cap has, up to now, prevented the opening of a single new free school. Indeed, there cannot be any Catholic free schools because the 50% cap policy would come into effect only if the school was popular with pupils from other faiths and none. That means that the policy would only target popular Catholic schools that already had diverse school communities, while having no impact on schools that were either not over-subscribed or only attracted pupils from one, monocultural, community.

The 50% cap is espoused as encouraging diversity and inclusion. Catholic schools are already some of the most diverse schools in the country. That is in part due to the traditionally migrant nature of the Catholic community, which drives diversity and new demand for school places. Large catchment areas allow for increased social mixing. Catholic schools tend to be far more ethnically mixed than most other types of school. About one third have a proportion of ethnic minority pupils somewhere between 5% and 40%—higher than in any other type of school. Furthermore, all existing Catholic schools select pupils based on faith only when the school is over-subscribed, and currently, one third of all pupils in Catholic schools are not Catholics.

**Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on making an excellent case and highlighting that this policy unnecessarily disadvantages Catholics. It is completely unnecessary for the Government not to have stuck to their manifesto pledge. I hope that the Minister will give some explanation for that in his speech.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** I hope he will, because this is an important point. Catholic schools have traditionally opened as voluntary-aided schools. VA schools are state schools where 10% of the capital costs are found by the faith group. In addition, Catholic schools’ buildings and land are owned by the Catholic Church. The Church provides those premises at no charge to the state, and that arrangement saves the taxpayer tens of millions of pounds a year. Until recently, the onus for local authorities to prioritise new academies and free schools—this is where I agree with the hon. Member for Grimsby—meant that it was much harder to open new voluntary aided schools.

Now, that manifesto commitment was broken. Why was it broken? Of course, it has nothing to do with Catholic schools. The Government know perfectly well that we have the most diverse schools in the country. The Government are not at all worried about Catholic schools. The Government know perfectly well that, after the breaking of the manifesto commitment, not a single new Catholic school has opened. There are 50,000 Catholic children waiting for places, and no places for them. What are the Government doing about it? What they are doing is sending me letters, in the shape of one that I received from the Secretary of State, who tells me:

"On this occasion, I have been unable to approve any further bids. This is mainly due to the current lack of demographic need for additional school places in the areas chosen by the bidders."

I presume that the letter was written by some civil servant. It appears to be profound gobbledegook.

This is a serious matter, and I hope the Minister will address it. No new Catholic schools have been opened for six years, and 50,000 Catholic children are unable to find a place. Only one school has been approved, and that was on 14 June—last week. I very much hope we might get some progress from this Minister, and if not from him, then from whoever becomes the new Secretary of State in a month's time.

**Ms Karen Buck** (in the Chair): I call Mike Kane.

10.18 am

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I am recovering from that speech.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) on securing the debate. I cannot say that I agreed with much of her speech, but she has a passionate commitment to education, even though we may view it differently. I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. It is the birthday of my hon. Friend the Member for Grimsby (Melanie Onn)—can we all wish her a happy birthday? She summed up how all our schools, not just free schools, are underfunded and are having to beg scrapyards for resources; that will live long in the memory.

In this Chamber yesterday we debated whether migration should be in the history curriculum. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) was sitting in exactly the same place when I left yesterday, so he must have been working there overnight. He speaks regularly in Westminster Hall about his passion for the Europa School. It is just nice to see a Conservative being nice to fellow Europeans, in particular, once in a while, and I say well done to him, flippantly.
The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) speaks passionately about his constituency and the need for a school in Radcliffe. As my wife was born in Radcliffe, I am sure it will be the subject of pillow talk later.

The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) has shown passionate commitment to the treatment of Catholic schools. I declare an interest as the convenor of the Catholic Legislators Network in Parliament. A manifesto commitment was broken, and the Church is finding it extraordinarily difficult in bidding rounds to build the schools that it needs under the voluntary-aided system—a system that we happen to support. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will make progress with his campaign, because it is important.

We have learned today that the reality is that the current school system is broken. It has been fragmented. The current Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs threw it in the air in 2010 and let it break, and we are still trying to pick up the pieces. It has become unaccountable and is not being led by the needs of our communities. We need to fix what is broken. However, when 124 failing schools have been left stranded outside the system, and are waiting to be transferred to another chain or sponsor, something is wrong with the way we are running our school system. For far too long, parents and communities have been shut out of decisions affecting schools in their areas. The coalition Government document said that the free schools programme would “give parents, teachers, charities and local communities the Chance to set up new schools, as part of our plans to allow new providers to enter the state school system in response to parental demand.”

The reality has been very different. As my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby pointed out, research by the Sutton Trust and the National Foundation for Educational Research found that by 2018 only one in five free schools had parents involved in their inception, so the programme is not parent-led. The proportion of parent-led schools has decreased over time. What is the Minister doing to ensure that parents and communities are not being shut out of decisions about schools in their area?

Labour’s plan for a national education service will give power back to communities so that all our schools are run by the people who know them best—parents, teachers and communities. We would give local authorities the power to take on schools where no other sponsor could be found. That would ensure that no school would be left without the support of a sponsor to deliver school improvement services and provide it with a network of schools.

Despite huge expenditure on free schools, there is no evidence that they improve standards. Problems in 10 free schools, including low standards, concerns about financial oversight and governance and a failure to recruit sufficient pupils, have led to closure, planned closure or partial closure. I have previously cited the case of a school in Southwark. The council begged the Government not to close the school, which attracted 60 pupils and closed after two years. There was no spatial planning from the authority about where it should go. It cost £2 million. We could have sent each of the 63 pupils to Eton for half the price. I do not, by the way, advocate sending pupils to Eton.

The system is failing, as that case shows, but that should come as no surprise when, like academies, free schools can employ unqualified teachers, which they do at a much higher rate than other schools. While just 2.9% of teachers in all nursery and primary schools do not have qualified teacher status, the figure for primary free schools is more than three times higher at 10.2%. Similarly, while 5.4% of teachers in all state-funded secondary schools do not hold QTS, the figure in secondary free schools is 8.9%. That is a further undermining of the teaching profession by the Government.

Currently, 91% of schools face real-terms cuts. There is no need to ask me about this; just ask the Conservative party leadership candidates, who have all made promises to fund schools fairly. We cannot allow a system to go unchallenged when it permits the education of children to become a vehicle for private profits and allows the awarding of huge executive salaries, and when there have been mounting scandals, including evidence of financial mismanagement. The Minister should seek to ban related-party transactions—business arrangements between a free school, academy or multi-academy trust and other organisations with which there are personal connections.

The National Audit Office has highlighted wasteful spending on free schools. Its report in February 2017 found that free school places are more expensive than places provided by local authorities, with a place in a primary free school opening in 2013-14 or 2014-15 costing on average 33% more than places created in the same years by local authorities. A place in a secondary free school cost 51% more than a place in a local authority secondary. The National Audit Office has also exposed a reckless use of public funding on strategic land acquisitions for free schools, costing £850 million, with officials paying “premium” prices. On average, the Government paid 19% more than official land valuations for new sites.

It is not just the provision of free schools that has been riddled with mismanagement, however. The Government’s current chaotic system means that free schools can open in areas where there is no current need for new school places. That can result in reducing funding for existing schools that are already stretched to breaking point by the Government’s cuts to funding. Evidence was provided to the Education Committee by the Institute for Education in 2015, which found that “35% of the first four waves of free schools were in districts with no forecast need and 52% were in districts with either no forecast need or only moderate need.”

In 2017 the National Audit Office also made the observation that many free schools had been built in areas with no need for school places, leaving them struggling to get enough pupils and balance the books. Admission systems need to be joined up. They should provide oversight across the whole local area and be accountable to the public, as they currently are not. What is the Minister doing to address the current fragmented system, which has led to over-supply of school places in one area while another is under-supplied?

Although Labour has committed to ending the inefficient free school programme, if parents and staff want to go further in launching and leading their own schools we will make it possible for parents and communities to come together and ask for a new school in their area.

That is why we are working with the Co-operative party to develop the idea of co-op schools as a replacement for the free school model. Ultimately, we need a school system that responds to and reflects the needs of local
communities and has a vested interest in the local community rather than in private profits. It is a shame that the Government do not feel the same.

10.27 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to have you chairing our sitting today, Ms Buck. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Stella Braverman) on securing the debate and on an excellent opening speech on the future of free schools. I commend her commitment to the free school programme. She has been heavily involved in setting up and running Michaela Community School in Brent.

The shadow Schools Minister, the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), has reiterated Labour’s policy to politicise the running of schools, to remove academies’ autonomy, which is key to the raising of standards, and to abolish the free schools programme. That will be hugely damaging to academies and free schools and to academic standards, and it should alarm the teachers and headteachers of the 8,000 academies and nearly 500 free schools in this country. Similarly, Labour’s policy of abolishing SATs, the key accountability measure for primary schools, would be a hugely retrograde step and would again undermine the drive for higher standards in schools.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham said, Michaela Community School in Brent was rated outstanding by Ofsted in 2017. Inspectors commented on the “exceedingly strong” progress that pupils make and on their “powerful determination to achieve as well as they can”. We want every child in this country to have access to a world-class education, regardless of their background. Thanks to the free schools programme, extramural schools such as Michaela are changing what is thought to be possible and raising expectations across the country. I congratulate my hon. Friend on the Michaela Community School trust’s success in the most recent free school application round, announced last week. As she said, the proposed new school will open in Stevenage, where there is a need for new, quality secondary school places. Michaela Community School in Stevenage will replicate the ethos of the existing Michaela school in Brent, with a focus on traditional academic subjects and on teaching the value of self-discipline, excellent behaviour and responsibility for one’s own development. I wish the trust and my hon. Friend every success during the next exciting phase of establishing the school.

I hope my hon. Friend will allow me to begin by outlining how free schools such as Michaela are making a real impact on the lives of pupils across the country. All around the country, the Government have built such schools on the foundations of an education system through which the ethos of the existing Michaela school in Brent, with a focus on traditional academic subjects and on teaching the value of self-discipline, excellent behaviour and responsibility for one’s own development. I wish the trust and my hon. Friend every success during the next exciting phase of establishing the school.

A key part of the Government’s reforms has been the free schools programme. The programme was established in 2010, with the first free schools opening in 2011. The Government invited proposers to take up the challenge of setting up a new school, and groups who were passionate about ensuring that the next generation is best placed to face the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead came forward with their ideas and plans to make that a reality. Indeed, my hon. Friend was one of the very early pioneers of the programme, and Michaela Community School Brent was successful in only the second round of free school applications.

We now have 446 open free schools, which will provide around 250,000 places when at full capacity: 122 of 152 local authorities now have at least one free school in their area, and we are working with groups to establish a further 285 free schools. The free schools programme has provided a route for opening innovative schools that do things differently, and successfully opened schools that local authorities would not have commissioned, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) rightly pointed out.

Of those open free schools inspected by Ofsted, 84% have been rated good or outstanding, with 30% rated outstanding. That is a significant achievement, and I congratulate the proposers and teachers for their dedication to ensuring the success of their free schools and their pupils. Furthermore, in 2018, four of the top 10 Progress 8 scores for state-funded schools in England were achieved by free schools: William Perkin Church of England High School in Ealing, Dixons Trinity Academy in Bradford, Eden Girls’ School in Coventry and Tauheedul Islam Boys’ High School in Blackburn.

The latter two schools were opened by Star Academies, which has grown through the free schools programme from running a single school in the north-west to running 24 schools across the country, made up of nine academies and 15 free schools, with approval to open five additional free schools. Of the 10 free schools that have had Ofsted inspections since opening or joining the trust, all have been rated outstanding.

All these successful schools teach a stretching, knowledge-rich curriculum. Each takes a strong approach to behaviour management, so that teachers can teach uninterrupted. I have seen at first hand Michaela school’s commitment to high academic standards, showing what it is possible to achieve. I urge Opposition Members to visit some of those free schools, particularly Michaela or the Tauheedul Islam Boys’ High School, to see for themselves before they cast judgment on a hugely successful programme.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) for his kind comments; Europa School UK is a classic example of how the free schools programme empowers innovation, such as by teaching through a European language other than English. As he says, standards at the Europa School UK in Culham are very high indeed.

The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) said that the academies programme has led to more schools being put into special measures and requiring improvements, but the opposite is the case. In 2010, when there were just 200 academies, 68% of schools were good or outstanding; today, that figure is 86%.

Mr Ivan Lewis: Although the Minister and I have differences on some of these issues, I have massive respect for the work he does in his capacity as an Education Minister, and I think that view is shared across the House. If I may just correct the record, that is not what I said; I said that the removal, in the Bury context, of the local education authority’s role in supporting improvement in school standards, especially through specialist, highly qualified advisers, has contributed in
that Bury context to schools that were formerly outstanding becoming in need of improvement or inadequate. That is what I said. I never said that the academies programme had led to the deterioration of those schools; I said that the removal of the local education authority, which in this case was excellent, adding value to schools, headteachers and teachers, has contributed to a deterioration in the performance of those schools.

Nick Gibb: I thought the hon. Gentleman had said that was the case at a systemic level, right across the country, and not just in Bury. I thought he had said that the reduction in the school improvement department’s capacity in local authorities had led to an increase in the number of schools in special measures and requiring improvements. If he did not say that, I will withdraw the remarks, but the truth is that there are fewer schools either in “requires improvement” or in special measures than there were in 2010, despite—or, in my opinion, because of—the fact that we have such a large school improvement change.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his clarity and for his kind words about the Minister responsible for the schools system, Lord Agnew, and his understanding of the problems facing the town of Radcliff in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. I can assure him that we will continue to work with him on that particular issue.

We have approved schools with links to other institutions, such as the LIPA Sixth Form College, inspired by the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts, which focuses on acting, dance, music and sound technology and was recently judged outstanding in all areas by Ofsted. In addition, in September 2012, we opened the London Academy of Excellence, a selective free school sixth form in east London, which was set up in collaboration with seven independent schools.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend the Minister join me in celebrating the investment of more than £20 million in education in Cheltenham, in the form of a new secondary school to be run by Balcarras, which will open in 2021? Although issues such as traffic will have to be got right, does he agree that the principle of investing in excellent new schools close to the community they serve must remain a Government priority?

Nick Gibb: I do agree; there was an element of that in the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham. The free schools programme is important, and it is still extensive, but of course it is important that it continues in the long run. That is why I fear the Labour party’s policy and the impact it will have on the future of the free schools programme.

I was talking about the London Academy of Excellence. In 2018, the school had an A-level progress score well above the national average, and the average grade achieved was A-minus. The school reported that 22 of its pupils received offers to study at Oxford or Cambridge last year.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) raised the matter of the 50% cap for faith-based free schools. The free schools cap on faith-based admissions has meant that some of the most experienced and largest providers, with a track record of delivering good outcomes for children and young people, have felt unable to open new schools through this route. The response to the “Schools that work for everyone” consultation, published in May last year, announced a capital scheme to enable the creation of new voluntary-aided schools.

The capital scheme is open to both faith and non-faith groups; as with VA schools, those created through the scheme will be locally maintained, with the same freedoms as existing VA schools, including over their admissions. That means they will be able to give priority to admissions on the basis of faith for up to 100% of places. Last week, as my right hon. Friend pointed out, we announced the approval in principle of the bid for Hampton Waters Roman Catholic Primary School in Peterborough, which will address the need for places and meet demand from parents in the city. Consideration of two further bids has been placed on hold while we work with proposers to identify suitable sites for proposed VA schools.

The free schools programme has also helped to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. I have already mentioned Dixons Trinity Academy, a free school based in Bradford, and how its GCSE results place it among the top schools in England for the progress achieved by its pupils. However, the school is also one of the top-performing schools for disadvantaged pupil progress. Each of the other three free schools in the top 10 for progress also serves disadvantaged communities, demonstrating that high academic and behavioural standards are not, and must not be, the preserve of wealthy pupils alone.

Harris Westminster, a free school that opened in 2014 with close ties to Westminster School and that draws pupils from across London, with 40% of its pupils from a disadvantaged background, reports that 23 pupils were offered places to study at Oxbridge last year. That is another example showing that socioeconomic background need not be a barrier to academic excellence. I cannot, therefore, understand why the Labour party is so opposed to the prospect of more free schools.

Every child should be able to go to a good local school that suits their needs, whether that be a mainstream school with a specialist, alternative provision or a special school. To help achieve that ambition, we have opened 34 special and 45 alternative provision schools, and we have another 54 special and nine AP free schools due to open in the future. Furthermore, we are running competitions to find academy trusts to run an additional 37 special and two AP free schools across the country. That will bring the total number of special free schools to 125, boosting choice for parents and, crucially, providing specialist support and education for pupils with complex needs such as autism, severe learning difficulties or mental health conditions. We want these children, who are often already vulnerable and disadvantaged, to have a chance to reach their potential and live a fulfilled life.

We are not stopping there. Just last week we announced the approval of 22 mainstream free school applications in local authority areas identified as having the lowest educational attainment and in those that have not previously benefited from the free schools programme. That includes one from Northampton School for Boys, which will please my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer). Those schools will create over 19,000 new places, spread across 19 local authorities in every region. We are opening new schools in areas where there was a need to create more school places and largely in areas where there is low educational performance.
The announcement demonstrates that we continue to look for applications that have a new or innovative approach that would add value to the wider school system. That includes the Birmingham Ormiston Academy—an exciting new specialist college for 16 to 19-year-olds in central Birmingham that will offer a range of vocational and technical qualifications for students to enter television, film or theatre professions—and Shireland CBSO Music School in the Black Country, which will work with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra to help young people from diverse backgrounds test their musical ability at an elite level.

In addition, we are working to open four new specialist maths schools with the Universities of Lancaster, Liverpool, Cambridge and Surrey. That builds on the success of the two existing maths schools, King’s College London Mathematics School and Exeter Maths School. In 2018, 99% of King’s College London Mathematics School mathematics students achieved an A or A* in A-level mathematics, and the school’s A-level maths progress score of 1.46 meant that pupils achieved on average a grade higher than similar students nationally. When I read out such results, it is difficult to maintain a calm voice and not to choke, given the intake of those schools. Again, I cannot understand why the Labour party, which is meant to be the champion of the least advantaged people in our community, cannot get behind the King’s College London Mathematics School, the Exeter Maths School and the other maths schools we are opening up and down the country.

We have also published application criteria for wave 14 of the free schools programme, which will again target areas that have both low educational standards and a need for additional school places. We will, of course, continue to look carefully at the free schools programme, along with all our priorities for the education system, in preparation for the next spending review.

I am enormously grateful for the support my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham has shown for free schools. They are playing an integral role in our education system and bringing high standards of education that pupils might not have otherwise received. We will continue to ensure that we have an education system that works for everybody, regardless of their background, giving them knowledge and skills that will set them up for life. Many important points have been raised, and I always welcome the opportunity to discuss the free schools programme and the range of benefits that free schools bring to the wider educational landscape.

Suella Braverman: Thank you for your chairmanship of today’s debate, Ms Buck. It has been rich, varied, useful and well-informed. The examples mentioned by the Minister in his closing remarks, from Cheltenham—my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) also mentioned that—to Liverpool, Northampton and Exeter, and the results from the King’s and Exeter maths schools, just show that the outcomes from free schools are simply brilliant. We need to celebrate those results, not try to undermine them for political gain. Those schools are contributing to our children’s lives, and we should be encouraging them, not hindering them.

I disagree with some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) and other Opposition Members. Their ideological objection to more freedoms for teachers, which have brought about improvements in life chances for many children, is unsurprising but, overall, saddening. I would have hoped that politics would be put aside when it came to doing what works for our children, so that they can do better in life.

The challenge the hon. Lady and the Opposition have is that, nine years on from the inception of this policy, the emerging evidence shows that free schools—I would obviously like to see more free schools established, and faster—produce good results, as set out extensively by the Minister, and that is especially true for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The evidence also shows that they are good value for money and are an asset to our communities.

Sadly, as the Minister said, if the Opposition were in charge, free schools would be scrapped. Schools such as Michaela and Europa School UK, which was spoken about passionately by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), where lives are being turned around, would not be possible. That is simply an indefensible and incomprehensible position for the Opposition, who are putting politics above our children’s lives.

Zoning in on the closures of free schools was misguided on the part of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby. She failed to put that in context. Rates of free school closures are similar to wider rates of closure in the broader state sector. It is always disappointing when a school fails, whether it is local authority maintained, free, an academy or otherwise. Crucially, however, school improvement and turnaround can be swifter in free schools, thanks to early inspection and a greater ability to adapt to recommendations.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions today—I will not go into detail, because I want to wind up. Simply put, free schools change lives. They are from the community, and they are for the community—that is the beauty of these schools. They are demand-led, and they respond to local needs. If any Member were to visit many of them, they would see with their own eyes stories of transformation—children building their dreams and aspirations. We should be proud of that record, and it is why free schools should now move from success to scale.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.
That this House has considered the future of free schools.

Sitting suspended.
A38 Improvements

[SIR LINDSAY HOYLE IN THE CHAIR]

11.4 am

Mrs Sherryl Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered A38 road improvements.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Lindsay. I am delighted to see so many hon. Friends here today to talk about the A38, which runs through their constituencies and mine. The A38, between Bodmin, Plymouth and Exeter, is one of the two arterial roads connecting Cornwall with the rest of the United Kingdom—indeed, it is the only trunk road. It provides that link to my constituency of South East Cornwall, from the Tamar bridge in the east to Bodmin Parkway railway station in the west. It also provides essential access to the rest of the mid, west and north Cornwall road network. The A38 is the spine of my constituency, too, as it links the communities that I represent, either directly or via minor link roads.

First designated in 1922, the A38 is the longest two-digit A road in England, at 292 miles long, running from Mansfield in Nottinghamshire to Bodmin in Cornwall, in the respective constituencies of my hon. Friends the Members for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) and for North Cornwall (Scott Mann). It has a rich history, closely following the Roman and Saxon roads, and it acted as the main holiday route into Cornwall, Devon and Somerset before the opening of the M5 in the 1960s and 1970s.

In my constituency, the A38 first ran on the former route of the A389, now the A374, over the Torpoint ferry, which is still an essential transport link for my constituents. When the Tamar bridge was opened in 1961, the A38 was rerouted through the village of Tidelford, which remains on the route today and experiences several challenges, as I will outline later. It provides a vital link between the towns of Saltash and Liskeard, and on to Bodmin, past the town of Dobwalls, which has been served by a much needed bypass for over a decade. The Minister might be aware that the latter is framed by two bat bridges and one bat house, which were built because the new road went through existing bat flight lines. Environmental impacts and supporting our ecology remain serious concerns. The A38 also passes Trago Mills, the hugely popular retailer and local employer in Glynn Valley.

The A38 is vital for South East Cornwall’s economy, our communities, businesses, emergency and other public services, and all those who want access to them, or who visit and stay in my constituency. However, it is simply not fit for purpose, given the huge increase in use in recent decades. The Cornwall chamber of commerce has said that the A38 is so unreliable in my constituency that it deters new business and investment locally, and hinders prosperity and growth. The chamber is at the sharp end and knows the importance of improving the route. That is why I am delighted to have secured this debate to continue our campaign to obtain vital investment in the A38, throughout South East Cornwall and beyond, through current and future road investment strategy periods.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for calling this debate. As she mentioned, the longest A road in the country starts in my constituency of Mansfield. What she has said about her constituency rings true for mine, too. It is our main link to the M1, but it has real challenges: it is not fit for purpose, it is congested and it is full of accidents. Does she agree that, because of the length of the road and its importance to so many constituencies, investment and improvement along the whole length of the A38 would give a big boost to our economy?

Mrs Murray: I completely agree. My hon. Friend might like to take note of what we did in the south-west with regard to this road by working together on a cross-party basis with local authorities. That might be a model that he could take forward.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Lady, my constituency neighbour, for calling this debate, because this is a cross-party campaign, which is really important. She has been a doughty champion for it. Does she agree that this shows what can be done when our region works together, with MPs from all political parties and councils of different political hues, all putting aside their differences in support of this vital and much needed road investment?

Mrs Murray: Later, I will thank all of the people who have helped, but I must say that I am really grateful for the interaction that we have had with and the input from Plymouth City Council, both before the last election and since; both administrations were very supportive of our getting something done on this road.

I wish to put on the record our thanks to all of our partners, who are providing a powerful collective voice on the need for investment and improvement, including councils and councillors from across Cornwall and Devon, local enterprise partnerships, chambers of commerce, community road safety campaigners and my fellow parliamentarians from across Cornwall and Devon. Their work has enabled a compelling proposal—the A38 case for action—to be produced, which I and colleagues presented to the Secretary of State for Transport last July.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way; she has been a doughty champion of the A38 case for action. Does she agree that the changes that need to be made to Bodmin Parkway station will particularly benefit our constituents and will boost the local rural economy in the way we would like to see?

Mrs Murray: I completely agree. At the moment, the entrance to Bodmin Parkway railway station prevents many people from using that vital rail link, and I agree with Cornwall Council and my hon. Friend that it urgently needs significant improvement.

The A38 in South East Cornwall has several challenges, some of which are shared with the city of Plymouth and with the Plymouth to Exeter routes. I refer to the Devon section of the A38 case for action document, as many of my constituents commute to Plymouth and beyond, for work, travel, hospital visits, regular shopping trips and leisure. Investment is crucial right along the route from Bodmin to Exeter.
The very poor accident record on the stretch of the A38 in my constituency is tragic and it must be addressed; the accident rate is nearly three times higher than the national average. In the last few years, there have been serious and even fatal accidents at Stoketon Cross, Landrake, Tideford, Trerulefoot, Menheniot and in the Glynn valley. My heart goes out to those affected, but I appreciate that what is needed is not words, but action to prevent future tragedies.

Volumes of traffic are high across the whole of the Bodmin to Exeter section of the A38. Between Bodmin and Saltash alone, there is a cumulative average daily traffic flow of more than 60,000 vehicles. Recently, I conducted a survey about traffic congestion and problems with access at peak times from side roads in Carkeel, and it had a huge response, which demonstrates how concerned my constituents are about the future viability of the A38. There are over a dozen access roads between Carkeel and Trerulefoot, with huge traffic flows that make it incredibly difficult—even dangerous—to join the A38. That is repeated along the whole of the road between Plymouth and Bodmin, and it is a constant danger in the Glynn valley, where roads wind and there is poor visibility.

It is also important that I highlight the lack of alternative roads or other transport modes, particularly given the resilience issues with the main railway line at Dawlish. There are only three significant alternatives: the Torpoint ferry; a single-lane 16th century bridge at Gunnislake; or a very long detour to the A30 in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann). However, all three are not practical alternatives, due to limited capacity and the travelling distance involved.

Across my constituency, the road is of variable standard, with changing speed limits. There is a mixture of single-carriage sections, multiple side-road junctions, direct access roads, dual carriageways with central reserve crossings, such as that for Looe, and the severance of local communities, including Landrake and Tideford. It makes for unreliable, congested and unsafe journeys, and a general feeling of frustration among my constituents.

In addition to the severance of local communities, there is also the significant impact of poor air quality. The A38 is subject to a high level of unplanned closures, which results in poor journey time reliability when compared with that of the A30 in north Cornwall. Over the last five years, the A38 has had 1,100 more unplanned closures than the A30. That figure is not acceptable, given how many people rely on the A38 to conduct their daily lives.

The A38 case for action document clearly states the desired outcomes for our communities between now and the end of road investment strategy 3, which is 2030. However, my ask on behalf of my constituents is for the earliest possible investment. We want the highest level of safety possible, by reducing accident rates and removing accident black spots; we want air quality to be improved; we want communities to be reconnected, by reducing the impact of severance; and we want to ensure that the A38 can support economic growth, including in tourist numbers and for major events, such as Mayflower 2020, by fully utilising technology to reduce journey times, increase reliability and strengthen resilience.

We also want to encourage increased use of rail for commuting, by improving access to park and ride schemes; Bodmin Parkway station has already been mentioned, but I will also mention Menheniot station. For South East Cornwall, that means we need specific speed and safety improvements as soon as possible, including overtaking lanes, side-road junctions, speed cameras and pedestrian crossing facilities. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will hear my plea and be able to respond positively.

In the medium term—so, within RIS2, which is 2020 to 2025—I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to consider making a substantial commitment to improve the Menheniot /Lean Quarry junction, and to link that with work to develop park and ride facilities at Menheniot station, in order to encourage more commuting by rail. This would be a significant investment, estimated to be over £14 million. However, it would also make use of the newly improved railway station in the constituency of the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard).

In the long term—so, within RIS3, which goes beyond 2025—a full upgrade of the A38 from Trerulefoot to Saltash is a priority, including dualling of the road. Of course, we would like this work to happen sooner, if possible.

The A38 case for action document shows that nearly £900 million of productivity growth and investment would be gained by improving the A38 between Bodmin and Exeter. Such an improvement would be a major opportunity for sustainable economic growth, with 52,000 additional jobs and 52,000 homes being planned by 2034, and it would also be an opportunity to strengthen the resilience of the wider transport network. However, the benefits to our respective communities would be so much greater—an improved environment, better air quality, more efficient road travel, less congestion, more jobs and, most importantly, a reduction in the number of road deaths and serious injuries. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will consider my points and the A38 case for action document carefully and positively.

The proposals and outcomes set out in that document are compelling, and I look forward to hearing what he has to say.

Ms Karen Buck (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister to respond, I will just apologise, both to the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) and the Minister, for my late arrival.
tourism, to Mansfield in Nottinghamshire. At nearly 300 miles—292 miles, to be precise—it is the longest A road that is entirely in England. Once upon a time, it was thought of as a country lane; it was called the longest country lane in England. However, it plays a really important role for communities up and down the country.

In the south-west of England, which is our focus today, the A38 and the A30 are the two principal routes, taking traffic through Devon and Cornwall, to and from the M5 and its connections to the midlands—my part of the world—and beyond. Through the two counties of Devon and Cornwall, both roads are part of the strategic road network that comprises England’s motorways and main A roads, managed by Highways England. Those roads will be familiar to many Members of this House as routes to popular holiday destinations; my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall is not short of popular holiday destinations in her constituency, and I recommend that anyone who is listening visits them.

Although tourism is a vital industry for the region, the A38 also has a strategic day-to-day role for local people and businesses, especially those in and around Britain’s ocean city, Plymouth. My hon. Friend has emphasised the importance of that road, and has rightly highlighted some of the problems that it faces, including safety and congestion. She has also drawn attention to the case for action on improving the A38, prepared by local authorities and local enterprise partnerships and backed by several local Members of Parliament. I know that my Secretary of State was pleased to receive that case for action when he visited the area last year to see it and its roads for himself, and I understand that he further discussed the contents of the case for action in October at a meeting with local stakeholders, organised by my hon. Friend. I congratulate her on having secured that meeting.

I will now explain how we are considering that case for action and other requests that we have received for improvements to the strategic road network. The Government take a long-term approach to investment in the SRN through the setting of periodic road investment strategies. Those strategies set out the Government’s strategic vision for the SRN and specify what Highways England must deliver in terms of road enhancements and day-to-day performance.

The first road investment strategy was launched in 2015 under this Government, providing over £15 billion of investment in the strategic roads network between 2015 and 2021—a lot of investment, and rightly so. Highways England is making good progress on delivering that plan: some 29 schemes have already opened for traffic, including the dualling of the A30 between Temple and Higher Carblake in Cornwall, which cost £56 million alone. That improvement is expected to bring more than £134 million into the Cornish economy each year, encouraging economic growth, business expansion and the development of housing and tourism. The next stage, which is dualling the A30 between Carland Cross and Chiverton, is currently before the planning inspector. If it is approved, construction would start within the next 12 months.

For the A38, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall, £3.6 million has been spent to address safety and structural issues on the section through Glynn valley between Dobwalls and Bodmin. That work has helped to deliver safer and more reliable journeys for road users. Safety is one of my Department’s highest priorities and is certainly my highest priority, given my responsibilities as Roads Minister.

Looking ahead, I understand that my hon. Friend will be meeting Highways England again in July to discuss potential improvements to the Carkeel roundabout, and I wish her well in that meeting. Further along the A38 in Devon, a safety improvements scheme will soon be implemented at A38 Harcombe Bends between Chudleigh and Exeter, which will involve installing reflective road markings and improved warning signs. It follows work at Wrangaton, completed a couple of months ago in March this year, which addressed a flooding hotspot that risked the safety of road users.

I have talked about the first road investment strategy and the money that has gone into my hon. Friend’s area, but that is just the start of our roads reform. She will be pleased to hear that we are now working to develop the second strategy, which we call RIS2—our Department’s fondness for acronyms is legendary. Part 2 of the road investment strategy will govern investment in the strategic road network between 2020 and 2025, so there is more investment to come with RIS2. That investment will be funded through the national roads fund, which will match all the money spent by taxpayers on vehicle excise duty in England for investment in our most strategically important roads.

In the 2018 Budget, the Government announced their intention that, of the £28.8 billion expected for the national roads fund between 2020 and 2025, no less than £25.3 billion would be made available for RIS2. The remaining £3.5 billion will be used to help fund enhancement schemes on the most important roads managed by local highway authorities. That funding must first meet the costs of Highways England’s operation of the SRN—the essential task of maintenance and renewals work—and complete the RIS1 commitments. Once those are covered, it can then deliver the new enhancement schemes, for which £3.5 billion will be available.

To inform decision making about how to use that funding, my Department and Highways England have gathered a substantial amount of evidence through three years of research and public consultation. The A38 case for action has been a helpful contribution to that evidence base; local knowledge, local insight, and the views of local Members of Parliament such as my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall are invaluable as we at the Department for Transport seek to develop an investment plan that is affordable and deliverable. We have received a large number of proposals for RIS2 through that process.

Competition for the available funding is, of course, very strong, and we are considering all the proposals carefully, with some key aims for RIS2 firmly in mind. Better meeting the needs of road users and the neighbours of the network is a key aim, including addressing safety and congestion issues. Supporting housing is another key aim, as is supporting balanced economic growth and productivity in an area and enabling seamless integrated journeys across transport modes—where they link with rail, ports and so on. We expect to publish RIS2 towards the end of this year—a few months hence. That will not be the end of the story; we will continue to work
through the coming years to deliver a better road network that meets the needs of road users and the country at large.

Luke Pollard: The case that the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) has made will save lives if we get the investment in her constituency that is needed. If we get the investment we need at the Manadon roundabout in Plymouth, it will open up huge amounts of our city for the job creation that I know the Minister is keen on. I would be grateful if, during that funding period, he looked favourably on both the schemes in Cornwall and those in Plymouth.

Michael Ellis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. As he knows—we have worked together in other areas—I will give the matter the very careful consideration that I know it deserves. I share the appreciation that my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall and all colleagues have for the strategic importance of the A38, both for the south-west generally and for those people in my hon. Friend’s constituency and neighbouring constituencies who depend on it day to day. Safety is the paramount priority, but the economy is also very important in all of these considerations.

I thank my hon. Friend for the sterling efforts that she has made on behalf of her constituents to promote the case for further improvements to the A38 during the development of RIS2. I wish her well in making progress.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am
Sitting suspended.

Modern Slavery Act: Independent Review

2.30 pm
Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): I beg to move, That this House has considered the independent review of the Modern Slavery Act.

It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I thank the secretariat of our inquiry, who were superb. I want to make a brief comment about the importance of this topic to me—it is terrific that so many Members want to intervene or make a speech, because that shows a growing interest in the issue in the House of Commons, which is good.

Two things over my parliamentary lifetime have knocked me sideways: one has been the extent of hunger and destitution in my constituency; the other was the beginning of the work on modern slavery. I find it impossible to describe the horrors that people try to convey to us about the experience of being enslaved in this country, in this year and at this time. That is partly because one does not want to break down speaking in this debate. I know everyone will bear in mind the background of those individuals.

My Pauline conversion came when I was sent off and told to do a press conference for the Centre for Social Justice report on modern slavery, “It Happens Here”. I was horrified and amazed by the information—the data and case studies—that the CSJ brought together. There was a huge gathering of organisations for the launch of the report. We agreed at that meeting that we should lobby hard for a modern slavery Act. It was after a summer’s work of lobbying that the then Home Secretary, now Prime Minister, decided we would have a Bill. She thought we should have a scoping exercise about what that Bill should contain. She then used her influence to allow us to have a Joint Committee of both Houses to consider the draft Bill. We then had a Bill.

For all that we now want to move on from the legislation, that initiative was a real success for the Prime Minister. This was the first modern slavery Act in the world. It included supply chains, although the measures to act on them were pretty feeble. However, once something is in legislation, the requirements can always be pushed up. There was also some help for victims, and I am sure many Members will talk about the adequacies.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Does he welcome the work of Northern College in Barnsley, which has set up the “Free Thinking” programme, the first of its kind to provide education opportunities specifically for survivors of modern slavery? Does he agree that the Government should look at ways in which we can roll that out across the country?

Frank Field: I do indeed. I had the real pleasure of meeting, with my hon. Friend, a delegation that came down from the college, and I saw the work it is doing. Clearly, if we are to get a breakthrough on the lack of knowledge about what is happening in this country, courses like that will and should play a crucial part. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 signified a breakthrough.
Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. We can never have such debates too often, and we warmly welcome any initiatives that deal with modern-day slavery. I am sure he will remember the gangmaster issue in Morecambe, probably 10 or 15 years ago, when Chinese people were being used in a form of modern-day slavery. We are getting more and more instances where individuals are being locked in property—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I know this is a hugely interesting debate in which lots of people will want to take part, but I ask for interventions to be brief, because Mr Field has a lot of colleagues to bring in.

Frank Field: I do agree with my hon. Friend. The scope and work of the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority are clearly important, as he said, in countering modern slavery.

The 2015 Act was a breakthrough, and there have been successes from it. The number of police investigations moved from 188 in 2016 to 1,370 in April 2019. There has been a doubling in the number of people thought to be victims—up to now, it is 7,000. The composition of that total has also changed; the proportion of children and UK nationals has increased.

We can talk, quite properly, about those things being successes, but, despite that, the Prime Minister was not satisfied we had got the 2015 Act right. She therefore asked the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), Lady Elizabeth Butler-Sloss and me to undertake a review. As always, when the Government act, they want a review by Christmas, although we were not much in session before the summer break. We picked up four themes that we would look at: the anti-slavery commissioner; giving greater importance to supply chains; the role of advocates for children involved in trafficking; and the legal working of the Act.

We made an innovation in how we would undertake our work. It would have been impossible to do a detailed inquiry without the work of the separate commissions that we established, which reported to the right hon. Lady, Elizabeth Butler-Sloss and me. I put on record our thanks to them. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) co-ordinated the parliamentary front and looked at what Parliament thought about the Act. Bishop Redfern looked at what the faith groups saw their role as. Baroness Young and John Studzinski looked at business. Anthony Steen led the discussions on civil society with the very large number of voluntary organisations that are concerned with slavery. Christian Guy looked at the Commonwealth and the international scene. Professor Ravi Kohli looked at child trafficking. Peter Carter QC and Caroline Haughey QC looked at the criminal justice system. They all went away and did that work, and then came back to the three of us who were in charge of the inquiry. Without their work, we could not have achieved what we did in submitting the report to the Home Secretary on time.

There were 80 recommendations, and the Chamber will understand that I will not dwell on those, although I want to emphasise a couple. One is on the lack of data. It is appalling that we collect no data whatever on what happens to those who enter the national referral mechanism for safety—they are mainly women, but some are men—once that period of safety ends. Most of our forebears would have been scandalised if they had allowed an Act to continue with that lack of data collection.

We had views about the independent slavery commissioner, which the Government, for their own reasons, disregarded. However, we thought it was important to realise that, all the time, there is this great conflict in the Department between its wish to bear down as effectively as possible on those merchants of evil—the slave owners—and its responsibility for immigration. We therefore thought that the Home Office’s modern slavery unit—happily, a unit was established—should actually go to the Cabinet Office. We also have views about the supply chains, and we are anxious that some of the money that we should get off these undesirable individuals under the proposals in the Act actually goes to the victims. That is therefore part of the agenda for today’s debate.

We have parliamentary groups, and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke will talk about other ways in which our report will be followed up. I hope that the Home Office, Parliament, the slave owners and those we wish to rescue from slavery will be convinced that today is another example of our wish to be more effective in countering this wickedness that we see in this country and abroad.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Given the number of Members who wish to speak, there will be a six-minute time limit from the very start. I call John Howell.

2.41 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Thank you, Mrs Main; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I will raise the situation of modern slavery in Nigeria, which the team should look at as an example of how the Modern Slavery Act is working. The attack on modern slavery is an international phenomenon, and we lead the world in setting the standards.

I mention Nigeria because I am the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Nigeria, so I happen to know the country and what is going on there very well. As a bit of background, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa. By the middle of the decade, it will have in the region of 400 million people. It also has the largest number of people in modern slavery in Africa. Examples include women who are tricked into migrating for non-existent jobs and then left to work in brothels or forced to work for no wages and with no legal immigration status whatever.

It is not just women who are affected; the number of children affected is enormous. Some are forced to work as street vendors or beggars. Boys are forced to work in mines, stone quarries and domestic service. Nigeria has just under 1 million people who are trapped in modern slavery. It is an enormous number, which accounts for around 17% of the people trapped in modern slavery in Africa, where the total figure comes to around 7 million or 8 million people. That is an enormous number; we are not even the tip of the iceberg in this country.

The Nigerian Government like what they see in what we do. We are helping to tackle the problem of modern slavery by using the Department for International
[John Howell]

Development budget in a number of ways. For example, the work with non-governmental organisations uses victims who have been rescued from modern slavery as good examples. Those victims talk to people about how evil it is and about how they can avoid getting trapped in it. That is such a powerful way of getting the message across, because those victims have actually suffered as a result of modern slavery, and such outreach goes down extremely well.

The British Government have taken a stance, putting about £16 million into Nigeria to help with this issue. That provides a number of bits of background. It is particularly concentrated in a place called Edo State, which sits at the crossroads of the people traffickers. I could go on and on about the people traffickers, but I will not.

On my last visit to Nigeria, I took a brief to tackle modern slavery with the Nigerian Government, and one of the companies I went to see was Unilever. Unilever acts in a number of sectors where one would expect modern slavery to exist—broadly, in the agricultural sector. I had a long chat with its representatives and saw the NGOs they were working with. It was a fantastic experience, because Unilever in Nigeria has eliminated modern slavery from not just its own activities but its entire supply chain. That has taken a big effort, so it is worth looking at that as an example of how to go about things.

One of the great joys for me was talking to the NGOs that work in this area and that have helped to eradicate modern slavery. They, too, used people who had suffered to get the message across, which is a brilliant thing to have done. When I go back, I hope I will be able to capitalise on that. I hope Unilever’s example has spread, because that work in this area and that have helped to eradicate modern slavery to exist—broadly, in the agricultural sector. I had a long chat with its representatives and saw the NGOs they were working with. It was a fantastic experience, because Unilever in Nigeria has eliminated modern slavery from not just its own activities but its entire supply chain. That has taken a big effort, so it is worth looking at that as an example of how to go about things.

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2.47 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I declare my interest in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) on securing the debate, and on his report with the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and Baroness Butler-Sloss in the Lords.

I know that the Minister is committed to doing all that she can on this issue, so my remarks are really a challenge to us as an institution, and as a Parliament, rather than a criticism. We all want to end slavery and trafficking; that goes without saying. However, we have had an opportunity to ask how we can wake the system up a bit, and make it go a bit faster. I was in Government, and it is a great source of frustration for me that some of the sensible amendments that the Government have started to accept were tabled in 2015. They should have been adopted then, and the Government are now adopting them four years later.

We all understand why people outside sometimes get frustrated. In a sense, that fuels populism, because people ask, “Why doesn’t the system get a move on?” Everybody knows that it is a problem. I say to the Minister that this is a real opportunity to get hold of this issue, and say that not only will we be outraged, frustrated and angered by it, but we will drive the system much more quickly than at present to work in a way that makes a real difference.

A difference has been made, of course, but let us look at what the report says. In the limited time that I have, I will make a couple of points in each area. Businesses are still not really conforming to the transparency arrangements, which I know the Prime Minister has made a statement about. I say to the businesses of this country that surely every managing director or board of directors deplores slavery, and I challenge them to put their own houses in order—to use their massive purchasing power to invest in companies, businesses and supply chains that conform to the requirements of the Modern Slavery Act.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a passionate and well-informed speech. Will he join me in paying tribute to the brilliant businesses around the country who understand the agenda and are trying to do their best about it, such as the Co-operative Group, which has brought in a project called Bright Future that guarantees a job placement for anyone who is a victim of modern slavery?

Vernon Coaker: Yet again, the co-op movement shows that businesses to get their act together—to stop just talking and to show the rest of the country in their investment decisions that they mean what they say. One of the suggestions in the report is more transparency. I know the Minister will address that, and the Prime Minister has already started to address that, which is good.

We come to independent child trafficking advocates. That has to be rolled out much more quickly and has to include not only trafficked children, but unaccompanied children, which is a demand of many of the non-governmental bodies. People would be shocked—I know the Prime Minister is—that we save children, and then we lose them. How can that be right? How can it be right that we take children from the traffickers and put them into the care of the state, and then we lose them, and not just for a short period of time? According to the 2017 report from Every Child Protected Against Trafficking and Missing People, 190 of them have gone and we have no idea where they are. That simply is not acceptable. We have to do better.

The report laid out that the role of the commissioner is a challenge for the Government. The commissioner has to be independent. Governments hate that—I know that from my time in Government. They say they love it, but they hate it, because as soon as the commissioner brings out a report that says the Government need to be doing better, the Government usually row back—although I know the Minister will not do this—and say, “If only the commissioner understood the parameters in which we operate.” That is why the suggestion in the report that the commissioner should be moved into the Cabinet Office rather than the host Department might be a way forward.

It is really important that some of the legal applications are clarified, particularly in terms of what we mean by trafficking and modern slavery, and the relevance to the Palermo protocols and so on. There is a job of work to be done there.

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I want to labour one point with the Minister, which completely and utterly bedevils the system, and it bedevils me—I find it intolerable. The Government must reconcile the needs of victims with the immigration system. Somebody can be found to have conclusive grounds for claiming to be a victim of modern slavery or trafficking, and yet they end up with no immigration status at all. The Home Office even looks to send home some of the people in that situation. I know the Home Office will say that it will look at this, and that the processes will all be done very carefully, and so on and so forth. I say again to the Minister, all power to her elbow when she points out to the immigration department of the Home Office that these people are victims of the most heinous crimes and should be guaranteed some security of residence in this country, over and above what they are given at present. It simply is not good enough.

I finish where I started. This is a real opportunity. It is a positive report that reflects the good work that the Government and the whole of the House of Commons have done, and it says to the British people that we know more needs to be done, and we are going to do it.

2.54 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. It is also a great pleasure to speak in this debate, after having the privilege of working with the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and Baroness Elizabeth Butler-Sloss from the other place. I am a newcomer to the issue of modern-day slavery and I have learned so much from the right hon. Gentleman. The report will add much to the work that needs to be done, which the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) has talked about.

Modern-day slavery is a human tragedy that is still happening in our communities today—we have to acknowledge that if we are going to move forward. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has done more than anybody in raising this issue in the last decade, in this place and outside, but there is still so much more to be done. She made a very powerful speech at the International Labour Organisation just a few days ago, reminding us of the progress that has been made. The UK has led on this issue over the last decade, and that is strong evidence—much of which was brought forward by the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion)—of the very close relationship between modern-day slavery and prostitution. We in the UK need to look carefully at our laws, which are potentially acting as a magnet for those who want an easier place to operate as traffickers of people who they want to sexually exploit. I hope the Minister will be able to comment on that.

I want to raise one thing that is not in the report—I hope that is allowable, Mrs Main. One of the things we wanted to look at, but were not able to because of the terms of reference, was the issue of prostitution. There is strong evidence—much of which was brought forward by the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion)—of the very close relationship between modern-day slavery and prostitution. We in the UK need to look carefully at our laws, which are potentially acting as a magnet for those who want an easier place to operate as traffickers of people who they want to sexually exploit. I hope the Minister will be able to comment on that.

In the foreword to our report, we talked about setting up an implementation group to hold the Government to account. The Minister knows me and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead well enough to know that we will do exactly that, and that her feet will be firmly held to the fire—not only on implementing the things to which I know the Government are committed, but on ensuring they look very carefully at all the recommendations in the report. Modern-day slavery is a human tragedy, and we cannot allow it to continue or get worse on our watch.

3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be called in this debate. First of all, it would be remiss of me not to thank the right hon. Members for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and Baroness Butler-Sloss for the incredibly hard work that they individually and collectively put in to ensure that the report came together. Looking at the hours, days and weeks that were spent on the report, I am in awe of those three and others. The report is clear, concise and yet still shocking, and the facts cannot be ignored.
[Jim Shannon]

I was an advocate for the Modern Slavery Act 2015, having seen my noble Friend and colleague Lord Morrow. I am sure the Minister is aware of this, but I want to remind the House very gently. He broke ground in the other place with the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. It is my belief that it paved the way for the Modern Slavery Act 2015. I stand by my decision to speak up for people in situations that prevented them from helping themselves. I believe this is the very core of what we do in the life that we have chosen and been given the opportunity to serve in.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke referred to sexual exploitation, an issue that was addressed emphatically in the Act that Lord Morrow brought forward for Northern Ireland. I was the sponsor of its presentation to the House. The event was well attended by Members of different parties and of the House of Lords—I think that encapsulated the interest. However, it is time to revisit the legislation, as all good legislators must—that is what the debate is about—and see its impact on the problem. The report reminds us gently, but firmly and concisely, that although the Act was certainly groundbreaking, new ways of trafficking and slavery circumvent the Act. We must therefore change the Act and the legislation to ensure that we can help people who need protection and assistance, and that those who are guilty of modern slavery are made accountable.

I loved the report’s use of the phrase, “give teeth to legislation.” We often use it in the House on different occasions. We should give teeth to the legislation to stop people exposing loopholes and continuing to exploit people. I support that wholeheartedly, and commend the right hon. Members again. I was horrified to read that:

“The number of potential victims identified in the UK each year has more than doubled”—

these figures are horrific—

“from 3266 in 2015 to 6993 in 2018.”

Right hon. Members have referred to the fact that:

“The proportion of children identified has increased during the same period from 30% to nearly 45%”—

that should shock us to our very core, and it underlines the need to act on the report as soon as possible—

“in large part due to the rise in cases of county lines and other forms of criminal exploitation.”

Perhaps the most shocking thing in the report is that:

“UK nationals now represent by far the highest proportion of potential victims identified at almost a quarter of all those recorded, while in 2015 they were only the fifth most represented nationality behind Albania, Vietnam, Nigeria and Romania”—

the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) mentioned Nigeria—

“This is again due to the rising number of children identified as being involved in county lines, most of whom are UK nationals.”

Sex slaves and migrant workers are promised jobs and come to the UK, but that all changes when they get here. I believe we need a victim support scheme. I know the Minister has referred to that in previous answers to questions, and perhaps she could mention the scheme in her response.

I wholeheartedly agree with the authors of the report that too few convictions have been handed down for the new offences prosecuted under the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and that too few slavery and trafficking prevention and risk orders are in place to restrict offender activity. We need to tighten up and do better. So how do we add teeth to the legislation? The report is incredibly clear, so I will not simply rehash the recommendations. I seek merely to highlight a couple.

There is the issue of a more appropriately allocated budget for the commissioner, and the message that this is not a board set up on a whim, but an intrinsic part of the whole system. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead mentioned the transparency in supply chains and introduced a private Member’s Bill, the Modern Slavery (Transparency in Supply Chains) Bill, in the other place in 2016 and asked me to take it through this place in 2017. It was designed to strengthen the transparency in supply chains and introduce the legislation to cover the public sector. Sadly, I did not get the Bill very far at that stage. At the time, the Minister reassured me that the Modern Slavery Act 2015 was just the start. We see today that those words were true, but it is still going far too slowly.

Time is not on anyone’s side in such debates, because there is so much to say and comment on. I give my sincere thanks to everyone involved. I also pledge to do what I can to make the recommendations become reality, so that the shocking numbers highlighted in the report become a part of our history. As we move forward, we can give hope to people who need it. Our job is to support them.

3.6 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) on securing the debate, and on the work that he has done, alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), in getting such a fantastic report published. I thank everybody else who was involved, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for her dedication to starting to rid our nation of the evil practice of modern slavery when she was Home Secretary. She led the way, not just nationally but globally, through the legislation that she introduced.

I first took an interest in modern slavery when I was first elected, because I heard the Bishop of Derby, Alastair Redfearn, speak about it. As a Derbyshire MP, it had a huge impact on me, so I have been following it ever since. Baroness Young, who was also involved in the report, introduced a private Member’s Bill, the Modern Slavery (Transparency in Supply Chains) Bill, in the other place in 2016 and asked me to take it through this place in 2017. It was designed to strengthen the transparency in supply chains and introduce the legislation to cover the public sector. Sadly, I did not get the Bill very far at that stage. At the time, the Minister reassured me that the Modern Slavery Act 2015 was just the start. We see today that those words were true, but it is still going far too slowly.
A lot of my constituents will think that modern slavery is about the sex trade and prostitution, but we all know it is more than just that. It is the nail bars and car washes—my right hon. friend the Member for Basingstoke mentioned that we now have an app where that can be reported, which is really good. I do not like washing my car, so I take it to a car wash, but I look so carefully at the people who work there, to reassure myself that I am not adding to the modern-slavery supply chain.

Modern slavery also applies to manufacturing. Once again, this issue has been quite close to home, because an agency supplier to Sports Direct was employing slaves. Some fantastic work was carried out by the Nottinghamshire police, resulting in convictions. So we need to tighten up transparency in the supply chain because we never know where we will find modern slavery.

My interest has never gone away. In fact, to promote this debate and to get it on the radar, I asked the Prime Minister a question earlier today. I was reassured because she said that the Government would “shortly be publishing a consultation to look at ways to strengthen transparency in the supply chain, and...expanding transparency laws to cover the public sector and its purchasing power.”

As we know, the purchasing power of the public sector is huge. The word that concerned me was “consultation”, and we need action. We could see the report as a consultation and we need to speed things up. We cannot keep having consultation after consultation. We need action to make things happen.

Before I came into this debate today, I was at an event called “Send My Friend to School”, which is about making sure that the sustainable development goals include funding for education. If we get education right, we can give kids a future. Giving kids a future as they grow up is another way of eliminating modern slavery. We need to work across Government to make sure that whatever public money is available is spent on making sure that our supply chains are transparent and free from modern slavery, and we also need to spend public money in the right place overseas to make sure that modern slavery does not happen in the first place.

I look forward to the Minister’s response. I feel that the changes that we so desperately need to see in this country . Between January 2016 and January 2018, Northumbria police visited 81 brothels, encountering 421 women, 86% of whom were from Romania. Northumbria police visited 81 brothels between March 2016 and April 2018. Of the 259 women they encountered, 75% were from Romania. More than half of those brothels were recorded by police as being connected to other brothels, agencies or non-UK organised crime groups. Modern slavery for sexual exploitation is happening right here in the UK on an industrial scale. The impact on victims is devastating.

Research by the European Commission shows that victims experience sexual brutality that causes serious damage to health and wellbeing: vaginal injuries that lead to sexually transmitted infections and HIV; and high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression. Victims live in fear of reprisals if they try to escape. The rates of re-trafficking of those who manage to exit are high. Evidence from the POPPY project revealed that victims were exploited for an average of eight to 20 months before they could get out. Most women were exploited every single day of the week, seeing on average 13 sex buyers a day. We can therefore extrapolate that the average victim can be raped anywhere from 2,798 to 6,828 times. It is slavery through prostitution in the UK, and it is happening on our watch.

The basic principles of supply and demand underpin the phenomenon of trafficking and modern slavery for sexual exploitation. Without demand from sex buyers, there would be no supply of women and girls through sexual exploitation. Demand for paid sex is context-dependent, and one factor that influences the higher level of demand is the legality of prostitution. Legality has been found to contribute to normalisation, which in turn contributes to demand. In short, trafficking and modern slavery is larger in countries where prostitution is legal.

Demand reduction legislation was first introduced in Sweden in 1999. Research there has revealed that demand for prostitution has significantly decreased since Sweden criminalised paying for sex. At present the Modern Slavery Act does not seek or function to suppress the...
demand from a minority of men who pay for sex—the very demand that drives and funds trafficking and modern slavery for sexual exploitation. Since our Modern Slavery Act came into force, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and France have all criminalised paying for sex in order to combat demand for sexual exploitation, while removing the criminal sanctions that penalise victims. Demand reduction legislation is also in place in Norway, Iceland and Ireland, which means that England, Wales and Scotland now have substantially more sex-buyer-friendly laws than many of our surrounding countries, making us an attractive destination for sex traffickers.

Prostitution laws should be urgently updated to reduce demand for sexual exploitation by criminalising the purchase of sex, while removing all criminal sanctions applied to victims of sexual exploitation and supporting them to exit. That is the key way to tackle modern slavery of women in the UK. Once again, I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead for securing this debate, and I look forward to working with the independent review team as they explore the links between prostitution laws and preventing modern slavery.

3.17 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Main. I commend the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) on securing this debate, on his tireless work in this area, on his efforts to expedite a review—I remember that it was not necessarily going to happen—and on the excellent review that flowed from that. Of course, I should not miss out of my compliments Baroness Butler-Sloss and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), as reviewers, and two of my very good pals in this place, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and Baroness Young, who provided expert advice. Looking down the list of contributors, I feel we should give those guys more credit. The report really is a terrific bit of work.

The slavery of another human being is a cruel and unthinkable crime. We talk in terms of modern slavery, but, in reality, this is a thread that has run through humanity for centuries, and we are custodians of an abolitionist movement that has stood and fights it. Today we stand in the shoes of Wilberforce, Hamilton and Elizabeth Heyrick. It is an awesome opportunity and challenge, and our ambition must match theirs.

Having world-leading legislation is a critical first step. I have no doubt that, as the Prime Minister finishes her final few days in office, the work here will be among her proudest. The 2015 Act stands as a testament to her personal commitment to this agenda. Slavery is a scourge that we have fought for centuries. Slavers innovate, and we too must develop our approaches to make sure that they are fit for a modern context. That is why the review is so important. Even in four years, things move on.

I want to touch on two issues in the report that I have spent my past two-plus years in this place raising. First, the role of the independent commissioner is important; it is one way in which a self-confident, reflective Government are held to account. As the report has shown, however, it has not delivered as planned. Frankly, if a role is hosted, managed and appraised by the very Department it is set up to ensure scrutiny of, it is not independent. It is not possible for someone to be independent of the place where their pay and rations come from. If the Government are serious about independent oversight, it needs to be done properly. The suggestions in the report would be a good approach and would ensure greater independence and effectiveness.

The Minister does not need me to draw her attention to what the right hon. Member for Basingstoke said in the report about the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, on which she and I have spent the past three months. There are some good suggestions there about how we can have a truly independent commissioner. If we carry on along current lines, I can say with certainty that a Member will be standing where I am, facing a Minister, and they will be having the exact same conversation about the independent domestic abuse commissioner that we have been having about the Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner. We shall make the same mistakes, because nothing will have changed. No one wants that to happen, but no one at the moment is stopping what seems to be a runaway train. I implore the Minister to stop it and to say there is a better way. I think that there is, and the report suggests one.

While I was a member, the Home Affairs Committee took evidence from the outgoing Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner, Kevin Hyland. We heard about the practical difficulties that he had in running the office and the debilitating nature of the Home Office recruitment process. There are good reasons for that, and I fully understand, but I wonder what craft and creativity could be brought to bear so that the post could be made agile and flexible in relation to need.

As to transparency in supply chains, section 54 of the Act is a critical part of disrupting the supply chains on which the global organised crime network is built. However, the record on that is not good enough. It is unthinkable that, four years on, more than a quarter of companies do not comply with the provisions on reporting, as TISCreport states. That does not even account for those who do not comply with the provisions on reporting, as TISCreport states. That does not even account for token compliance. What other laws that we pass in this place are thought of as, “Do them if you fancy doing them”? I certainly do not talk to constituents about the needs to drop. I am interested in hearing more about the Government’s plans.

I echo the call in the review for the requirement to be extended to the public sector. Councils and central Government are massive purchasers and could have a real impact on disrupting supply chains. Of course they...
would have no interest in dealing with disreputable suppliers. However, the latest Sancroft-Tusell report says that more than 40% of the top 100 suppliers to central Government have failed to meet the basic legal requirements of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. That is extraordinary. What is wrong with us, whether we are in the Government, or we are the people who hold them to account? How have we let it come about that 40% of the top 100 suppliers, who get billions of pounds of taxpayers' money, think, for a start, that they do not need to comply with the law, and do not think it worth their time to cross the road to comply with modern slavery legislation? It is ridiculous, and none of us should stand for it. I would be interested to know when there will be action on that.

The report is excellent. I alluded earlier to the fact that there was a bit of a battle to make the case for it, and I applaud the Members who did so. It is good to come back and ask whether something that was world-leading is now fit for our time. Were amendments rejected previously that now fit the modern context? There are 80 suggestions, and I am pretty much on board with all of them. If we add those things and develop them, we will get what we all want: a strong, forthright and complete attack on slavery in this country.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): I am sure colleagues have not missed the fact that they have shown such discipline that the Minister and shadow Minister will have a generous amount of time—it may well be that discipline that the Minister and shadow Minister will have not missed the fact that they have shown such prolific contribution to policy development in this important panel. I hope that, in due course, we can make a useful contribution to policy development, just as they will in England and Wales. We can all learn from what works and from good practice in each of the jurisdictions.

I commend everyone who spoke in the debate for their knowledgeable and insightful comments. I want briefly to add my support for recommendations on two of the key themes of the report that relate to the whole of the UK, and to make a couple of comments on some of the other provisions. As has been said, we could do with a full day in the Chamber to discuss the various aspects of the topic.

I particularly welcome many of the recommendations made about the Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner’s role and powers. The hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) was particularly eloquent on that. Recommendations that I fully back include those on appointment procedures, although I would always want to make it clear that the Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive should still be consulted in the process. The proposals on how the role is funded, who sponsors it, and where it is situated seem to be sensible and practical ways to build the independence of the commissioner. As hon. Members have said, that is pivotal to the role’s credibility.

Secondly, I am similarly supportive of the ideas on transparency in the supply chain, which could mean that a measure with the potential to be transformational really has teeth, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, paraphrasing the report. Implementing the suggestions could help to bring an end to what is too often useless and pointless tick-box reporting by certain companies, and could ensure far more widespread compliance.

On a related subject, but going beyond that, there is a compelling case to reconsider whether we should restrict ourselves to a simple reporting model. Perhaps, as other countries are pushing towards doing, we should put companies under duties to identify, prevent and mitigate impacts on human rights more broadly. I echo the eloquent comments of the hon. Members for Erewash (Maggie Throup) and for Nottingham North about the need for action in relation to the public sector.

Thirdly, I welcome the discussion on the different models for supporting children in the different jurisdictions of the UK. We are certainly proud of the work that the independent guardians are doing in Scotland, but nothing is beyond improvement, and analysis such as that provided in the report allows us to see what we can learn from the other schemes. For what it is worth, I am full square behind what has been said about the need for roll-out of the independent child trafficking advocates—or independent guardians. Again, the hon. Member for Gedling is right about the urgency and significance of that.

I have two final topics I want briefly to cover. First, to paraphrase the review, and as the right hon. Member for Birkenhead said, there are severe deficiencies in the way data about modern slavery is collected. There is still a need for far greater awareness of modern slavery and for consistent, high-quality training among those most likely to encounter its victims. Addressing those issues will be paramount if we are to maximise the impact of the legislation and strategies. It is against that background that the Scottish Government this week commenced.

Some provisions of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and, therefore, some of the recommendations of the review, are directly relevant to all parts of the United Kingdom. Even in devolved areas, in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where there is of course distinct human trafficking legislation, I am sure all the recommendations will help to inform the debate and policy development, just as they will in England and Wales.
consultation on a broader duty to notify and provide information about victims. The proposal is to specify a wider range of public authorities required to notify Police Scotland about persons who are or appear to be victims of offences under the legislation. The explicit and main aim is to provide a more accurate picture of the scale and extent of trafficking than can be gleaned from national referral mechanism data, and to provide more effective targeting of enforcement activity and support services. I take on board the point made by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead on the need for data on those who are on the other side of the NRM process, and I shall definitely feed that back in.

I believe there is still a real need to look again at how the immigration system fits into this, and I echo what other hon. Members said about that. Similarly, as we debated recently in Westminster Hall, the Government need to look again at support for victims. However, that is for another day. I thank the review authors again for their thoughtful and insightful work, and echo the calls that have been made to seize the opportunity to make a difference for the victims of modern slavery.

3.29 pm

Carolyn Harris: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) on securing this important debate. I thank all those who have spoken so eloquently today. I welcome the independent review of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, and its robust and detailed recommendations, and I congratulate all those involved in producing the report. Modern slavery is an abhorrent, vile, devastating practice, and we must do everything in our power to ensure it is stopped. Those who fall victim to it must be fully supported on their journey out of modern slavery, and given the dignified care they need.

During my time as an MP and a shadow Minister, I have spent many hours meeting victims of modern slavery, and hearing the tragic stories of how they were stripped of their rights, violated, and subjected to abuse and inhumane work and living conditions. The review highlighted the significant scale of modern slavery in the UK. In 2017, 5,143 potential victims were referred through the national referral mechanism, 41% of whom were children. The number of victims who sadly go unreported will obviously be much higher.

Along with CORE, the UK civil society coalition on corporate accountability, the review highlighted weaknesses in the introduction of section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act, “Transparency in supply chains etc”. An estimated 40% of eligible companies are not complying with the legislation at all, and there are currently no penalties for non-compliance. When statements are shared, they are often generalised and do not provide the detail required to be sure that modern slavery is not taking place. Consequently, if companies have victims of modern slavery in their supply chains, little has been done by organisations to eliminate it.

Much more needs to be done to strengthen the legislation, first by mandating companies to report on the six areas that the Act requests, and secondly by ensuring consequences if they do not report. That commitment from companies could also provide an opportunity for a co-ordinated approach to issues that arise in multiple supply chains. If the UK wishes to lead the way on this issue, it must ensure that such structures are in place, and enforced, so that companies report on their supply chain. A further problem that I have raised a number of times, which was also identified in the review, is the lack of information about victims once they leave the NRM. The fact that such information is not properly recorded leaves hugely vulnerable individuals at risk of being re-trafficked. No knowledge is kept of their whereabouts, which is simply not good enough.

I also wish to mention the gendered nature of modern slavery. I understand that the law on prostitution could not be addressed in the review as it fell outside its remit, but I am pleased that that work will now be carried out, together with colleagues in the all-party group on prostitution and the global sex trade, for which my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) has done such brilliant work. Although the issue was not addressed in the review, many who gave evidence stated that because—unlike other countries in Europe—England, Wales and Scotland do not have a sex buyer law, they could be more of a target for traffickers. The sex buyer law on prostitution decriminalises all those who are prostituted. During my time as an MP I have met countless women involved in prostitution, and I have heard their harrowing stories of exploitative relationships and the dangerous situations they have been put in. We must ensure that England, Wales and Scotland are not easy targets for traffickers because they do not have a sex buyer law.

The UK Government can say warm words, and repeat the same lines about what they are doing to help victims and protect them from modern slavery or being re-trafficked. However, unless our police force and support services are properly resourced to undertake that mammoth task, those desperately needed changes will not come about.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Lady set out the issues around the law on prostitution in the UK, and she made a clear case for why a sex buyers law has helped to reduce sexual exploitation in other nearby countries, leaving the UK with quite different laws. Will those on the Labour Front Bench support a change to the law in that area?

Carolyn Harris: I will answer by saying simply that it is a work in progress.

In 2015 there were 17,000 fewer police officers in England and Wales than there were in 2010, and regardless of the way that is spun, it will have an impact on helping victims of modern slavery. We can get closer to eradicating this heinous crime if there is a properly resourced, co-ordinated approach by companies, politicians and other supporting bodies, who commit to meeting the expectations of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. There is a huge opportunity to be world leaders in removing this horror from our society, but there must be more enforcement and it must be properly resourced. The consensus we have heard today should, and I hope will, motivate the Government to implement the recommendations as soon as possible. Again, I thank everyone who was involved with this remarkable and insightful piece of work.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and I am grateful for your invitation to colleagues to intervene on the Minister as much as possible.

I thank the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for securing this important debate, and for all his work not just in the review—I will thank him and others lavishly for that in a moment—but over the years. We were struck by his recollection of how he was first alerted to the heinous crime of modern slavery, and by the recollections of other hon. Friends and Members around the Chamber. My hon. Friends the Members for Erewash (Maggie Throup) and for Henley (John Howell), and the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) highlighted the various ways that we have all become aware of, alerted to, and are working on efforts to tackle the range of horrendous crimes against humanity that modern slavery involves. Yet again it is a great privilege to take part in a debate in which the tone, I hope, shows the best of this place, with both constructive criticism and the will to work together. I thank all hon. Members and friends for their participation this afternoon.

The Government are committed to the eradication of modern slavery in the United Kingdom and overseas. Our modern slavery legislation is among the best in the world, but we always seek to improve our response. The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) expressed impatience with this place but also with outside, and the hon. Members for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) noted the evolving methodology of slave owners, and the ways they change their criminal behaviour to avoid detection and exploit more vulnerable people, or find opportunities for selling people in a range of ways. That is what modern slavery is about.

Vernon Coaker: On the evolving nature of the legislation, will the Minister do all she can to ensure that some of the negative reporting about the way traffickers are starting to use the statutory defence included in the Modern Slavery Act 2015 does not deter us from using it? That important provision protects vulnerable victims.

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question because we have recently seen negative publicity about that issue. We are clear that that defence exists to protect the most vulnerable people in society, particularly children, and we believe that rolling out independent child trafficking advocates—particularly the new forms that we are trying for UK nationals—will help the police and others to understand where that defence applies properly and lawfully.

Jim Shannon: The Minister will be aware of the legislative change in Northern Ireland—there was a meeting in the House to make Members aware of it. Has she had a chance to look in detail at the legislation in Northern Ireland? May I say gently—and quickly, Mrs Main—that by looking at it she might find a way of introducing effective legislation here?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that. Later in my speech, I will deal with hon. Members’ observations about prostitution. I am always happy to look at the example set in other parts of the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

The methodology is evolving, and we have an open-handed, open-hearted response to tackle this very serious crime. I was pleased that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and Baroness Butler-Sloss accepted the Prime Minister’s invitation to review the Act because we do not want to rest on our laurels. We recognise that as the crimes develop, so too must the law. I want to put on the record my sincere thanks to those three colleagues for all the work they have done on this. It is quite something to see the work they have drawn together, with the help of the commissioner experts—I have written to them all to thank them. They have done extraordinary work, and we are truly grateful to them.

We are considering all the recommendations of the final report very carefully, and we hope to respond to them formally before the summer recess. Colleagues who are impatient will have to understand that the wheels of Government turn slowly, and that is a swift response. We are working very hard indeed to achieve that. We recognise that this is an opportunity, as the hon. Member for Gedling said:

I will touch on the review’s four themes, and I hope hon. Members will understand that I cannot commit to particular recommendations today. I am delighted that Dame Sara Thornton took up the role of Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner on 1 May. Anyone who has met Dame Sara or had the privilege of working with her knows how independently minded she is. I know from my meetings with her how much she is relishing the opportunity to work in this arena, bringing her policing experience with her. I have no doubt that she will bring some huge improvements to the way in which we deal with modern slavery in this country. It is a vital role that offers independent insight and challenges public authorities to ensure the UK’s response remains among the best in the world. We very much welcome the review’s recommendations on how to ensure the role’s independence, and we are working closely with Dame Sara to take them on board.

Last week, the Prime Minister announced the creation of a new Government modern slavery and migration envoy to help advance the Government’s international modern slavery objectives. That is something that colleagues were keen to recommend. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley gave examples from Nigeria, with which we must work closely because we are sadly a destination for a great number of the traffickers from that country. My hon. Friend will know that the Home Office is using the modern slavery fund to tackle modern slavery in key source countries, including Nigeria, where we have committed £5 million to deal with the issue. Through events such as the Santa Marta Group conference, I have met some of the amazing people who work with people—predominantly women—in Nigeria who are at risk of being trafficked or have been trafficked. I am absolutely convinced about the invaluable role that their work plays.

Vernon Coaker: This is a difficult question, but I will ask it because the Minister is more sympathetic to this than others in the Home Office. She talks about women from Nigeria who may have been trafficked to this country. If they are confirmed to be victims of trafficking through the national referral mechanism and receive a conclusive grounds decision, what immigration status should they have at the end of that?
Victoria Atkins: I will come on to that when I talk about victim support. The hon. Gentleman understands only too well how complicated this is, so I will try to keep to my time, and I want to give the right hon. Member for Birkenhead a couple of minutes at the end to sum up.

Sarah Champion: The Minister was right to identify this country’s pull factor. She rightly talked about the point that the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) made about women coming over here and being sexually exploited. Does she acknowledge that the Government must do more to address sexual exploitation in this country, and that a buyers law is the way to do that?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady and my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke for setting out the reviewers’ intention to look at prostitution in addition to the report that they have delivered. I welcome that review. I very much understand the points that the hon. Members have made today and in previous debates. We have commissioned detailed research into what prostitution looks like in the 20th century, because we all acknowledge that it is different from how it was 20 years ago, particularly given the rise of online sex trafficking and prostitution. We want to wait for that independent research conducted by academics in south Wales, and we hope that they will be able to report this summer. We very much look forward to that, and we will of course review the evidence once it comes in.

The review rightly focused on transparency in supply chains. We are the first country in the world to require large organisations to report on the steps taken to prevent modern slavery in their supply chains. More and more businesses are reporting on their actions to protect vulnerable workers. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley mentioned Unilever, and other colleagues rightly mentioned the Co-op. In my role, I have the privilege of helping the Home Secretary with the business forum, which draws together some of the biggest business leaders not just in this country but in the world, so we can examine what they are doing to ensure their compliance with the Act. As hon. Members said, compliance can give companies a competitive advantage, but only as long as other companies are doing what they should be doing too.

The Home Office wrote to the CEOs of 17,000 businesses in October 2018 and March 2019 to notify them of our intention to undertake an audit of compliance. We are pleased that nearly 4,000 businesses have signed up to our newsletter for further information. This is an area that requires real action. I am therefore very pleased that, last week, the Prime Minister announced that we will develop a central registry for modern slavery statements and hold businesses to account. I think that is a very significant development, and I was delighted when we managed to get it over the line, not least given our experience of the huge public pressure that the gender pay gap has put on businesses to ensure they treat female staff members properly and correct unfairnesses where they exist.

I am conscious of the work being done by various businesses and organisations, including, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke said, the NHS and churches. The Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority is also doing a huge amount to educate and hold people to account.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister mentioned the excellent progress that has been made on this front, but it remains the case that 5,000 businesses are not in compliance with section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act. In October 2018, she said that they can expect to face tougher consequences if they continue to flout their obligations. Will she elaborate on what those tougher consequences might be?

Victoria Atkins: We will consult on further new measures, including proposals to improve reporting quality, ensure compliance and extend the requirements to the public sector. My hon. Friend the Member for Erewash expressed some dismay at yet another consultation. I regret that when we make big changes, which I hope this consultation will lead to, we have to consult to see what organisations and so on think of them. I believe this consultation will be a real step forward, and I encourage hon. Members to respond to it.

Some 100 local authorities already report, but I am pleased to announce that individual Departments will publish their own modern slavery statements from 2020-21, building on the Prime Minister’s earlier commitment that central Government will report voluntarily this year. We very much accept the observation that we must lead by example, and we will do so.

I turn to independent child trafficking advocates. As was set out, some of the most heartbreaking examples of modern slavery in what is, it has to be said, a pretty competitive field are those of children who are exploited by slave masters. We are committed to providing specialist support for child victims. We have now rolled out ICTAs to one third of local authorities in England and Wales, in line with the commitment I made in July last year. We welcome the findings of the independent review, and we are considering the recommendations on the improvements we can make to the ICTA service. We remain committed to rolling out ICTAs nationally as soon as possible.

On legal application, the Act provided the necessary tools and powers for the police to tackle the offenders responsible for this crime and bring them to justice. I am grateful that the reviewers examined the definition of the offences, the uptake of slavery and trafficking reparation orders, and the use of the statutory defence. We are considering the review’s recommendations with our operational partners and will use the impetus the review has created to build on the recent improvements we have seen in the operational response. We have made good progress, but the review rightly highlights where we need to go further to ensure more offenders are convicted, more gangs are disrupted and more illicit profits are seized and returned to victims.

The hon. Member for Strangford touched on victim support. That technically was not part of the review, but I want to answer his question because it comes up in the context of immigration, which a number of colleagues understandably raised. We absolutely reiterate our commitment to identifying victims of modern slavery and supporting them to recover from their exploitation and begin rebuilding their lives. In 2017 we announced a package of reforms to the national referral mechanism centred on improved identification and support for
victims at all stages, and quicker, more certain decision making that victims and wider society can have confidence in.

To improve decision making, we have launched a single expert unit to make all decisions on whether someone is a victim of modern slavery. That single competent authority is responsible for all NRM decisions regardless of an individual’s nationality or immigration status. That is significant because we are absolutely clear that consideration of whether an individual is a victim and any decision about their immigration status must remain separate. We are convinced that that expert unit, and all the safeguards we have put alongside it, will help to improve the quality of decisions.

Importantly, we are also developing a new digital system to make it easier for those on the frontline to identify and refer victims. That system will go live at the end of the summer. That is also significant, because it goes to the point the right hon. Member for Birkenhead rightly made about data collection. We have high hopes that, once that is digitised, the collection of such data will be very much improved.

Modern slavery is an appalling crime that robs people of their freedom and their dignity. It cannot be allowed to continue. We can be proud that the UK is a world leader in tackling modern slavery, and that the Prime Minister set out her expectations not just for the United Kingdom but for the rest of the world in her call to the United Nations for action. We of course acknowledge that we must lead by example, and we will continue to do so. Once again, I thank the right hon. Member for Birkenhead rightly made about data collection. We have high hopes that, once that is digitised, the collection of such data will be very much improved.

Modern Slavery Act.

4 pm

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

That this House has considered East to West Midlands railway connectivity.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased to debate this important issue. Like many hon. Members, I have spoken frequently about the pressing need to invest properly in our rail network. I am glad that several hon. Members from the midlands are present, which underlines the strength of interest in the subject, even though it is a short debate. I am happy to take interventions.

This is not my first debate in the Chamber on rail investment in my community, but I make no apology for prioritising the topic, which is essential for our economic development and our standing as an excellent place to live and work. The Minister will be happy to hear that I will not discuss rail privatisation or future models of ownership; suffice it to say that our network is in need of significant improvement. Commuters and other rail users across my constituency do not always feel well served by the services that they pay a high price to use. They are crying out for a service that works as it should, and the network is crying out for the major investment that it desperately needs.

If the Government are serious about the midlands engine, they need to power it up with a significant commitment to our rail infrastructure. The midlands are a focal point of our country’s strategic transport network. Whether people are heading north, south, east or west, the chances are that they will travel through the midlands at some point, which loads additional pressure on our network that does not affect other regions to the same extent.

Over the last decade, rail journeys in the east midlands, or that touch the east midlands at some point, have increased by a staggering 37%, but in the west midlands, they have increased by an extraordinary 121%. It is good news, of course, that the networks are well used and that many people travel to, across and through our region, but we must recognise that those journeys put pressure on the network and cannot be at the expense of decent, reliable local and regional services for my constituents.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): On the point of local services and east-west links, does my hon. Friend recognise that it is not only the big stations but the so-called little stations, such as Burton Joyce, Netherfield and Carlton, that are important commuter stations for people who live in those areas?

Alex Norris: I absolutely agree. When I was preparing for the debate I was thinking about Netherfield, as I often do because I have canvassed there an awful lot in my life. Those stations are important to people and provide the ability to get to and from Nottingham or other places.

The figures do not lie, although I know that anything can be proved with figures. The latest statistics show that £70 per head is spent on rail infrastructure in the
east midlands and more than 10 times that is spent in London. We can play with those numbers, but fundamentally, there is an extraordinary imbalance that is unsustainable economically—and, frankly, practically—and it will not do. I am a realist, however, and practical, so I am not out with a begging bowl asking for investment levels to be equalised overnight in a vacuum for no purpose. I am here to make a positive case for my constituents and our region to get a good shake of the dice.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I am fortunate that there was investment in a new railway station in Ilkeston not long ago, but even from there, or from Long Eaton station, which is also in my constituency, it is hard to go from east to west, so I welcome the debate. The hon. Gentleman is correct that we need more investment in our railways, so that more trains can stop more frequently at our smaller stations.

Alex Norris: I appreciate that intervention. We talk about north and south and going to and from London a lot, but for our constituents and the communities in our part of the world, that east-west link and the link to Birmingham is just as important.

It is the perfect time, after an intervention from the hon. Lady, to mention that HS2 is coming down the line. We still have some significant work to do to make sure that the east midlands is not eroded from that map. We have a real opportunity to gear up our region’s infrastructure and economy.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. HS2 is often seen as a north-south rail project, but does he agree that reducing the journey time from Birmingham to the east midlands hub at Toton to just 19 minutes is a game changer for east-west connectivity in our region? It is unsurprising that the eastern leg of HS2, which will transform links from Birmingham to not just the east midlands but Yorkshire, the north-east and Scotland—an area of 15 million people—delivers more than 60% of the wider economic benefits of phase 2.

Alex Norris: The Chair of the Transport Committee, my constituency neighbour, makes an excellent point. One of the most frustrating things about the arguments around HS2 is that they get drawn into journey times to and from London. They are not unimportant, but they are not the fundamental thing.

Many hon. Members will have heard me say that we have a real opportunity in the east midlands—the west midlands will benefit too—in the Toton station for HS2; in dualling the roads that get us to the brilliant East Midlands airport, which is the biggest pure freight airport in the country; and in developing the power station site, a centre of the country where freight will come in by air, rail and road. They are not unimportant, but they are not the fundamental thing.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. On HS2 and the economic benefits to the region—the debate is about east-west rail links—for my constituents, the east-west connection to the Chesterfield hub is vital if we are to make the most of the local economic growth around those stations. Does he agree that to make HS2 work for areas across the east midlands, not just immediately around those hub stations, we need those east-west rail links so that people can travel to those new jobs and to the economic growth that HS2 will create?

Alex Norris: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Without those east-west links, people will not get the benefit of HS2 and we will not get all that growth. Individuals will lose out if they are not close to it, which none of us wants. It is no secret that we are going to see a lot of political change in this place in the next six months, but I hope that we can come together as midlanders and make a positive case, with one voice, about why that model and that development will make such a difference.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): In terms of coming together, does the hon. Gentleman agree that extending services on the Crewe-Derby line through Stoke-on-Trent to Nottingham is essential? I welcome the decision of the new operator of east midlands services to extend most of those services to Nottingham.

Alex Norris: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Greater frequency and a better service will be good for constituents at both ends of the line and in between. Hon. Members will have seen that last week, northern newspapers and public figures got together to talk about powering the north. We need to match that level of energy, enthusiasm and creativity; I will come on to something shortly that we can all get behind. The Minister will reiterate the Government’s commitment to investing in our midlands rail network, but it is our duty to make sure that that rhetoric stacks up with the reality on platforms across our region.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on an important topic. Does he agree that rail freight capacity is important to relieve communities and roads of heavy lorries and to meet our zero-carbon targets? Projects such as Peak Rail in my constituency would drive hundreds of lorries off our roads and would bring heritage steam to Buxton, which would attract tourists. With significant private sector investment, it could also free up capacity on our main lines at little cost to the Department and would have benefits for the proposed HS2 route.

Alex Norris: I share my hon. Friend’s view; I was going to make that point. We all want freight off the road, because we declared a climate emergency three weeks ago and that is a good way to support that declaration. We can create, in the midlands, through Toton at the fulcrum of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, and the airport and the power station site, a centre of the country where freight will come in by air, rail and road. We will be the fulcrum for that and the jobs and opportunities are extraordinary. My hon. Friend knows that I often drive through her constituency on the way to the football, and I hoped that she was going to mention better rail links through there, because I certainly would have shared her view on that too.
Midlands Connect has produced a practical, backable and concrete proposal on the Midlands rail hub. I hope that the Minister will take some time to reflect on what he has heard about it so far and on where he thinks we might go with it in future. The project will create economic, social and environmental rewards across the whole of the Midlands and far beyond. It is the most ambitious upgrade of our region’s rail network since the east coast main line was electrified in the 1980s.

The line to Birmingham was electrified more than 50 years ago, and we are still campaigning hard, Minister. I will never miss an opportunity to say that we want the same for the Midlands mainline. It is extraordinary that we are still waiting for 20th-century levels of support in Nottingham.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech that is as enthralling and informative as the debate itself. He has never happened to me before. I confess that I was disappointed to find that I was not granted the debate first time; that is not in his role in the future, I ask him to pass it on to his successors, so that they understand that this is a good project.

Alex Norris: I absolutely agree. That was precisely why I applied for this debate—to have the opportunity to encourage the Minister to back the scheme, which is going ahead now. I made my application on the day of the draw and was granted the debate first time; that has never happened to me before. I confess that I was planning to have a little bit of lead-in time, but I am nevertheless delighted even to be slightly ahead of some of the review proposals. As my hon. Friend says, it requires decisive Government action and support.

The project, as planned, would include new direct services between Nottingham and Coventry via Leicester, and would connect Hereford, Worcester, the south-west and Wales to the HS2 network. That could be done in phases, starting in 2024, and finished in time for the arrival of HS2—

4.11 pm
Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.38 pm
On resuming—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I apologise to the Rail Minister, but I suppose it is appropriate in a debate about railways for there to be a significant delay in proceedings. For those who are waiting for the next debate, this debate is due to finish at 4.58, when the next one will begin. I call Alex Norris.

Alex Norris: Thank you, Mr Hollobone; I am grateful for the chance to resume my remarks.

Before we were interrupted, I was talking about the facets of an east Midlands rail hub, and I know the massed crowds in the debate will be excided to hear some more about it in the next 18 minutes. That could be completed in phases, starting in 2024 and finishing in time for the arrival of HS2 in the east Midlands in 2033. That staggered approach would minimise disruption to passengers and would prevent a worsening of the issues that we are suffering.

As I said before, this debate came more quickly than I expected, so the full details of the proposal for the hub from Midlands Connect will not be published until next week. I will test the principle that the best place to tell a secret is on the Floor of the House of Commons by letting Members in on some of the highlights, ahead of time.

Broadly, the proposal would give capacity for 24 new east-west and west-east passenger services every hour on the Midlands rail network, with 36 additional freight paths per day, shifting 4,320 lorries from road to railway each day. Some 1.6 million more people would be brought within an hour’s journey by public transport of the Midlands’ biggest towns and cities, and the extra capacity would add £650 million to the economy of the Midlands every year.

The hub would be a win-win for our region on so many fronts. It would bring huge economic dividends every year to our industries and local businesses. A more joined-up public transport system would be a good idea as it would reduce traffic on our overcrowded roads and help to tackle the climate emergency we are all too aware that we are facing. The additional tourism it would bring to the region would also be a benefit, as my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) mentioned.

It is clear as day that this project whose time has come; it needs to happen. The case for the Midlands rail hub is persuasive, the details Ministers see will be good and it is time that Midlands communities were backed in this way. I hope Ministers will put the full weight of the Department for Transport behind this project; if they want the Midlands engine, they will have to have the rail hub as a constituent part of it.

I know Transport Ministers have a tough job and there are competing priorities, but I believe there is a strong business case. This is not the politics of the begging bowl or saying, “London gets so much per head and we get so much less per head.” It is easy to say that stuff, but there have to be backable propositions; this is one of them. We think it will lead to good infrastructure in the region and economic benefits.

I ask the Minister to read the report from Midlands Connect when it is released next week and put it at the top of his in-tray for approval. We know there will be significant political change in the next few months and there may be ministerial changes too. If the Minister is not in his role in the future, I ask him to pass it on to his successors, so that they understand that this is a good project. We would make sure that they got a copy of the report, but I hope the Minister would pass a copy on too.

Far too many people in my constituency think that progress in our economy is stalling. There are significant gaps in our development that have not been exploited. I mentioned briefly when the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) intervened that the reality for my community since the mid-1980s has been significant deindustrialisation. We could have a day’s debate on the reasons for that, its inevitability and what came in its place, but to a certain
extent that is now for the birds. What comes now is what matters, with the midlands rail hub being a critical component part of our economic development around that triangle.

**Lilian Greenwood:** My hon. Friend is making an important point about the economic regeneration that the midlands rail hub could enable. He has already acknowledged the importance of tackling the climate emergency. Is it not equally important to tackle congestion and poor air quality in our cities, and improve safety? We know it is far safer to travel by rail than by road.

**Alex Norris:** I share my hon. Friend’s view. The climate emergency is a real thing, not just for leaflets. We should see every action that we now take as a country through the prism of sustainability. This is one of those projects, because it is sustainable: it will take cars and lorries off the road, and the jobs we are talking about—around the airport, the HS2 facility at Toton and the power station site—will be new economy jobs. There are extraordinary opportunities around the power station site for clean energy jobs; we are talking about more than 100,000 potential jobs across those sites. This is the future for the midlands. The only way to get there is to have it properly wired up with the infrastructure.

I hope the Minister will give good consideration to the rail hub, so that we can get it moving, on the books and ready for delivery.

4.44 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones):** It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) on securing this debate on this highly important issue. He articulated the importance of rail in his own area, and across the east and west midlands, highlighting its impact on reducing congestion, improving air quality and other environmental improvements, plus its role in underpinning our economy. Those are critical reasons why we should be—and are—investing heavily in rail.

I agree with points made by a number of Members about the importance of rail freight in the economy as a whole, and in the midlands in particular. It is already part of a strong logistics sector in both economies; rail underpins that comprehensively.

I receive many representations from colleagues about the rail services in their areas, typically focused on capacity and overcrowding. I will talk about cross-country, the midlands hub, HS2 and rolling stock, what we are doing now and what we are working to deliver for passengers over the next few years.

This is an exciting time for the rail industry and for passengers. We have new fleets being introduced that will help to deliver a step change in customer service. The performance of trains is one factor affecting the overall network performance. Both the Department and operators consider that to be an important part of the franchise competition process.

We are seeing a change in the operator for the east midlands franchise, which has been won by Abellio. There will be a mobilisation phase and Abellio will take over in August. It will oversee the introduction of a brand new fleet of trains on the upgraded midland main line from 2022. The new trains will deliver faster journey times over longer distances in peak periods, and new, frequent express services will be introduced, including from Corby through Luton into London. The roll-out of the new fleet will be completed by December 2023. That intercity fleet will be significantly more reliable and comfortable. The key point about capacity is that passengers will benefit from an 80% increase in the number of morning peak seats into Nottingham, Lincoln and St Pancras.

Midlands Connect is critical in planning the transport for the future of the area. It is working with HS2, Transport for the East Midlands, the Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham, Nottinghamshire local enterprise partnership—D2N2—and Network Rail to make the case for enhanced connectivity to the new hub station at Toton. HS2 will indeed transform things, which was a point made by the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who is Chair of the Select Committee on Transport. It will not just improve connectivity to and from London, although that is obviously a part of it, but it will certainly transform connectivity between the east and west midlands in a positive way. That point does not always get exposed, but needs to be said. The Toton hub will be well connected to Nottingham, Derby and other mainline stations, and provide significant journey time improvements to the north and west. It is key to maximise the opportunities that will be presented when HS2 arrives in the area.

Midlands Connect is also investigating options to run services from Leicester to Leeds via HS2, transforming connectivity between the two cities, and developing a business case for additional services on the Derby-Stoke-Crewe corridor, so the east midlands can link to HS2 services at Crewe in 2027.

**Jack Brereton:** The Minister mentioned the Crewe-Derby line, through Stoke-on-Trent. Does he agree that there is real untapped potential on that line to vastly improve services, particularly to stations such as Longton, in my constituency?

**Andrew Jones:** I agree entirely with my hon. Friend; he has made a strong case for that in meetings that we have already had on the subject, and that case has been shared with other colleagues, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths). I will mention it later, but I agree entirely with the point.

Today, eight out of 10 journeys between Birmingham and Nottingham are made by road. That is not desirable. One of the key points made about the midlands rail hub was that it will help to improve east-west connectivity by doubling the number of direct services between those two great cities, cutting the journey time by more than 25% to just 50 minutes and bringing about 450,000 more people in the two cities within one hour of each other. It will enable faster and more frequent services through Derby and will include funding to examine the case for major investment to reduce conflicts between the east coast main line and Nottingham-Lincoln traffic at Newark.

I recognise how important this case is. We have received the strategic outline business case in the Department and it is going through its evaluation. The hon. Member
for Nottingham North asked whether I would back the case; I cannot say that until we have concluded our evaluation, but I can say that I am extremely keen to see inter-city connectivity as a driver of economic growth, that the points he has made are spot on and that I am keen to work with Midlands Connect to take this forward. Indeed, I am meeting Midlands Connect next week. I hope that is of some interest to him.

I must mention the midlands main line, because we are seeing the biggest upgrade of the line since its completion in around 1870. The investments being made will improve long-distance passenger services between Sheffield, Nottingham and London, and services between Corby, Kettering and London. The journey time improvement and additional seats will make cities in the east midlands better places to do business in.

Market Harborough station has recently seen considerable improvements to make it more accessible and ease the curves in the track, which will increase line speed, deliver improved journey times and help to reduce fuel use. That project has been going well and saw a landmark completion earlier this month. The next east midlands franchise will deliver new bi-mode trains on routes between London, the east midlands and south Yorkshire, delivering benefits to both passengers and the environment.

However, the east midlands railway will provide additional capacity and more frequent services on routes across the east midlands, not just on the lines to and around London. Those include the route between Leicester and Nottingham, the Robin Hood line and routes in Lincolnshire. As an example, the Derby to Crewe line will see the introduction of additional capacity. The key thing here is that it has been a single-carriage service, which has not met the needs of the travelling public in the area. We will see additional capacity using modern trains, which will have air-conditioning, at-seat power points and free wi-fi.

Many trains from Crewe will be extended through to Nottingham and there will be additional morning and evening services introduced, as well as an hourly service on Sundays. That upgrade has attracted significant attention—I have had more comments on this part of the east midlands franchise than on any other—so I hope that that will be of interest to colleagues. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South has been a key champion for it.

One project that I have visited recently in the east midlands is the upgrade to signalling and modernisation of the railway around Derby to improve train service reliability. That has been an important project to unlock capacity, and I must say that when I visited it I thought it was a significant piece of work that had been achieved well by Network Rail.

A further project that is coming on stream later this year, which I have not had a chance to visit, is the brand-new station of Worcestershire Parkway, delivered by Worcestershire County Council. When it opens, the station will be served by CrossCountry services on the Nottingham-Cardiff route, providing improved journey opportunities between the east midlands and destinations in Worcestershire and the Cotswolds.

I mentioned earlier the services provided by CrossCountry; I have had significant representations from colleagues about the capacity problems on that line, because it has been so popular that it has seen huge growth in passenger numbers. CrossCountry provides local train services between the east and west midlands, with its long-distance services covering the most extensive franchise in Britain, from Scotland to Cornwall and Manchester to Bournemouth. CrossCountry offers regular direct trains from Derby to the north-east and Scotland, as well as to Bristol, Plymouth and the Thames valley. All routes serve Birmingham New Street.

Because of this extensive network, and to avoid the possibility of fettering the outcome of the Williams rail review, which is looking at the future structure of the rail industry, the CrossCountry franchise competition was cancelled last year. We are now working with the incumbent, Arriva, to develop a direct award franchise agreement. This work will consider the results of the extensive public consultation held in 2017 to deliver appropriate passenger benefits.

The key question that is consistently raised, and therefore our No. 1 priority for the next CrossCountry franchise, is providing additional capacity for passengers. We are working on a number of options to deliver additional trains for the CrossCountry fleet as they become available in the rolling stock market. The rolling stock market is going through one of its greatest changes in our country’s history. We are seeing a fleet update equivalent to when we went from steam to diesel in the UK. That is the scale of change we are experiencing, and it will free up rolling stock to add additional capacity into our network. We must remember that we are now enjoying more services on our rail network than at any point in British history.

I once again thank the hon. Member for Nottingham North for securing this debate on this important issue. We have covered a lot of ground, but I hope I have made clear that we are seeing new trains, new services, new lines and new stations. Rail in our country is being transformed, and he has made a great case for east-west connectivity in the midlands. I am happy to keep colleagues informed and I look forward to working with Midlands Connect and other bodies in the area, because I strongly believe that rail is a key driver of economic growth, environmental improvement and social mobility. Before closing, I will just highlight that the Government fully understand that, and it is why we have secured a record investment of £48 billion for our rail network over the next five years and are investing £1.5 billion in the midlands main line upgrade—the biggest since its completion 150 years ago.

There was one question about infrastructure spend by the different parts of our country and I have some updated information that the House might like to know: the infrastructure pipeline data from the Infrastructure and Projects Authority shows a per capita spend of £236 for the midlands for the period from 2018-19 to 2020-21, which is the same as the south and just a little bit behind the north. We are seeing a radical change in the infrastructure spend across the country, as we believe strongly that the economy of our country needs to be rebalanced. Underpinning that is a rebalancing of our transport investment, and at the heart of that is work in the midlands.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered East to West Midlands railway connectivity.
Jewish Refugees from the Middle East and North Africa

4.58 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Jewish refugees from the Middle East and North Africa.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, as we consider this important matter. In 1945, 856,000 Jewish people lived in the middle east, north Africa and the Gulf region. Only about 4,500 remain, almost all of them in Morocco and Tunisia. Jewish people have lived continuously in the middle east and north Africa for over 2,600 years, yet in just a few decades they almost totally disappeared. Thousands were expelled or fled their home countries in fear. Around 850,000 were forced out or felt they had to leave following the United Nations decision to partition Palestine in 1947. Age-old communities, with roots dating back millennia, were gone. It was the largest exodus of non-Muslims from the middle east until the movement of Christians from Iraq after 2003.

Between 1948 and 1972, pogroms and violent attacks were perpetrated in every Arab country against its Jewish residents. The ethnic cleansing of thousands of Jewish people from the Arab world in the mid-20th century was described by journalist Tom Gross as “systematic, absolute and unprovoked.” For example, there were 38,000 Jews living in western Libya before 1945. Now there are none. Few of the 74 synagogues in Libya are recognisable, and a highway runs through Tripoli’s Jewish cemetery. In Algeria, 50 years ago, there were 140,000 Jewish people. Now there are none. In Iraq, there were 135,000, and in Egypt, 75,000. Almost all are gone from those countries too. Some 259,000 left Morocco, 55,000 left Yemen, 20,000 left Lebanon, 180,000 left Syria and 25,000 left Iran. What happened amounted to the near total extinction of an ancient civilisation.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Is she concerned by the assumption that the near total absence of Jews from so many countries across north Africa and the middle east is because there were never Jewish communities in those countries? Helping to break that misperception and spreading the stories of the great histories of those Jewish communities, which go back thousands of years, as she says, is key to helping us to understand and find solutions for some of the problems of today in the region.

Theresa Villiers: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. That is one reason why this debate is so important. It is shocking that, so far as I am aware, there has never been a debate specifically on this subject in the House.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing the debate. Somebody who asked a question in last night’s Tory leadership debate—Abdullah from Bristol—had retweeted a tweet suggesting that Israel should be relocated to the United States. This debate demonstrates why that is so offensive. It feeds into a false narrative that Israel is a creation of Europe or America, and totally whitewashes the history of the Jews in the middle east and the recent living history of Jews in Arab states in the middle east. That is why it is so offensive and so disgusting.

Theresa Villiers: I agree. Both those points reinforce the importance of raising awareness of this issue, because if our colleagues in the House or the general public do not understand what happened to the Jewish communities of the middle east, they do not understand the middle east conflict. Understanding what we are discussing is crucial if one is to have a fair and balanced outlook on that long-standing dispute.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this historic debate. She will know that my family, on my father’s side, comes from Libya but had to leave because their home and business were appropriated by Gaddafi, and there were pogroms before that. Why does she think the United Nations has passed 172 resolutions specifically on Palestinian refugees over the past 60 years yet not one on Jewish refugees?

Theresa Villiers: That United Nations record is a matter of grave concern. As I will go on to acknowledge, it is of course important to recognise the suffering experienced by the Palestinians displaced by the 1948 war, but that should not blind us to the suffering experienced by the Jewish communities about whom we are reflecting today.

Stephen Crabb: However, the reason that the United Nations has passed such resolutions is that the Israelis officially discriminated against these communities, which is why it is so offensive.

Theresa Villiers: It is shocking that, so far as I am aware, there has never been a debate specifically on this subject in the House. That United Nations record is a matter of grave concern. As I will go on to acknowledge, it is of course important to recognise the suffering experienced by the Palestinians displaced by the 1948 war, but that should not blind us to the suffering experienced by the Jewish communities about whom we are reflecting today.

Jewish people lived in what is now the Arab world for a millennium before Islam was founded, and centuries before the Arab conquest of many of those territories. Until the 17th century, there were more Jewish people in the Arab and wider Muslim world than in Europe. In 1939, 33% of the population of Baghdad was Jewish, making it proportionately more Jewish than Warsaw. Until their 20th-century expulsion, Jewish people had lived in the area covered by present-day Iraq since the Babylonians exiled them from Judea to Mesopotamia in 586BC. The Bible tells us that, taken into captivity in Babylon, they went on the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates. A sizeable minority chose to stay after the Persian king Cyrus defeated the Babylonians and declared that the Jews were free to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple. Jewish people living under Muslim rule shaped Judaism as we know it today. The Talmud—or the Babylonian Talmud, as it is often called—was written in the pre-Islamic academies of present-day Iraq. For centuries, Babylon was the spiritual and religious hub of Judaism.

According to the powerful book “Uprooted” by Lyn Julius—I warmly recommend it to everyone here and welcome that Lyn is with us in the Gallery—Jewish people in the Arab world faced two types of oppression. Countries such as Yemen, Syria and post-Suez Egypt drove out their Jewish populations mainly in a single mass expulsion. In other places, such as Lebanon and Morocco, Jews were pushed out gradually over a more protracted period, steadily being made to feel less and less welcome in their home countries. Several countries criminalised Zionism, exposing their Jewish minorities to the allegation that they were somehow enemies of the state.

Andrew Percy: Does my right hon. Friend agree that that was designed to clear the way for the expansion of Arab nationalism and Islamism? That was a deliberate policy to force Jews out of Arab countries as part of the desire to remove a Jewish presence from the Arab world.

Theresa Villiers: Of course. As she says, is key to helping us to understand and find solutions for some of the problems of today in the region.
In Iraq, the situation deteriorated over time. Having served their country proudly over centuries, the vast majority of the Jewish community in Iraq had their nationality taken from them in 1951. A crisis point was reached in 1969 with the execution of nine Jewish Iraqis on trumped-up charges of spying. Their bodies were left hanging for days on public display. Following that brutal episode, many of Iraq’s remaining Jewish population escaped through Kurdish areas, including the vice-president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, my constituent Edwin Shuker.

Last year, Edwin visited Parliament to talk to MPs about the injustice we are reflecting on today and to share with us the story of his escape from Baghdad over the Kurdistan mountains. He told me:

“For years, we were pleading to be allowed to leave... We were happy to leave behind everything, but were denied this request. Instead, we were practically kept as hostages from 1963 until we finally managed to escape with our lives in 1971... and were mercifully granted asylum upon arrival to the UK.”

I pay tribute to the tireless work Edwin and others have done on this issue, and I am pleased he is here with us today. I welcome all those here today who have been personally affected by the events that we are considering or whose families were driven out of those ancient communities in the middle east.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Theresa Villiers: In a moment. I thank those people for their courage in speaking out on this important issue. We owe them all a great debt of gratitude.

Zac Goldsmith: I apologise for intervening on my right hon. Friend while she was mid flow. I congratulate her on securing this historic and hugely important debate. The US and Canadian Governments have both passed resolutions formally recognising the plight of Jewish refugees. Would she support a similar measure here in the UK, so that the British Government, the British people and Britain as a whole finally recognise, officially and formally, the plight of those Jewish refugees, which she is describing?

Theresa Villiers: I agree that we need much clearer recognition. One good way to do that would be a resolution in Parliament. I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will consider that as a next step from this debate.

I pay tribute to Harif, which provides a powerful voice for Jewish people originally from the middle east and north Africa, ventilating many of the concerns about which we will no doubt hear in this debate. I also thank the Board of Deputies, Conservative Friends of Israel and Dr Stan Urman for the information they provided me with in advance of the debate.

Many people were given just days to leave, and most lost everything they owned. A Jewish Egyptian refugee, Joseph Abdul Wahed, wrote:

“We left. And we lost everything. We lost the business, the manufacturing shop, a very beautiful villa with a garden full of orange blossoms and lemon blossoms that I can still remember. But I did take with me a Star of David. It was made by my grandfather. Luckily I was able to get it out.”

The ethnic cleansing of Jewish people from the Arab world has far too often been overlooked, as we have already heard in interventions. This is largely an untold story, and it is an unresolved injustice.

Huge amounts of airtime, debate and resources are focused on the Palestinians who were displaced by the 1948 conflict, and it is right to acknowledge their suffering and the importance of safeguarding their interests in a future peace settlement. But the plight of the 850,000 Jewish refugees and the scale of their suffering have never had the recognition they deserve. Indeed, I was shocked to learn that some countries’ embassies in Cairo are apparently located in homes stolen from Jewish Egyptian refugees. Concentrating only on the Palestinian refugees gives the international community a distorted view of the middle east dispute. A fair settlement needs to take into account the injustice suffered by Jewish refugees as well as the plight of displaced Palestinians.

The historic UN resolution 242 states that a comprehensive peace agreement should include “a just settlement of the refugee problem”—language that is inclusive of both Palestinian and Jewish refugees. The status of Jewish refugees has been recognised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and by world leaders such as President Bill Clinton.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the right hon. Lady for raising this issue. Although I am a European Jew—my family are European Jews—my mother’s best friend at school was an Egyptian Jew who had to flee Egypt in the 1950s to move to Israel. I grew up with stories of Egyptian Jews, Iranian Jews and Iraqi Jews who had to flee and who lost many things when they were fleeing, so I am really grateful for the right hon. Lady’s intervention, and I call for reparations for Jewish refugees from those countries as well as for Palestinian refugees.

Theresa Villiers: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. It is so important for us to be able to tell some of these stories. It is astonishing that they are so little known. I therefore welcome his intervention.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister raised this matter in her speech to mark the 100th anniversary of the Balfour declaration; she referred to the suffering of both Jewish and Palestinian refugees. I ask my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Government’s help on some key questions. I appeal to them to back the efforts by UNESCO and other bodies that are pressing for the conservation of historic sites in the middle east that have cultural significance for the Jewish community and, indeed, other minorities. I also appeal for Ministers, when they discuss middle east matters, explicitly to acknowledge that two refugee populations, Palestinians and Jews, emerged from the same conflict, during the same period, and that the rights of both need to be addressed in a fair settlement. I also ask right hon. and hon. Members to acknowledge that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) did, and as has been the case in resolutions passed in the US Congress and the Canadian Parliament.

After fleeing their home countries, a number of the 850,000 displaced Jewish people went to the UK and Europe or to Australia, the USA and Canada. About 650,000 found refuge in Israel. Many faced hardship.
and adversity, but I want to highlight the optimism, because theirs is a huge success story, as they have become a much-valued part of the social fabric of the countries that welcomed them and took them in. In their former homelands in the middle east and north Africa, Jewish people over centuries had attained leading roles in many walks of life, and that success has been replicated in their new home countries, including here in the United Kingdom and in my own constituency. I count it a great honour that those I represent in the House include people whose courage and determination got them through a traumatic expulsion from their former homes in the middle east and north Africa.

I want to close on a cautionary note. I am deeply worried that history is repeating itself in the middle east. Just as the indigenous Jewish population was worried that history is repeating itself in the middle east and north Africa, so the Christians are now under east. Just as the indigenous Jewish population was worried that history is repeating itself in the middle east and north Africa, just as the indigenous Jewish population was worried that history is repeating itself in the middle east and north Africa. Let us hope that that is not repeated in relation to the Christians in the region, whose roots also go back many centuries and whose position now also looks increasingly precarious.

I am afraid that this is an occasion to recall the solemn statement by the former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks:

“The hate that begins with Jews never ends with Jews.”

That is a danger that none of us should ever forget.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. This hour-long debate will finish at 5.58 pm. Seven Members are seeking to contribute. I am obliged to start calling the Front Benchers no later than 5.36 pm, and the guideline time limits are five minutes for the SNP and for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister, with Theresa Villiers having two or three minutes at the end to sum up the debate. That means we have 21 minutes of Back-Bench time, which means that there will have to be a three-minute limit to ensure that everyone can contribute.

5.14 pm

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on securing this important debate. I am obliged to start calling the Front Benchers no later than 5.36 pm, and the guideline time limits are five minutes for the SNP and for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister, with Theresa Villiers having two or three minutes at the end to sum up the debate. That means we have 21 minutes of Back-Bench time, which means that there will have to be a three-minute limit to ensure that everyone can contribute.

5.17 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. Many in the House will know that I have a deep personal connection to this issue. I very much wish that my grandfather, Renato Halfon, had been alive now to see the demise of Muammar Gaddafi. In 1968, my grandfather was forced to leave Libya because of pogroms targeting Jews and, as an Italian Jew, he fled to Rome. He had owned a clothing business, and planned to return to Tripoli once the pogroms had subsided, but when Colonel Gaddafi took power in 1969, all Jewish businesses were seized under the new regime. In the beginning, Gaddafi was seen as a saviour, yet, as we know, he became a murderous dictator.

My grandfather, like thousands of other Jews from Libya, had nothing to return to—no home or business. On top of oil money, Gaddafi had bought the loyalty of his supporters by giving them all the property seized from the Jews and Italians. Gaddafi’s rule was driven by the conviction that foreigners were still exploiting Libya, and the eviction of Jews and Italians was made a hallmark of his regime.

Fortunately, my grandfather had seen Gaddafi coming. He sent my father, aged 15, to England in the late 1950s. After a short stint in Rome, my grandfather joined him in north London, where he spent the rest of his life. It is a great sadness that, by the end of 1970, nearly all Jews and Italians had left Libya. Jews had lived in Libya for more than 2,300 years and had a thriving culture. The population numbered more than 38,000 by 1948.

Today, Jewish communities all over the middle east and north Africa have been almost entirely erased. The flight of historic Jewish communities has altered the shape and face of the region forever, but that is rarely recognised or spoken about on the international stage. As I mentioned to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), the UN has passed 172 resolutions specifically on Palestinian refugees, but nothing on Jewish refugees. It must be noted that Israel, despite being in its infancy as a country and under attack from six Arab states in 1948, did its best to integrate Jewish refugees. In comparison, many Arab countries, with the exception of Jordan and a few others, turned their backs on the displaced Palestinians.
I am proudly British. I feel a deep attachment to my heritage. I do not want a right of return. I only wish to go to Tripoli to retrace my dear grandfather's footsteps. I urge the Minister to give the immense suffering of Jewish refugees international recognition and equal prominence to the plight of the Palestinian refugees. All their stories deserve to be told.

5.20 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): It is always a pleasure to participate in debates under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on securing this important debate.

As the right hon. Lady has made clear, it is important to acknowledge the historical facts relating to Jews forced to flee their homes in the middle east and north Africa. Too often, the debate about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is dominated by a narrative that demonises Israel and delegitimises the rights of Jews to self-determination in their own state.

In the aftermath of the creation of the state of Israel, as the right hon. Lady said, a minimum of 850,000 Jews were forced from their homes. From Iraq to Egypt, Syria, Libya and Yemen, state-sanctioned pogroms descended on Jewish neighbourhoods, killing innocents and destroying ancient synagogues and Jewish cemeteries. New draconian laws prevented Jews from public worship, forced them to carry Jewish identity cards, and seized billions of dollars of their property and assets. Any future peace plan must tackle that issue. It should be part of any full and final settlement between Israelis and Palestinians. Naturally, there must also be justice for Palestinian refugees, based on credible proposals. As Palestinian leaders have privately accepted for decades, it is not feasible to demand both a Palestinian state and the right of return to Israel for Palestinian refugees. Other solutions have to be found, which are just and recognise the losses that refugees have suffered.

It is also time to question the need for Palestinians to live in United Nations-run refugee camps. Surely, they should be encouraged and supported to live in better conditions in Arab countries in the region. That need not in any way compromise or prejudice their rights in any future peace agreement. Refugees, especially children, should not be used as political pawns in the frontline of a public relations campaign.

Regarding these issues, in the past I have accused the Leader of the Opposition of supporting a one-state solution. Today, I reiterate that charge. It is the logical conclusion of the positions he has adopted for decades and his support for the view that the creation of the state of Israel was a catastrophe. His personal attempt to persuade the Labour national executive committee to amend the definition of antisemitism, to allow people to say that the creation and existence of Israel is a racist endeavour, tells us all we need to know about his view of Jewish people’s right to self-determination.

The Leader of the Opposition and many of his supporters support the campaigns of every minority around the world who demand the right to self-determination. Why are Jews the only exception? It is to be hoped that the Equality and Human Rights Commission inquiry will shine a light on the Leader of the Opposition’s and his inner circle’s failure to act against their allies who are found to promote antisemitic rhetoric and imagery.

In conclusion, it is a source of regret that there is no meaningful political dialogue taking place at the present time between Israelis and Palestinians. Let us hope that this changes, in the interests of peace and stability for both peoples.

5.23 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on securing this important debate. It is an opportunity to give this issue the prominence that it deserves. As the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) said, it is remarkable that this issue is rarely remarked upon. Some 850,000 people were forced from their homes, yet no pressure group or organisation ever talks about it. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) said, the UN has passed 172 resolutions on Palestinian refugees and not a single one on Jewish refugees. I ask the Minister to advise us on what can be done to correct that imbalance, and what the Government can do with regard to the United Nations.

The right hon. Lady said that Jewish roots in north Africa go back 3,000 years. Indeed, many Jewish people travelled with the Phoenicians, who were wonderful traders and seamen, capable of navigating the oceans. Today there is not a single Jewish person left in Algeria; previously there were 140,000. The same is true in Libya. There are said to be just 20 Jewish people living in Egypt, despite there once being a thriving community of 75,000.

The Jews of Yemen, a community going back 2,000 years, also faced some of the worst persecution, with protests against the UN partition plan resulting in the murders of over 80 innocent Jewish people, and the burning of their homes, school and synagogue. However, Israel managed to save 47,000 of the Yemeni Jews in the extraordinary Operation Magic Carpet, from 1949 to 1950, with help, I must say, from the United Kingdom, so that they could start their new lives in the nascent Jewish state.

Some 60,000 square miles of land was taken from Jewish refugees, which would be four times the size of Israel. These people are not seeking any kind of restitution; they are seeking recognition of their plight. My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) also suggested that the Government should follow the lead of the Canadian, American and Israeli Governments, and officially recognise the experience of so many Jewish refugees after the second world war. I hope that the Government take that opportunity.

Many of those Jewish exiles have gone on to make a huge advance in their personal lives, as well as contributing to the community of Israel itself. They have reached important positions in national Government, and thrived in the public and private sectors. They have made an invaluable contribution to the state of Israel. When we hear about Palestinian refugees, we must all bear in mind the fact that this was a tragedy for not just one group of people, but two groups.
5.26 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) for bringing this debate here and setting the scene so well, and giving us all a chance to participate. I add my voice to her call for the Minister for the Middle East to make representations to his US counterparts, ensuring that the long-awaited middle east peace process includes reference to the Jewish refugees from Arab countries.

I am pleased to see the Minister in his place. I believe this is his first debate in Westminster Hall.

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison) indicated assent.

Jim Shannon: Well, he is very welcome. I am sure it will not be his last. It probably will not be my last either, but that is by the way.

Since the partition of Ireland and the creation of Northern Ireland, the Protestants in the border regions that made up the new Northern Ireland have faced attempts on their lives, to ethnically cleanse them out of the regions. The United Nations has defined ethnic cleansing as “a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic, or religious, group from certain geographic areas.”

That is what has happened along the border of Northern Ireland, and that is what has happened to the Jews. We know that only 4,000 Jews remain in the Arab world, while some 200,000 Arabs were absorbed into Israeli society, making up the Arab minority of 1.7 million people, which forms 21% of Israel’s population.

What can we do? First, the media bias against Israel and her people is exactly that: bias. For example, when the BBC attempts to set a narrative that does not equate to what is actually taking place on the ground—such as reporting retaliatory missiles launched by Israel in such a way that it seems like an offensive attack—we must investigate and seek the truth, but not from those who seek to write the narrative that suits them.

Secondly, we must fulfil our obligations to do what the Balfour declaration began—allowing Israel back to her home and having equality and safety for all in the middle east. Thirdly, there is significant linkage between the two refugee populations, which forms 21% of Israel’s population.

Secondly, we must fulfil our obligations to do what the Balfour declaration began—allowing Israel back to her home and having equality and safety for all in the middle east. Thirdly, there is significant linkage between those two refugee populations, which underscores the need to deal with both simultaneously. We must impress upon the American Administration the importance of not negating any refugee’s rights to justice, nor the responsibility of Arab states to provide a humanitarian solution to their plight. Ensuring rights for both Arab and Jewish refugees is an essential key, on a very practical level, to resolving the issue of the refugees.

If Israelis—over 50% of whom are descendants of Jews displaced from Arab countries—are asked to approve a peace plan that provides rights and redress for Palestinian refugees only, it will be less likely to be adopted than an agreement that would provide rights and redress to Jewish refugees as well. That makes sense to me, and I believe it makes sense to everyone taking part in this debate.

A question was put to me over the weekend, and I shall ask the Minister the same question. What steps will the British Government take to recognise the injustice that was suffered by some 800,000 Jewish refugees from Arab countries and to ensure that, in the Government’s stance on the middle east peace process, they recognise their tragedy alongside that of the Palestinian refugees? Both sets of lives matter and both narratives matter. We must strongly advocate for those whose plight often goes unnoticed—in this case, the plight of Jewish refugees from the middle east and north Africa.

5.29 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I wish to dedicate much of what I am going to say to the Jewish refugees of Iraq. I have taken a personal interest in them over the past year, having become friends with several Jews of Iraqi heritage who fled to the UK from Iraq.

A few months ago, I had the pleasure of watching a powerful documentary entitled “Remember Baghdad”, which tells the story of Edwin Shuker and others, and of a once prosperous Jewish community in the Iraqi capital. Their stories are similar to those of so many other Iraqi Jews—135,000, to be precise.

Baghdad was seen as one of the centres of the Jewish world, with an abundance of synagogues, Jewish schools and kosher butchers. At one point, the Jewish community constituted as much as a third of the total population of Baghdad. It was a Jewish community much like those in many other parts of the world.

The situation began to change in the 1940s, with violent riots. Then, upon Israel’s foundation in 1948, the situation for Iraq’s Jews became absolutely untenable. Laws were passed making Zionism a criminal offence and allowing the police to raid and search thousands of Jewish homes for any evidence of Zionism. Jews were also prevented from going to schools, hospitals and other public places and organisations. Also, Jews were removed from thousands of Government positions and their homes were valued at 80% less than those of their Arab neighbours. Faced with such heartbreaking persecution, over 120,000 Iraqi Jews fled the country between 1948 and 1951; sadly, today the Jewish population of Iraq numbers no more than five. Many refugees went to Israel to forge a new life, but hundreds came to the UK, and in doing so they forfeited their Iraqi citizenship and their property.

The powerful documentary that I have mentioned tells a story of great loss, but I was also struck by the enormous optimism that it showed about re-establishing a Jewish presence in Iraq. In closing, I encourage the Minister to take the time to watch this short film; I ask him to recognise the injustice that was suffered by more than 850,000 Jewish refugees from across the middle east and north Africa; and I also ask him to ensure that the Government recognise this tragedy alongside that of the Palestinian refugees in their stance on the middle east peace process.

5.32 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for calling me to speak; I nearly said, “Sir Philip”, as I am sure it is just a matter of time before you are called that. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I of course congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on securing this debate and on everything she said. I associate
myself entirely with her comments and with other comments, particularly those by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about the declaration that we would like to see this Government make, which would bring us into line—as I believe a number of speakers have said—with both the United States and Canada.

I was not planning to speak in this debate, as the time for it is short, but now I have been given the opportunity I will, of course, take it. I will say something about the importance of education regarding this particular issue. That is because, as I said in my intervention earlier and as we saw in the awful tweet from Abdullah in Bristol last night—speaking as I am now, he will probably think, as he also tweeted, that I too am a political figure on the “Zionist payroll”—there is a false narrative that has been created that Israel is a European and western creation, and that it is anathema in the middle east. However, we absolutely know—not only because of the thousands of years of history and heritage of the Jewish people in the middle east and north Africa, but because of recent history, as has been outlined during this debate—that the Jewish presence in the middle east is a living history that goes back to before the creation of the state of Israel, and there are many in the Jewish community who doubtless would have liked to continue to live their lives in north Africa and other parts of the middle east but are prevented from doing so today.

The lack of understanding of the history of Jewish refugees from elsewhere in the middle east and north Africa is perhaps part of the reason why so many people who pronounce on the issue of Israel are so ignorant in making the offensive comments and statements they make, and it is also why this debate is so important.

Of course, Yemen has been referred to; I will just make a very brief comment on it for the Minister to respond to when he speaks. There is a very small Yemeni Jewish community left, of—possibly—only about 70 people. Previously I have written and said on the Floor of the House of Commons that those Jews who were persecuted in the past, we also need to look at other parts of the world would have been seen as a catastrophe for hundreds, and possibly even thousands, of years. An unknown number of people were killed—certainly hundreds, but probably thousands. By today’s standards, that was ethnic cleansing. Indeed, I would argue that by today’s standards that was a genocide and it deserves to be recognised as such. And those people who fled for their lives to try to escape from that genocide should be recognised as refugees, just as those people who are currently fleeing from Yemen, Syria and other conflict areas should be recognised, and looked after, as refugees.

One of the sad things in any conflict is that civilians always lose: they are always the ones who become refugees. And it is unusual for there to be an armed conflict where there is only one group of refugees; we almost always find that there are refugees from both sides. As the right hon. Lady forcefully reminded us, when we look at the recent history of Israel and of the Jewish people, it is very easy to be overwhelmed by the scale and the horror of what happened in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, and to lose sight of the fact that at any other time what was happening to Jews in other parts of the world would have been seen as a catastrophe on a global scale. That is because 850,000 people were forced out of the only homes they had ever known—homes that they could demonstrate their families had lived in for hundreds, and possibly even thousands, of years. An unknown number of people were killed—certainly hundreds, but probably thousands. By today’s standards, that was ethnic cleansing. Indeed, I would argue that by today’s standards that was a genocide and it deserves to be recognised as such. And those people who fled for their lives to try to escape from that genocide should be recognised as refugees, just as those people who are currently fleeing from Yemen, Syria and other conflict areas should be recognised, and looked after, as refugees.

As well as looking at what we need to do now to try, as far as possible, to restore the rights of all those who were persecuted in the past, we also need to look at what we should be doing differently now to stop such persecution from happening again. I liked the comment earlier that hatred against the Jews does not stop with the Jews, and eventually becomes hatred of somebody else. I think that is a lesson that we take too long to learn. When we allow hatred and persecution of any minority in a society to become normalised, that hatred and persecution very quickly spreads to a different minority, whether that minority is based on religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or any other characteristic.

If we tolerate and allow people to demean, dehumanise and vilify anyone else because of their religion, colour or nationality, we are allowing the start of another process of persecution against a minority at some point. In welcoming today’s debate, and associating myself
with a huge amount of what the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet said in her opening comments, I desperately hope that in 50 years’ time, there will not be some Parliament somewhere talking about a massive persecution against a population of refugees that happened because we did not do enough to stop it from happening in our world today.

5.39 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on having secured a very timely debate. It is extremely important, at this stage of all stages, to be reminded of the true history of the middle east and the part that the Jewish community played in it. I will say a little bit more about that in a minute.

I thank the right hon. Lady for her tour d’horizon of the middle east and north Africa, as well as her remarks about the near-total extinction of an ancient civilisation and the fact that this is the first debate we have had in this House on this subject. She also pointed out that Jews lived in that region for more than 1,000 years before the religion of Islam was founded. It was a thoughtful, well-researched opening speech, and I am grateful to her for it. The right hon. Lady also quoted the former Chief Rabbi and my relative through marriage, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks—a wise and incredible man, who did such a lot to represent the Jewish community of this country.

We then heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman), who always makes an excellent contribution in every debate that I hear her speak in. She mentioned that Jewish people have always been a part of the middle east, which is absolutely right. We heard from the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon); we then heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis), who made the point that any future peace plans must include the history of Jewish refugees and the loss faced by those communities. We also heard contributions from the hon. Members for Hendon (Dr Offord), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Henley (John Howell), and for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy). I am very grateful for the points that they made.

I have a personal interest in this topic. My earliest memories of my own family’s history centre on photographs of my late father, taken outside a mosque in Tangier. When my grandfather was a refugee from the Nazis during the occupation of Paris in 1940, my grandmother remained in Paris; he was in Spain. He crossed the water to Morocco, where he found refuge in Tangier. His own brother was the mayor of that city at the time, which shows the part that Jews played in north Africa and, indeed, the middle east. My father’s origins were Ottoman, from Salonica and Istanbul, so the cuisine that we enjoyed as children was always middle eastern and Turkish cooking—something that I found strange when I went to the homes of my English friends at school. Having mentioned my great-uncle, I will add that on the street where I lived in north-west London, my best friend’s family had fled from Cairo. The Sharma family had found refuge in London, and the parents and grandparents still spoke very good Arabic; their main language was French, which meant my family could communicate with them. Their stories about having to flee from Nasser’s Egypt always remained in my mind.

A few years ago, I went to Kurdistan in northern Iraq; I went to Erbil. The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet mentioned the part that the Kurdish people have played in helping Jews escape from the hostile environments they found themselves in after 1947. It was a pleasure to hear from so many Kurdish contacts and interlocutors about their respect for the Jewish people, and the fact that if Israel were able to establish an embassy in Baghdad today, there would be one in Erbil tomorrow. They are great supporters of the Jewish people, and they feel a great sympathy because of the plight and persecution that they have unfortunately had to experience.

Over successive waves of persecution in the 20th century since 1948, up to 850,000 Jews—some estimates are close to 1 million—were expelled from mainly Arab countries. Most of those Mizrahi, as they are called in Israel, took their refuge in that country; their descendants comprise approximately half of all Israeli Jews. To many Israelis, the issue of refugees remains one of the outstanding obstacles to peace that must be resolved in any final status negotiations. The plight of Palestinian refugees, as we have heard, is well known, but Israelis rightly believe that less attention is given to former Jewish refugees.

As it happens, just before I came to this debate, I had a meeting with Dr Saeb Erekat from the Palestine Liberation Organisation. I told him about this debate and that we would be discussing Jewish refugees in the middle east, and asked him what he would do about that. He asked me to say quite openly that the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the Palestinian Authority believe that just as Palestinians should have their rights to return with full compensation, so should all Jewish refugees. I thought that was very interesting.

5.45 pm

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Morrison): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, for my first time in this capacity. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on having convened this debate; it is indeed a timely debate to be having, and she has laid out the case extremely well.

In the very short period of time we have had to debate this matter this afternoon—I hope this will be the first of several such debates, as one hour is insufficient to give us the coverage that it so richly demands—we have had a tour de force of the historical background to the conundrum currently faced by Jewish refugees. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), the Opposition spokesman on these matters. He has referred to a meeting with Dr Saeb Erekat; I also met with Dr Erekat today, and we shared a number of reflections on the current situation. He is a very wise man with experience in these matters, and the remarks that he made to the hon. Gentleman do not surprise me in the least.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet mentioned Jewish refugees in the round, and spoke about the historical background to this issue. She mentioned Morocco and Tunisia; I am pleased she did so, because although the general history in respect of
On similar ground in his remarks, the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), touched them down. The Scottish National party spokesman, resolution 242. It speaks of refugees; it does not break the complexity of the issues still to be resolved by the of Palestinian rockets, and the Palestinians who live a still expect to be made homeless by Israeli demolitions. whose inhabitants are apparently safe for now, but who Morocco has done good things in the past in respect of its Jewish population.

However, that does not obscure the general awfulness of the way these things have been. We have heard from a lot of right hon. and hon. Members about the failure of the international community to properly understand the extent of Jewish refugee status. We talk a great deal about Palestinians—they are always in the news, and they are extremely important—but we also need to consider refugees in the round. Of course, UN Security Council resolution 242 mentions “refugees”; it does not disaggregate refugees. There is a reason for that, which we are exploring today.

It is particularly timely for me to be talking about this today, because three weeks ago I paid my first visit to the middle east in my new capacity, and I visited Yad Vashem. My belief is that a person will not fully understand the state of Israel unless they visit Yad Vashem. It had a profound impact on me. Yad Vashem gives us the story; it tells us why it is that a people who have been bashed, bullied and messed around over generations and centuries have said, “Enough! This is our home. This is ours, and we are going to defend it.” I am very pleased that the Government are four-square behind their right to self-determination and safety in the state of Israel.

The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) spoke about the two-state solution. As we approach the Manama conference next week, I make it clear that we have to have a two-state solution based on the ‘67 borders, with agreed land swaps and Jerusalem as a shared capital. There has been lots of talk in recent times about that being fished, and he referred to the Leader of the Opposition. We are clear that we will not have peace in the middle east unless we have a shared future between the Jewish and Palestinian people, and that means a two-state solution. At this time, we just need to make that abundantly clear.

I spent a lot of time in the west bank, Gaza and Israel. I saw the desperate conditions in which the people of Gaza are living, and I visited Khan al-Alhamar, whose inhabitants are apparently safe for now, but who still expect to be made homeless by Israeli demolitions. The UN has said that could constitute a forcible transfer. The experience of all these people—the victims and survivors of the holocaust, the Israelis who live in fear of Palestinian rockets, and the Palestinians who live a precarious existence in Gaza or the west bank—illustrates the complexity of the issues still to be resolved by the middle east peace process.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet is absolutely right to cite UN Security Council resolution 242. It speaks of refugees; it does not break them down. The Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), touched on similar ground in his remarks.

The history of Jewish migration and displacement in the region is highly complex. We have touched on a great deal of that today. Some have estimated that the figures could be as high as 1 million displaced people over that period. For those whose homes and property were seized or who were forcibly expelled, the experience was hugely traumatic and hugely distressing. Some continue to live with all that distress today and rightly seek some sort of recognition of the trauma they have suffered. We deeply sympathise with that suffering, just as we sympathise with the many Palestinians who have been forced from their homes over the same period and, indeed, the more than 15 million people of many faiths and nationalities who are currently displaced in the region.

We understand that there were a range of motivations for Jews who decided to leave Arab countries. Many of them were certainly forced out, one way or another—either directly or by the general bullying behaviour that they experienced over years. Many left because they were driven by the desire to forge a new homeland for the Jewish people in the new state of Israel. We continue to support that legitimate aspiration for a secure and safe homeland in the form of the modern state of Israel, just as we support the objectives of a viable and sovereign Palestinian state. The hon. Member for Bury South was absolutely right to underscore the importance of that. It is with those two states very much in mind that we approach the Manama conference next week, at which this country will of course be represented.

The Government continue to believe that the way forward is through substantive peace talks between the parties leading to a two-state solution with Jerusalem as the shared capital. We would also like to use every opportunity to call out any instances of antisemitism, wherever it occurs. Scapegoating and demonising minorities fuels division, hatred and violence, and it cannot go unchallenged, wherever we find it. Freedom of religion or belief is a universal human right that dovetails with many other human rights. Where religious freedoms are under attack, other basic rights are also under threat.

In the time available to me, I will run briefly through the contributions that have been made this afternoon. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet mentioned UNESCO world heritage sites. We work, as she will probably know, with regional Governments and UN agencies so that cultural sites, religious and secular, are protected in a troubled region. She is right to raise that.

I commend the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on their contributions, particularly in relation to the history of this piece. They have a deep and long-standing interest in the matter.

My good friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) pointed out that peace in the middle east needs consideration of Palestinian and Jewish refugees. I hope in my remarks and my emphasis on UN Security Council resolution 242 that I have made clear that the Government very much see it in that light, too.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) talked about the injustice perpetrated on Jewish refugees and hoped that they, as well as Palestinian refugees, would feature in the middle east peace process. The fact
we are having this debate in this place should reinforce the message that there can be no lasting peace without consideration of both of the peoples principally in the frame in this matter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) quoted a very insensitive remark by Abdullah from Bristol. I am grateful to Abdullah from Bristol for making his crass remark, because it gave us an opportunity to explode it today in the House of Commons. My hon. Friend also mentioned Yemen. Between 1948 and 1949, 50,000 Jews were airlifted from Yemen, and he is right to point out that there are probably only around 100 left.

I once again congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet on rightly raising this important matter. It is timely that she has done so, since next week in Manama these grave matters concerning the middle east peace process and the way forward will be considered. I very much hope that someone involved with those talks has been listening today.

5.56 pm

**Theresa Villiers:** I thank the Minister and everyone who has taken part in the debate. The main point I take away from it is that one hour is just not long enough. This story has stayed untold for far too long. We need this debate to be the start of a process by which we ensure that more people know about this unresolved injustice.

I echo the request from all parts of the House that the Government explicitly refer to the matter of Jewish refugees in statements, discussions and debates about the middle east because, as we have heard, it is not possible properly to understand the middle east conflict or to formulate a fair solution without an understanding of the issue with which we have been grappling this afternoon.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) made a powerful point when he said ignorance about the long history of the Jewish communities across the Arab world and the middle east is used as an excuse to fuel the entirely false narrative that Israel is somehow an artificial European construct and a colonial outpost. That is a false narrative, and I hope that the Minister and all right hon. and hon. Members present today will help me in taking forward the process and in ensuring that more people know what really happened 70 years ago, so that we can see some genuine justice in the middle east for the dispossessed Jewish communities of the Arab world.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved,**

That this House has considered Jewish refugees from the Middle East and North Africa.

5.58 pm

**Sitting adjourned.**
Westminster Hall  

Thursday 20 June 2019  

[SAM CHEL GILLAN in the Chair]  

Sudan  

1.30 pm  

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,  
That this House has considered the political situation in Sudan.

It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I have put in for a debate on this subject on a number of occasions. I was getting a bit despondent that I had not secured one, given the depth of the crisis in Sudan, so I was pleased that the unusual channels managed to find space for one. I hope everyone present contributes. I do not intend to say much; rather, I intend to ask a series of questions of the Government, and I hope we can move forward on what we should be doing.

I went to Sudan in September with the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). We had some inkling that problems may be afoot, but I do not think any of us anticipated how bad things would become. That is why I am pleased that we can at the very least debate the issue today. It is such a tragic situation.

My interest in Sudan goes back a long time. I have visited the country four times. I was always interested in the religious aspect of the conflict before the country split. We now have two elements to Sudan: the situation in South Sudan does not quite mirror what has happened in the north, but that country has its own problems. Perhaps we will discuss them on another occasion.

The Library produced an excellent briefing for the debate, for hon. Members who do not know, those briefings are always published online, that gives as good a summary of the background as is possible in three pages. I will not go through it, except to say that when Bashir was removed in April, some of us feared that there would at the very least be a vacuum, which would be filled by someone else, who would not necessarily be any better.

I welcome the Minister, and I look forward to hearing what she has to say. I also welcome the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on Sudan and South Sudan with great acumen. We are here to ensure that we do what I have always pledged to do when I have met the Sudanese: not to forget the situation in Sudan. They often feel that their crises, while not belittled, are given a secondary level of interest because of all the other things going on in our world.

Sadly, following the removal of Bashir, violence broke out on the streets of Khartoum at the start of June, and what is happening in other parts of the country will be as bad as, if not worse than, whatever is going on in Khartoum. I will mention later what my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton and I found on our visit to Darfur.

We will keep our eyes very much on what is happening. We will not let the atrocities escape our notice. I hope that, in due course, we will have got a bit more stability into the country and that the Government will take appropriate action with international colleagues to deal with those responsible for the worst aspects of those atrocities. I will talk later about my discussions with the diaspora. I hope the Minister is able to respond to the things they have to say—I am only their mouthpiece—and to the things I ask of the Government.

The EU has taken a strong stance on what has been happening in Sudan, but we must understand that the situation will not be sorted out quickly. The African Union has made its own representations to try to bring about peace. Egypt, because of its relationship with Sudan, has expressed concern, and it was good that the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, visited in an attempt to mediate between the Transitional Military Council and the Forces of Freedom and Change, which seem to be the two sides most engaged in what is going on. Sadly, as a result of that, some FFC people were arrested, and at least one has been thrown out of the country. That is not exactly helping the dialogue.

I am concerned about the relationship between Sudan and the United Arab Emirates and particularly Saudi Arabia. For those who do not know, most of the fighting in Yemen is being done by Sudanese Rapid Support Forces, which we would call Janjaweed. That has added to the escalation of the troubles on the streets of Khartoum. At a time when the UK Government are being called to account for their own arms shipment arrangements with the Saudis, it is apposite that we recognise that we must put pressure on the Saudis, who hold the ring with respect to the arrangements by which the Transitional Military Council—the Government, if we can call it a Government—currently holds power. I hope the Minister says a little about that.

I will ask a series of questions of the Minister and then finish with what the diaspora have to say, which is very important. We have many thousands of Sudanese in this country, who are at the very least intensely worried about what is happening to their families and friends and who want, for reasons we know, a new Sudan to come out of the current situation.

The UK Government have made clear public statements condemning the way events have evolved. Our brave ambassador has been called in at least once to be dressed down by the Sudanese regime. Having known that regime for many years, I know that is not a good experience, so I pass on my thanks to him. It is important that we put it on the record that the Government believe the Transitional Military Council, and in particular Hemeti, who seems to have taken control, is responsible for what is happening and will pay the price. We should use all diplomatic means to ensure that, in due course, there is a proper transfer of power from the Transitional Military Council.

I take the word “transitional” to mean that this is not another Bashir regime in the making, but something that will genuinely begin to govern Sudan in the way it should be governed. The new Government have to recognise the diversity of the people of Sudan, including women and younger people. I have hope for Sudan because I know from talking to younger people that they believe there is a different world out there. They believe something could be done to bring the country forward into the 21st century. Sadly, too often, they are disappointed.

We should lead efforts at the United Nations Human Rights Council, and we must ensure, as a member of the Security Council, that Sudan is properly held to
account through international mechanisms. I would say that even if it were not for the current difficulties in Sudan. I have said before to the Minister—she will not be surprised to hear this—that I hope she talks to the Home Office to ensure there are no deportations to anywhere in Sudan. There should have been no deportations anyway to Darfur, because of the ongoing problems there. It is important that people here and people there know that we recognise that the situation is so dire that we cannot send anyone back to that bedevilled country at the moment.

Because of the UK’s relationship with the other members of the troika—the US and Norway—it has a key role to play in making sure that the diplomatic effort is stepped up and that we bring the different parties together, which must include a real effort to de-escalate what is happening on the streets. We must condemn all state and pseudo-state armed actors, particularly the paramilitary groups—whether we call them Janjaweed or RSF—and individual militias, which have sadly always played a part in Sudan.

The eyes of the world are on Khartoum, but I fear that problems may break out again in Darfur. The Minister kindly said that the British Government are against any further draw down in the numbers of military and police there, but we must keep our eyes on the situation, because if it explodes again, that would be catastrophic. I would be grateful if the Minister said that we were categorically committed to that, and that we welcomed the others that provide the numbers—mainly African Union players now—keeping to their side of the bargain to make sure we do not reduce the numbers anymore.

We must also make sure that no one can escape here. One aspect of trying to control how certain people have behaved and of holding them to account is freezing their assets and dealing with them through unexplained wealth orders and repatriation. We have a history of certain people visiting for health treatment, which does not go down well with people who know enough about what they have done in the past. That takes me to the International Criminal Court, Bashir is cited, but it is no good just citing these people; we have to follow that with action, which must include other people who have perpetrated violence in Sudan.

The British Government have to explain to the Government of Sudan, as far as they exist, that they have to keep their obligations under international law and that any transgression will be punished. I am not in favour of disengagement—it is important that we keep our ambassador there—but they have to understand that they are accountable for what they have done, including the way they are imprisoning people, the aspects of completely out-of-control behaviour by some militias on the streets, and the torture. Sudan is notorious for ghost houses. We need to know that people are not being tortured as a matter of course. I hope that we will follow that up and deal with it subsequently.

We must uphold international law on all the conventions on torture and any other inhuman or degrading treatment. That dovetails with the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, which should hold a rule 112 hearing on the implementation of cases that have been brought to light at the 65th ordinary session in Banjul, Gambia.

I will finish with a few comments from the diaspora, who are clearly desperately worried. There are thousands of Sudanese people in this country. We have to remember that, at one time, one in five refugees was Sudanese—that is what comes from 50 years of civil war. Clearly, refugee numbers from other parts of the world have grown, but there are still an awful lot of Sudanese people trying to get out of that country or already here.

The diaspora are adamant that they want a full international investigation into what happened on 3 June and subsequently. They want to make sure that the Government are not in any way fuelling the problem by finding ways to get money through to the regime. I made a Channel 4 programme—it has not yet been broadcast, so I do not want to spike its news—that discovered that the EU moneys that have been going into force protection and border controls have found their way to Janjaweed, because it has been doing some of that work. We need an investigation to make sure that those moneys have stopped.

**Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con):** I have an interest in Sudan, in so far as when I was a young boy living in Aden, my nurse came from there, and I have a great deal of affection for her still. In my experience, the problem with aid is that it needs to be supervised all the way down. When we give money or goods to somewhere such as Sudan, the only way to guarantee its effectiveness is to have someone on the ground watching it being distributed at the point of delivery. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

**Dr Drew:** I do, and that is the allegation about some of the EU money. We wanted to stop the flow of migration, but this is a case of out of sight, out of mind, so we have not taken much notice of how these things have been done. If that money has found its way to the RSF, we should do something about that immediately. It is shameful, because that is not what the money was for.

The diaspora have also made it clear that they do not want any further cuts to the money going to UNAMID—the United Nations-African Union hybrid operation in Darfur. They would like access to the potential international mediation talks on 25 June in Berlin for the Sudanese Professionals Association, which has been a leading body in the Forces of Freedom and Change and has been instrumental in holding the Government to account. They also think it is important not to cut diplomatic ties, but they want to make it clear through our condemnations that people who have perpetrated the violence, and worse, will be held to account. That means that the RSF should be disarmed and removed from the streets of Sudan immediately.

It is important that we play our part. Britain is a key player in Sudan. We cannot ignore our past—it was a British colony. More than anything, however, because of our relationship with the troika—with the Americans and the Norwegians—the Sudanese people look to us to provide leadership to make sure that what is happening is not ignored and is given the correct priority, and that peace is brought to that bedevilled country. That will not be done easily—we have taken 50 years so far, unsuccessfully—but there is hope. We have to make sure that we put pressure on the transgressors and that we follow it through. We have done that in the past, but we must be even keener now to ensure that our obligations are fulfilled.
Sir Henry Bellingham: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), who, as the vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group, has been indefatigable in his support of Sudan and South Sudan. I declare my interests, particularly as the chair of the APPG.

I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman has said, because when General Omar al-Bashir finally departed on 11 April, there was a great deal of hope and rejoicing. That was a remarkable event, because it marked the end of 30 years of brutal dictatorship. During that time, huge misery was heaped on Sudan; appalling crimes against humanity were committed in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile; and there was the secession of South Sudan.

Incidentally, we should not forget the plight of South Sudan, where little progress has been made on the peace process. Some 60% of the population does not have food security. Of a population of 12 million, 2.2 million are refugees and 1.9 million are internally displaced people. Since 2013, 100 humanitarian aid workers have been killed there.

The removal of President General Omar al-Bashir was an extraordinary event. As the hon. Member for Stroud said, there were high hopes for the future at the time, and there have been a number of positive developments and trends. In some ways, the uprising was one of the most progressive in the region. The Forces of Freedom and Change, which some people call the alliance, and the Sudanese Professionals Association combined management organisations, workers’ organisations and trade unions—not that there are trade unions in that country as we know them here—and also managed to bring in a number of the more liberal Muslim groups. Crucially, unlike in Syria, Libya and Yemen, Sudan’s Islamic fundamentalists were kept out of it.

One of the key characteristics of the demonstration was that the demonstrators were determined to keep them as peaceful as possible at all times. After seeing the General deposed, they rightly did not want to leave the squares and areas around public buildings empty; they wanted to continue occupying them. That appeared to be working, and there was ongoing dialogue with the Transitional Military Council under Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. A lot of us at the time were quietly optimistic that progress would be made, but then the appalling events of 3 June happened, when the Transitional Military Council used total brutality and force on unarmed, innocent protesters who were sitting in and doing nothing but peacefully protesting for the future. Well over 100 were killed, and a number of key people were arrested, including SPLM-N leaders Ismail Jabal, Yasar Arman and Mubarak Arld.

I share the concern of the hon. Member for Stroud about the role of the Rapid Support Forces. The former Janjaweed militia, under Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, who is now the deputy head of the Transitional Military Council, has brutalised people on the streets, and we understand that it has used rape as a method of putting down demonstrations. Reprehensibly, some soldiers are preventing medical staff from going into hospitals.

All that is very depressing and, in some ways, unexpected. We must look at the international response, as the hon. Member for Stroud has done. I agree that the EU has been very strong and powerful in its condemnation. I would like to see more coming out of the UN. One of the problems is that if a more robust and direct resolution is drafted, the danger is that it will be vetoed by either China or Russia. I ask the Minister to tell us what more can be done within the UN. One of the strongest messages that the UK can send is that there can be absolutely no impunity or any form of amnesty for the people in the Transitional Military Council who have committed crimes against humanity and crimes against innocent people. Any indication that those wretched crimes will be swept under the carpet will only encourage the TMC to carry on with its current attitude, which is improving somewhat but there is still a long way to go.

Bob Stewart: I thank my hon. Friend for letting me intervene. It is crucial that the International Criminal Court now takes more of an interest in what is happening in Sudan and South Sudan. It has the capability to investigate, and we should put the Government of Sudan on notice that if they do not take action, which is their first duty when war crimes have been committed, the International Criminal Court will come knocking at some stage—albeit in 10 or 20 years’ time.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I certainly agree. There can be no question of General Omar al-Bashir escaping those charges in the ICC. There needs to be an ICC investigation into the crimes that took place in early June. It is absolutely essential that that happens.

Bob Stewart: All of them—not just June.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Exactly. Of course, General Omar al-Bashir has committed crimes in the past in Darfur and elsewhere. The crimes committed by the Rapid Support Forces and the TMC very recently must be fully investigated. I would be grateful if the Minister commented on that point, but it seems that UK has significant influence over it, particularly through our position in the UN.

As far as the regional players are concerned, I was—like the hon. Member for Stroud—encouraged that the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, recently visited Khartoum and had discussions with the TMC. There is quite a lot of evidence that the pressure from the international community is changing the attitude of the Gulf states that were fairly equivocal towards Sudan. The latest news is actually fairly encouraging. The protesters have agreed to end their campaign of civil disobedience and resume talks, so we are at a pivotal point. That is why it is absolutely essential that the troika put maximum pressure on the TMC and use the threats that my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) referred to. This is an absolutely vital moment for states in the region, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to put pressure on the Transitional Military Council to ensure that if the protesters end their campaign of civil disobedience, as appears to be happening, talks take place immediately. The protesters should end the campaign only if the TMC acts in good faith and enters into dialogue.

There is a great deal at stake for the people of Sudan, who have suffered so much for so long, for the region, given the strategic importance of Sudan in the horn of...
Africa: and for the UK. We have a historical duty to Sudan, and we must ensure that, if the country can move forward in a democratic direction, its huge potential is exploited and made the most of. The prospects for enhanced trade and building ever greater links between the UK, the diaspora here and Sudan, are limitless. Furthermore, we are obviously very involved in the Khartoum process, which is looking at the refugee crisis in the Sahel and the Maghreb. If this tragedy and disaster is not solved quickly, the refugee crisis will get worse.

Given the country’s tumultuous history and the tragedy since independence from Anglo-Egyptian rule 60 years ago, it is easy to be cautious and pessimistic, but I have always been a glass-half-full person. In my visits to Sudan, I have always been impressed by the optimism and the sense of aspiration among the Sudanese people. That has always struck me as being one of the great features of that country. As we waited patiently for the dictatoral rule of General Bashir to come to an end, that optimism increased.

I will end with a quote from someone many of us know quite well—Alex de Waal, who is a long-time Africa expert. He said that Sudan “is poised between an inspirational transformation and dangerous disorder.”

Let us hope that, with the Minister’s help and the help of all the other agencies and organisations involved, it will indeed be the former—above all, for the sake of the Sudanese people.

1.59 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl, and to follow the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), who chairs the all-party group for Sudan and South Sudan so well. He has demonstrated his great knowledge of that part of the world and his staunch commitment to continuing to shine a light on what is going on in Sudan. We must make it clear, through our voice in this place, that we support the Sudanese people.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew); his great knowledge of that part of the world shone through his remarks. He cares deeply, and his concerns about what is happening in Sudan, how the situation affects the diaspora living here, and the threats it is creating for neighbouring countries, are important.

I am afraid I do not have the knowledge or expertise of the hon. Members who have already spoken and said so much. The hon. Member for North West Norfolk was right when he said that when these disturbances began in December, around bread and grain shortages, and gathered pace to become a more general expression of dissatisfaction as to the need for this regime to come to an end and to move on to a new chapter, there was a sense of optimism in the world, and among friends of Sudan who saw what was going on. Sadly, on 3 June, when peaceful protesters were killed in Khartoum and the images broadcast across the world, that initial hope was dashed.

We have continued to receive reports of the military killing unarmed people in hospitals and elsewhere, and shocking reports of other dreadful things taking place. It was right for the African Union to cut off all activities with Sudan following the extreme bloodshed, demonstrating its clear position. It is good that the pressure from the United Kingdom, the United States and others, and the clear voice of the EU have led some Gulf states to soften their behaviours since their initial reaction.

It is a very difficult situation at the moment. As both my colleagues have said, everyone who knows Sudan well remains hopeful about what is going on with civic society, and about what is going on with younger people, but there is a need to provide the opportunity for that hope to thrive. As has been said, it is important that it is made very clear that the people responsible for what is happening at the moment will be held to account by the international community, and that the temporary Transitional Military Council should be exactly that—transitional—as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud said. There should be a clear path to proper democracy and order in government, in which the people of Sudan can have confidence.

It is a troubled region. Darfur is synonymous with awful historical events and we do not want that awfulness to return. Leadership from all of us, working together, is needed to support the UK Government to provide leadership through the troika, the United Nations and the EU. The United Kingdom has a pivotal position. I look forward to what the Minister and the shadow Minister have to say about how we move forward, building on the strong, unified messages that have already been coming across the political landscape in the UK. I hope those messages are being well heard in Sudan, and that we can take the necessary steps forward to help that troubled country to a better future—the future it deserves.

2.4 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) for securing this important debate.

The SNP would like to see a multilateral approach to this issue, where we can work with colleagues in the European Union and the African Union. This is an exceptionally distressing conflict situation, as other Members have rightly highlighted. There are incredibly worrying reports of civilians being killed, and, as the chair of the APPG, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), highlighted, there are also reports of sexual violence being used as a tool of war.

Those responsible must be held to account; that includes the militias. As the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) pointed out, even if they are not held accountable tomorrow, the day after or even the month after, they need to know that they will be held accountable. He was right to say that; I recognise the work that he has done and his track record in helping to ensure that people are brought to justice for heinous crimes, even years afterwards. The international community does not, and should not, go away just because these things have disappeared from the front pages of the newspapers or are no longer being debated in Parliament.
Bob Stewart: I intervene on my friend because if 100 civilians had been killed in a European country there would be one hell of a row about it. Although people here, such as my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), and the Opposition speakers are raising this issue, there are not many people here today. That is sad, because what has happened is something approaching genocide. We have not even touched on some of the other issues, such as the persecution of Christians.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the hon. Gentleman; as usual he raises an incredibly important point that, given his experiences and his track record, has particular resonance. I pay credit to him. As I have said to him, I was a great admirer of his before I came to Parliament because of his work on this. I acknowledge that we may disagree on an issue or two, but I pay credit to the work he has done, and continues to do, in pursuing these issues.

Years from now, we will continue that work and accountability will be key. I know that the Minister will reaffirm our utter steadfastness in defending human rights, along with our partners in the African Union and the European Union. I add my words to those expressing thanks to the UK ambassador to Sudan and members of staff in the embassy in Khartoum, who have an extraordinarily difficult job and who are carrying out their duties in a brave and dignified fashion. I hope the Minister will pass on that message from me and other Members.

On the UK Government’s own powers, I hope the Minister will continue to make clear statements of condemnation about militias like the Janjaweed and make it clear that although militias appear to be involved in the Transitional Military Council, the council will bear full responsibility for the actions of the militias, as well as their own army. That is a lesson taken from other conflict situations.

I am not sure whether the Minister is able to touch on issues about misinformation; there are concerns about it and we have seen it deployed as a tactic elsewhere in the world. Will she and her Department look at instances of misinformation and how we can counter them? Ensuring that there is a true and accurate reflection of what is going on is important for accountability, but also for our own policy making and making sure that we respond in an appropriate manner. Misinformation is appearing increasingly often throughout the world.

I add my support for the argument that inclusion must be at the heart of any transfer of powers, and I hope that the UK will pursue it, but I also add my voice to those saying that we must halt the deportations to Sudan. I know that is a Home Office issue, but will the Minister pass on that message from this debate? The deportations must be halted; they are not appropriate, and especially now, on World Refugee Day of all days, it is fitting to stress that again. Can we also learn from mistakes elsewhere—as we have learned in Myanmar; for example—that sufficient time and capacity must be given to any transfer to a democracy, along with de-escalation work? That takes investment and it takes more time.

I thank the chair of the APPG, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), who is a fount of knowledge on Sudan and South Sudan, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) and the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). He spoke about the delegation to Sudan that he and I took part in last year, and he is right to say that we had an idea of the problems that were brewing at the time. President Bashir had been selected as the candidate for the next elections; there was a feeling that, while there were issues, he had brought stability to the country. There was a strong feeling that he was the candidate—but with serious reservations. We had many meetings with politicians in Sudan, and that thread ran through all our discussions.

But as my hon. Friend said in his opening remarks, none of us quite anticipated the scale of the current crisis. I think of the relative calm we encountered in September last year, and the protests and killings that have taken place since in Khartoum and elsewhere in Sudan. Everybody has talked about the difficulties of accessing information from Sudan. The news we have had does not cover the whole story, and I will go on to talk about press freedom.

I thank all hon. Members who have spoken—the chair of the APPG, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), who is a fount of knowledge on Sudan and South Sudan, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) and the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). He spoke about the delegation to Sudan that he and I took part in last year, and he is right to say that we had an idea of the problems that were brewing at the time. President Bashir had been selected as the candidate for the next elections; there was a feeling that, while there were issues, he had brought stability to the country. There was a strong feeling that he was the candidate—but with serious reservations. We had many meetings with politicians in Sudan, and that thread ran through all our discussions.

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Many MPs with Sudanese diasporas in their constituencies have approached me in the past few weeks, bringing messages from their constituents and asking me why we are not talking more about Sudan. I am therefore grateful that my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud secured this important debate, and there was
also an urgent question last week. However, although it is important that we have these debates, talking on its own is not enough. What we need is action, and with that in mind I have several asks of the Minister, which I hope she will be able to address.

The first thing I want to ask the Minister is what we can do to put pressure on the internet providers in Sudan. I have already mentioned the difficulties we have in getting information out of Sudan, and one problem is that the internet providers have shut down the internet, or have been shut down by the Sudanese authorities. The major providers are the South African company MTN and a Kuwaiti company. It is unlikely that the UK can do much about them, but, nevertheless, I would be interested to hear what action the Foreign Office is taking to try at least to restore internet access to the people of Sudan.

There is also the important issue of press freedom—I know it is an issue dear to the Foreign Secretary’s heart, because he is holding a conference on it next month. Sudanese journalists have been targeted since the public protests began. Their media accreditations have been revoked, and many journalists have been detained. The International Federation of Journalists has joined its affiliate, the Sudanese Journalists Union, in condemning any attempts to intimidate the press. The IFJ is urging the authorities to end the clampdown and respect journalists’ rights to report in a safe working environment.

In May, the Sudanese authorities closed al-Jazeera’s offices in Khartoum and withdrew the work permits of all its staff. Again, the IFJ and the Federation of African Journalists have condemned the move as an attack on freedom of information and called for an immediate end to the clampdown on the media. Given the Foreign Secretary’s major and important work on press freedom, I would be interested to hear the Minister’s comments on how the UK intends to support press freedom in Sudan, which is vital.

It has been noted already that the Ethiopian Prime Minister has tried to mediate; sadly, one result was that some of the opposition politicians he spoke to were then imprisoned. It is important to note that, while the Ethiopian position is that Sudan should move to any civilian Government, many people, including many members of the Sudanese diaspora, would prefer groups that are already in the Forces of Freedom and Change and not Islamist or unheard-of groups. I would be interested to hear the Minister’s thoughts on that and on whether it should be UK foreign policy to support groups from the Forces of Freedom and Change.

The African Union has quite rightly suspended Sudan’s membership until a civilian-led transitional authority has been established. We need to place further pressure on the Transitional Military Council to continue the political transition. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud is right to raise the UK’s important role as part of the troika, and it is vital that we use our influence there.

We need an internationally led independent investigation into the recent events. We need an investigation into the killings, the rapes and the injuries inflicted on innocent, peaceful protestors. Britain must recognise its historical duty to Sudan and play a key part in enabling that.

I want to make a few remarks about UK aid. My hon. Friend also raised the issue of EU moneys finding their way to the RSF, but I will concentrate on DFID moneys. We will provide £65 million of aid in 2018-19 and £50 million in 2019-20, the majority of which will go on humanitarian assistance and development work. However, given the current crisis, has the Minister given any thought to increasing or redirecting UK aid, and will she make aid conditional on achieving a peaceful transition to a civilian Government?

My hon. Friend and the hon. Member for North East Fife both talked about the bravery of the UK ambassador, and I support those remarks. He provides people with support, and it is vital that we keep up that vital diplomatic role in Sudan.

Bob Stewart: On bravery, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) raised the issue of the number of casualties among non-governmental organisation workers. My wife was a delegate in South Sudan and was actually taken hostage for three weeks, so I am speaking out of self-interest here. The people who operate for non-governmental organisations in Sudan and South Sudan put their lives at risk all the time; they are incredibly brave. We should mark that point. I am in awe of some of those I have met.

Liz McInnes: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to comment on the bravery of people who work for our NGOs, including his wife, whom I have had the pleasure of meeting. She is an indomitable woman. We had a debate here a while ago on South Sudan, and my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe talked about South Sudan, and my hon. Friend also raised the issue of EU moneys finding their way to the RSF, but I will concentrate on DFID moneys. We will provide £65 million of aid in 2018-19 and £50 million in 2019-20, the majority of which will go on humanitarian assistance and development work. However, given the current crisis, has the Minister given any thought to increasing or redirecting UK aid, and will she make aid conditional on achieving a peaceful transition to a civilian Government?

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Liz McInnes: I entirely agree. This situation has been allowed to sit in limbo for far too long. It is a matter of international law that President Bashir should face up to the charges against him.

Bob Stewart: As soon as possible.

Liz McInnes: Yes.

Finally, I want to press the Minister on UK attempts to strike trade deals with Sudan, which I raised with her last week. I would also be grateful if she commented on our approach to trade with Sudan. Given the political crisis, I am really interested to hear her view on potential diplomatic pressures on the Sudanese people and their desire to move from a military regime to a brighter future under civilian-led government.

It is been an historic year for that transition. If someone had said to me when the shadow Minister and I visited that there would be a popular uprising and that Bashir would be gone at this point, I think we would all have found it very difficult to believe, but it has happened.

As a number of Members noted, the situation in Sudan is incredibly fragile. It does not have the strength of the democratic institutions that we have here. Clearly, the talks between the Transitional Military Council and the protestors represented by the Forces of Freedom and Change have been fraught and require a certain amount of external pressure and mediation to make sure that they continue to progress.

The quality of the debate raised a range of important points, which I will try to tackle. A number of them were common points. There was common acknowledgement that we value the strength of the diaspora here in the UK and those people-to-people links. We all send our great respect to our ambassador in Khartoum and his team, who have twice had to draw down to essential staff only and are working in difficult circumstances. I certainly have great pleasure in passing that on from parliamentarians. There was also a request that the UK continue, in all the different international forums in which we participate, to use our diplomatic connections to make sure that we not only keep this at the forefront of international forums but that we try to unite the international messaging around a common position. That is important.

We have been playing that role, whether on Monday, when I was at the EU Foreign Affairs Council, or in our ongoing discussions with representatives from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, or with other friends of Sudan. Importantly, we row in behind our friends in the African Union and the initiative shown by the Ethiopian Prime Minister, always remembering how important it is that we send a unified and coherent message at every diplomatic opportunity. That has been more challenging in the context of the United Nations Security Council, where we have been able to get a statement issued, but probably not as strong as the one that we would have wanted to put out on our own. We will also, at next week’s United Nations Human Rights Council, be able to lead a discussion; we are giving leadership on that as well. The UK has in a range of ways been trying to ensure that the diplomatic community and the international community are sending a common message, and I can assure colleagues that we will continue to use every single one of those opportunities.

A number of different points were raised by hon. Members. On the important point about returns, we have been in contact with colleagues at the Home Office. I can tell the House that the Government’s published statistics for the year up to the end of March 2019 show six returns in total, for non-asylum cases and asylum cases. The Home Office recognises that the human rights situation is very difficult in Sudan. In the first quarter of 2019, three quarters of the people claiming to be Sudanese asylum seekers were granted protection. All asylum claims made by Sudanese nationals in the UK are considered on their individual merits against relevant case law and up-to-date country information.

A number of colleagues raised the important question of overseas development assistance and whether any of that is inadvertently supporting the Government or Transitional Military Council, or finding its way to the Rapid Support Forces. I can assure colleagues that last December I took the decision to suspend some of the work that we were doing, after a full look at some of the economic support work that we were proposing to take forward in terms of the Government. Of the latter, we can specifically in relation to the regional operations centre in Khartoum, which is funded by EU funds and obviously therefore has a 15% contribution from the UK, I can inform colleagues that as a consequence of recent events, EU-funded work on the regional operations centre is suspended. That suspension lasts until the end of this week. There will be a decision tomorrow on a resumption of activities; that will take place after tomorrow’s management board, but I cannot see that anyone will argue for a resumption in the current situation. There are often reports that the UK, via the EU, funds the Rapid Support Forces, but I can assure colleagues that that is not the case. The question of misinformation came up, and I think it is always important to be factual on these things.

I think that accountability was mentioned by everyone in the debate—by the hon. Member for Stroud, by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) in his intervention and by the hon. Members for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) and for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). We would encourage the Sudanese people to retain and preserve evidence to...
enable future investigations to take place. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is looking to draw on recent experience in other countries—for example, Syria and Myanmar—to see whether it applies in this instance, so I would encourage people to retain evidence for future investigations.

The latest UN reporting on violence in Darfur is the statement made on 17 June by the humanitarian co-ordinator in Sudan. The main points are reports of intercommunal violence in various Darfur states, including recent clashes in Deleij, which left 17 people dead and 100 dwellings destroyed; and calls for the Transitional Military Council to ensure access for humanitarian supplies and timely facilitation of administrative procedures for entry of aid workers into Sudan and internal travel within it. That statement was published. There is also, should people wish to download it, an emergency flash update, dated 12 June, from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. That is helpful information.

I want to reassure colleagues that the UK’s humanitarian assistance is delivered through organisations such as the World Food Programme and other UN bodies.

A range of colleagues asked about current UNAMID troop numbers. After the technical roll-over, which we hope will be adopted on 27 June, there will be 4,375 troops in UNAMID. That is 325 above the mandated ceiling, as the mission has been unable to undertake some planned team site closures because of the issue with the Rapid Support Forces. It is important for colleagues to understand that although I have set out the UK’s position very clearly on a number of occasions, that roll-over has not yet been agreed.

On the question about media freedom and the bravery of journalists—bravery that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is rightly putting at the forefront of next month’s conference—I can update colleagues. Since President Bashir’s removal on 11 April, the BBC has had access to Khartoum and has been able to broadcast its morning programme from there. BBC Arabic TV and radio are quite widely available via satellite, but since 2010 the BBC has been banned from broadcasting on FM radio. Our ambassador has for some time been lobbying the information Ministry for restored access. I concur with the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe, that there is a long way to go to a free media in Sudan.

On the question made by the hon. Member for Scunthorpe, a clear path is what is needed. This will clearly be a long road; it is not something that can be switched on overnight. Donor countries such as ours, working with like-minded countries, can set out a path, which will have conditions attached in relation to progress. There is huge potential for the Sudanese economy should that transition path be followed and things evolve. There is enormous potential for us as a member of the international community, working with the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, other like-minded countries, EU development assistance and some of our own bilateral funding, not only to step up the humanitarian assistance—bearing in mind how widespread food insecurity is in Sudan—but to make the long-term inward investments that will be needed for that economy to prosper. Although we are not currently able to move forward on trade deals—clearly, there is no trade deal with the EU because the Cotonou conditions were never met—I think the
brought the country to where it is. We need to lift the country to ensure that we, with the Americans and Norwegians, can bring some sort of ceasefire to the streets, and then we can move forward to a proper peace settlement.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved.*

That this House has considered the political situation in Sudan.

2.43 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

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**Secondary Education: Raising Aspiration**

*Mr Virendra Sharma in the Chair*

3 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered raising aspiration in secondary education.

I am grateful to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Sharma. I am not sure whether anything else is happening in the House today that means that Members might be otherwise engaged, but I am very pleased to have the opportunity to have this debate and to ask the Minister some questions about how the Government are addressing the issue of aspiration.

Aspiration is important to me. In my maiden speech on 24 June 2010, I told the House about a constituent whose only aspiration in life was for her child to receive the tenancy of her socially rented property. On the other side of my constituency, parents told me about their children—how they were going to go to university, how they would certainly buy their own home in the local area and how they hoped to get married as well. That really illustrated to me the disparity in aspiration between different parts of my constituency and, I believe, across the country. I repeat today what I said in my maiden speech nine years ago: we live in one of the most prosperous cities in the western world, but there remain yawning chasms between the aspirations of some of the people I and other MPs represent and the aspirations of others. However, for some people, including Members of this place, aspiration is not that important—I will not take the number of Members here as a reflection of that, although I have to say to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), that I will take any interventions at any time he wishes to intervene on me.

Aspiration is not important to everyone because some people are of the view that people are either born with a spirit of aspiration or have had it bought on their behalf. That view fosters an assumption that some people are born into this world with a natural capacity to lead, while everybody else does not have that capacity, and that nothing can therefore be done to change the situation.

I certainly do not agree with that view, but we have only to consider our recent record on Prime Ministers to see the strength of it. Only three of the last 11 British Prime Ministers attended state secondary schools. In total, 28 Prime Ministers have been educated at Oxford University and 14 at Cambridge, and nine Prime Ministers were educated at Eton and Christ Church. John Major was the last Prime Minister not to have attended a university; overall, only nine British Prime Ministers did not graduate from university after leaving secondary education. I present those figures not as an attack on private education—I believe strongly in private education and anyone’s right to attend a private institution—but as an illustration that aspiration is imbued in some people.

People may know that tonight there is the premiere of Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje’s biographical film “Farming”. It tells the story of how Adewale, who is Nigerian, was “farmed out” as a boy by his parents to a white British
family in Dagenham, in the hope that he would have a
career. I spoke in a recent education funding debate about
Copthall School in my constituency, which is for girls.
Around 80% of the pupils speak English as a second
language, and around half are entitled to free school
meals or the pupil premium. The staff and governors
are making a great effort to promote aspiration among
their pupils, and I am enormously encouraged by what
they are achieving. One initiative they are very pleased
to promote is the Gatsby career benchmarks, which
they describe as
“aspirational and absolutely necessary as a vehicle for social
justice.”

It is worth commenting on that programme, as it
achieves three vital outcomes: first, it raises aspirations
among young people and promotes access to all career
paths, not just academic ones; secondly, it enables the
development of the skills and the outlook that pupils
need to achieve career wellbeing, including adaptability
and resilience; and, finally, it underpins the Department
for Education’s own guidance to schools on meeting
their statutory responsibility to offer career guidance.

As I was writing this speech yesterday, I received a
letter from my right hon. Friend the Minister for
Apprenticeships and Skills, about the Gatsby programme.
In concluding, she requested feedback from colleagues
about any conversations they might have with schools
in their constituencies in the coming weeks. However, I
can give some feedback right now to the Minister here
today. I have been advised by Copthall School:

“As you will see from the list at the end of this email, at
Copthall we are doing a lot to meet the eight Gatsby benchmarks.
However, it is a challenge to meet them all, particularly at a time
when school funding is in crisis. Most schools have insufficient
funding to fully implement the Gatsby benchmarks.”

Yesterday, the Minister and I had a discussion in the
corridor, and he said he looked forward to this debate
to hear more about my education history, following
some of my revelations in previous debates. However, I
have to disappoint him: I do not consider this a confessional
chamber, but somewhere where I represent my constituents,
so on this occasion I will not reveal more. My experience
at school certainly had a dramatic impact on my views
on aspiration and education, but it would be unfair of
me to criticise my school, and particularly the teachers, 30 years after I left, because most people have moved on from their posts, and life was a great deal different then. It would also be wrong of me to comment on the life achievements of others—my peers—who are completely content with their personal history, although I am keen that the mistakes of the past are not repeated.

One mistake that existed in the past and that continues to exist today is the tendency to separate academic and technical education routes into two simplistic alternatives. The problem is that that does not reflect the learner’s journey, which often moves between academic and technical routes at different times in their life. Permeability and flexibility between types of learning in our education system are vital if we are to enable learners to fulfil their potential and progress through both A and T-levels to higher level learning, and to achieve the goals in the Government’s industrial strategy of increasing social mobility and productivity.

As T-levels are introduced, it will be important to avoid sweeping away other qualifications, such as BTECs, which provide important and established progression routes into higher education, in the interests of creating a tidy qualification landscape. More than 100,000 students a year progress with a BTEC on its own or in combination with A-levels. UCAS data shows that, for the 2017 application cycle, only 61% of 18-year-olds held only A-level qualifications, with 11% of remaining applicants holding BTECs only, and 8% a combination of BTECs and A-levels. As a higher proportion of students opting for BTECs come from disadvantaged backgrounds, those qualifications play a critical role in supporting social mobility, providing a pathway for disadvantaged students to progress through to higher-level learning, either on an academic programme or on a higher or degree apprenticeship.

Our most disadvantaged children are often those in care and in need, something that the Secretary of State has also written to me about. Many have little aspiration and currently fall unacceptably far behind in attainment. Last year, the equivalent of one in 10 children needed a social worker at some point. The attainment of such children who require such help is greater than that of those who come from a low-income background. What hope do we give to those children? We must raise their aspiration so they expect more of themselves and believe they can succeed, and we must support schools to support children themselves.

Last year, the number of looked-after children in England reached 75,420, an increase of 4% on the previous year, and it has been increasing since 2008, when the total was 60,000. Young people in care are six times more likely to be excluded from school and more likely to be unemployed after leaving school, and 45% of them suffer from mental ill health. They are clearly being failed.

When I was deputy leader of Barnet Council, I introduced a scheme whereby the council would effectively act as a family business. If we have a family business, we often employ our own children or relatives. My initiative allowed the looked-after children, whom we were corporate parents to, to have a place in a family firm. I was very pleased that I took the opportunity to involve himself in marketing, but went on to university and provided a career for himself. Others fell by the wayside. It was not a scheme where everyone had an automatic right to a place, but there was an opportunity for them to aspire to achieve something through the services available through the local council. I was keen on the scheme because, as a child, I had a friend who lived in a children’s home, and I always understood that the opportunities available to him and other people in the care home were not the same as those available to someone like me, who lived in a loving family environment. I would like the Government to promote such initiatives. Indeed, local authorities could take the initiative to promote themselves within their communities.

To return to A-levels, high-quality careers information, advice and guidance for students and parents are essential to ensure successful implementation in the coming years. Clear signposting is needed within the curriculum to create awareness of the T-level option and ensure that young people avoid shutting down options—for example, by choosing academic subjects that will not feed into T-level study. That is particularly important, as the choices made about post-16 study will narrow further study and career options. Students at this age are still forming their identities and expectations of life, so it is vital that early information is provided.

Universities have direct experience of recruiting students from a diverse range of qualification backgrounds to access and succeed in higher education. It will be important to engage with higher education admissions professionals on T-levels to ensure that universities develop an understanding of T-levels and are able to communicate entry requirements to prospective students and level 3 providers. It will also be important to assist universities in meeting the specific needs of students progressing from those qualifications into higher education. Information around access to higher education from T-levels should also be communicated to students further down the line when they are making choices about level 3 study in schools and considering pathways and routes from T-levels.

The promotion of aspiration should occur not only in the secondary school sector. Middlesex University is located in my constituency. It has demonstrated to me on numerous occasions its considerable experience and expertise in raising aspiration and boosting social mobility. Some 52% of its current students are eligible for free school meals; 85% of the cohort falls into one of the five widening participation categories; and 50% of students are the first in their families to go to university. There seems to be a link between the university’s promotion of aspiration and its student numbers, as can be seen in its innovative Make your Mark initiative.

In 2018-19, Middlesex University engaged 6,986 school and college students and 286 parents through its outreach activity in 86 workshops in local schools. The outreach work helps young people to understand the opportunities available to them. The Make Your Mark initiative provides guidance for young people on what is likely to be the best pathway for them, including vocational routes such as apprenticeships, through an interactive web microsite. The university has produced a guide and website for 11 to 16-year-olds, featuring blogs, quizzes, insight into what university life and study are all about, and tips on exam success and money matters.

Universities, given the access that they have to schools, have more potential to be the one-stop shops for careers information and guidance at every level. There is also scope for employers, FE and HE to collaborate more effectively in providing high-quality careers information.
We have to be careful that for groups such as the Copthall School they do not end up as the equivalent of the freedom to dine at the Ritz. That is an important issue, which politicians of all parties need to address.

I agree with what the hon. Gentleman said on the flexibility to move between the academic, the technical and the vocational. Those words get bandied about too often in this place as if they were in silos, which then achieves that result. Flexibility has always been vital and it is even more vital now, given the speed at which subjects, their teaching and careers will mutate over the next few years. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), the former Skills Minister—I am proud to call him my friend, although he is on the other side—along with my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), is addressing that point as we speak, taking forward a skills commission that will look at some of those areas. What the hon. Member for Hendon said on that subject was absolutely spot on.

I was glad to hear the hon. Gentleman’s comments on BTECs. We agree with him. A consultation is out, and the Minister might wish to tell us today when he expects to be able to respond to that consultation. The Minister—I am proud to call him my friend, although he is on the other side—along with my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon mentioned the importance of the university contribution, and I shall mention a couple of universities as I go along. He mentioned Middlesex University, which I am familiar with. I am pleased to say that I shared a platform with the vice-chancellor, Tim Blackman, only a few weeks ago at an event at the Bridge Group, and I am absolutely delighted that, in the Open University’s 50th anniversary year, Tim is to become its new vice-chancellor. All those are good and positive things.

I believe that aspiration and austerity are incongruous bedfellows. If a Government of any description decide to implement an austerity programme over a long time, as this one and their predecessors have done, there is a danger of that aspiration diminishing. In our view, the Government’s decision to go down that road was not an inevitability—certainly not for the long period that it has continued. I shall not go over the arguments about whether they inherited a growing economy in 2010—we believe that they did, on the base of 2008—but whatever the case, it is concerning that the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights recently said that the Government’s policies of austerity have continued unabated, and that a third of children are now in poverty. Austerity is always a political and ideological choice in some sense or other, and that has been clear in the education system.

I am sad to say that we have seen about 1,000 Sure Start programmes cut from the early years; I genuinely mean that, because Sure Start was one of the great achievements of the Labour Government of 1997 to 2010. Children’s services, schools and further and higher education have also seen considerable cuts since the Conservative party came to power in 2010. The Minister and his colleagues in the Department, in their heart of hearts—I know he has one—know that this is not acceptable. After all, the Secretary of State only recently said that he had heard the concerns about funding loud
and clear, and last year it was reported that he was trying to squeeze more money out of the Treasury. However, the Government took £3.5 billion out of the capital spend at the last Budget, and so far the Treasury—although we await a spending review, of course—has only offered schools £400 million, in October 2018. That is thin gruel indeed.

To summarise, those cuts, along with the impact of the public sector pay freeze and then the cap, have created a serious problem in teacher recruitment and retention. The hon. Member for Hendon referred to the importance of teachers. There have been inevitable consequences. The Government have missed the teacher recruitment and retention target for five years, and in the past two years, more teachers have left the profession than have joined it. The hon. Gentleman referred to that in the House, when he said:

“Under this Government, the number of teachers has not kept pace with increasing pupil numbers.”—[Official Report, 29 November 2018; Vol. 650, c. 482.] I have a question for the Minister: how can we expect schoolchildren to aspire in the way that the hon. Gentleman talked about when there are not enough teachers to encourage them?

On top of that, we have the Government’s commitment to T-levels. The hon. Gentleman talked about their importance, and I agree with him. We share the long-standing concerns of Lord Sainsbury and support the recommendations of the skills plan that was drawn up and presented to the Government, which the Government approved; my friend, the principal of Blackpool and The Fylde College, Bev Robinson, had a considerable part in that plan. Despite all those things, schools and colleges are still unable to deliver at a secondary level the high-quality education that people deserve, because they simply do not have the funding to make ends meet.

The aim, of course, is to expand and attract the coverage of vocational education schools to the secondary sector, which is laudable, but the question is the same. The Government have talked about the subjects and standards that they want to roll out for T-levels, but as to who will actually teach them, there has barely been a peep. Maybe there will be a peep today—I do not know. Are there going to be existing secondary school teachers? Are they FE college lecturers, or associates, or other people entirely? If the Government are serious about standards that they want to roll out for T-levels, but as to who will actually teach them, there has barely been a peep. Maybe there will be a peep today—I do not know. Are there going to be existing secondary school teachers? Are they FE college lecturers, or associates, or other people entirely? If the Government are serious about T-levels being an ecosystem and not another shiny brand that goes the way of other initiatives, they really must focus on them and not simply spend a quarter of a million pounds on a T-level logo.

Those are important issues. Aspiration, of course, can be hugely developed by teachers, but there is so much more that we can do to unlock the innate inquisitiveness, interest and ambition of young people as they enter secondary education. That transition from primary to secondary, as they approach puberty, in schools where they may have left their primary school friends behind, is often very challenging, not least for young people with special educational needs and disabilities, as the hon. Member for Hendon said. That is why the Sutton Trust and others have said over the years that we need earlier interventions and encounters to play a vital role in improving that aspiration. As I said, I recently argued at the Bridge Group and at this year’s Annual Apprenticeship Conference that that is as relevant to achieving wider social mobility in the vocational and technical sphere as it is in the academic.

I believe we should be looking at sustained and dedicated programmes with schools, for children at a much earlier age, and for particular social and ethnic groupings. I believe that approach is likely to yield much better results than many of the current interventions, late in secondary school, where universities will spend tens of millions of pounds but sometimes, arguably, only strengthen offers and representations from some young people who are likely to have gone to there in substantial numbers anyway.

Earlier this week, in the House of Lords, I was privileged to be present at the launch of a new initiative by the National Education Opportunities Network. Graeme Atherton, who founded NEON in 2012 and has directed it since then, was launching its initiative to improve access for white students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Some 10 new HE provider initiatives are being brought together to better support that group, which is one of the least able and likely, from a secondary background, to attend higher education. It is about raising horizons and expectations, not about fixing pupils’ future career patterns at the age of 10. However, I believe the Government urgently need to look at how that integrates with their careers advice strategy—focusing on what happens in individual areas and the way in which Labour, as a party in government, would make more sense of the fractured and fragmented system of information, advice and guidance that we currently have at secondary level, which we believe is an important consideration. I and my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner)—our shadow Education Secretary—were at a roundtable with stakeholders only this week, discussing how that work might go forward. The Office for Students also has an important role in this area, and I am pleased that it is encouraging collaborative outreach programmes such as those that I have described.

We have been saying for some time that, in a secondary system in which students in schools, FE and sixth-form colleges gain their all-important A-levels or other qualifications at around the age of 18, there must be a robust, independent and wide-ranging review of admissions processes to higher education. That review should focus on a range of things, but particularly the unconditional offers to students of that age that have exploded in recent times, which some have said put those from disadvantaged backgrounds at a key handicap. That is why we believe there is a case for post-qualification admissions, and we were interested to see that the Government have recently asked the OfS to conduct such an inquiry.

The latest OECD international survey on teaching and learning does not, for us in England, make for great reading. England has the world’s eighth-biggest problem with secondary school teacher shortages and the third-highest level of shortages in Europe. For a long time, our party has called for a laser-like focus on the problem of teacher workload; across the continent, secondary school teachers work 37.5 hours a week on average, but in England, that figure is about 47 hours. The question is how much of that is actual teaching, as opposed to paper or virtual bureaucracy. In an environment that leaves many feeling like the proverbial mouse on the treadmill, how are those teachers going to communicate ambition? The digital world and the fourth industrial revolution are all moving ahead at an
incandescent pace, and teachers are an absolutely vital element in taking that forward, whether in colleges or schools.

We have 600,000 young people in the category of NEETs—those not in education, employment or training. The Government tell us that that is a stable figure, but it should not be stable; we should be moving on, and I do not see where the Government are taking that issue at the moment. Perhaps the Minister would like to enlighten us.

The Timpson review, which the Government have received, points out that excluded pupils are more likely to already be disadvantaged by class, income, special educational needs or disabilities, with certain ethnic minority groups at a higher risk. Those are the students most in need of support. “Newsnight” recently uncovered more than 1,500 children with SENs or disabilities who are without a school place in England, which only emphasises the problems that Edward Timpson—a respected former Conservative MP and Education Minister—sought to address. The issue of off-rolling needs to be a priority.

The situation, as I say, puts aspiration at serious risk. Right hon. and hon. Members may be familiar with the House of Lords report on the future of seaside towns and cities by my noble Friend the Lord Bassam. That report found that significantly fewer young people from seaside towns and coastal communities can access higher education than those in other parts of England, and that since 2010, there has been a 27% decline in the number of those young people accessing HE. That is another important issue; the Government have identified opportunity access areas, one of which has been Blackpool, but those need to be dealt with more expansively and progressively. The Government’s disappointingly tepid response to the excellent Lords commission illustrates the urgent need to plug this in as a priority for social mobility and economic progress. Many seaside towns suffer from low educational attainment, and local economies then suffer due to skills shortages. These are obviously areas where educational aspiration needs to rank high, and I hope the Minister will consider his Department’s response to that report.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) has spoken in the House about last year’s BBC report that found that malnourished pupils in poorer areas were filling their pockets with food from school canteens due to poverty. My colleague and hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), the shadow public health Minister, has also raised the issue of food at school, school meals, and the gaps through which pupils will fall. As any teacher will tell us, they cannot teach children properly if those children are starving, let alone encourage aspiration.

The hon. Member for Hendon talked about lifelong learning; we agree with him entirely. Of course, people can have second and third chances if they have failures at secondary level, but the whole process needs to reflect that. That is one of the things that we are trying to do through the Lifelong Learning Commission that we have set up, which is looking at these issues. The hon. Gentleman, however, has given us a great deal of food for thought—the Minister especially, I hope. We await his response.
support schools to achieve that aim. It is right that we aim to provide the best possible education and therefore more opportunities for young people.

Getting the fundamentals right at an early age is vital for a pupil’s success at secondary school and in later life. Children who are reading well by the age of five are six times more likely than their peers to be on track by age 11 in reading and, counterintuitively, 11 times more likely to be on track in mathematics. Ensuring that all pupils in England’s schools are taught to read effectively has been central to our reforms, and we are now beginning to see the fruits of that work. By the end of year 1, most children should be able to decode simple words using phonics and, once they can do that, they can focus on their wider reading skills and develop a love and habit of reading. In England, phonics performance has significantly improved since we introduced the phonics screening check in 2012. At that time, just 58% of six-year-olds correctly read at least 32 out of the 40 words in the check. In 2018, that figure was 82%.

We can see how that work is having an impact. In 2016, England achieved its highest ever score in the reading ability of nine-year-olds, moving from joint 10th to joint 8th in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study rankings. That follows our greater focus on reading in the primary curriculum and a particular focus on phonics. Continuing improvement in reading ability should mean that more children arrive in secondary school able to access the curriculum and with a higher level of literacy than their predecessors.

Maths, science and computing are also fundamental to raising aspirations. We have funded 35 maths hubs to spread evidence-based approaches to maths teaching through the teaching for mastery programme. An investment of £76 million will expand the programme to reach 11,000 primary and secondary schools by 2023. To encourage more pupils to consider level 3 mathematics qualifications and to continue the rise we have seen in A-level entries over the past eight years, we have launched the advanced mathematics support programme, giving schools an extra £600 a year for each additional pupil taking maths or further maths A-level.

For the good of our economy, we need more young people to pursue degrees and careers in the sciences, including computer science. We have already seen excellent progress, with entries to STEM A-levels increasing by 23% since 2010. We have also launched a four-year computing programme supported by £84 million of funding. That includes a national centre for computing education, at least 40 hubs providing training to schools and a continuing professional development programme to train up to 8,000 secondary teachers without a post-A level qualification in computing.

My hon. Friend talked a lot about careers advice. He is right that if young people are to raise their aspirations and capitalise on the opportunities available to them, they need good careers guidance. In December 2017, the Government published our careers strategy, setting out proposals to improve the quality and coverage of careers advice in schools and to give more aspirational careers advice for young people. The strategy identifies how the worlds of work and education can come together to support young people, using the Gatsby benchmarks, to which he referred. They are based on rigorous national and international research and are the gold standard for careers provision in England. As part of meeting the Gatsby benchmarks, schools should make sure that students understand the full range of education and training opportunities available to them; that they feel able to apply to further and higher education and apprenticeships helps to raise aspiration and allows young people to make the right choices for them.

Information on education or training options provided by schools at key transition points too often fails to correct, or even reinforce, the impression that technical and professional education and apprenticeships are second best to academic study. My hon. Friend is concerned about that, and we share that concern. A new law, introduced in January 2018—commonly known as the Baker clause—requires all secondary schools and academies to open their doors to university technical colleges, FE colleges and apprenticeship providers. That will give all young people a better understanding of the qualifications, courses and subjects available at key transition points.

Gordon Marsden: The Minister knows that we strongly welcome the Baker clause. There are anecdotal accounts about how successful or otherwise it has been so far. Does the Department have any statistics on how the Baker reforms have impacted on that area as of yet?

Nick Gibb: I do not have those figures to hand, so I will write to the hon. Gentleman when and if we have those statistics. We are as concerned about the issue as he is.

We expect to see schools setting up careers events, assemblies and options evenings so that providers can talk to pupils about what they offer and what it is like to learn in a different environment. The evidence is clear that sustained and varied contacts with mentors, coaches, employer networks, FE colleges, universities, alumni or other high-achieving individuals can motivate pupils to think beyond their immediate experiences, encouraging them to consider a broader and more ambitious range of future education and career options.

Activities involving employers, such as careers insights, mentoring, work tasters and work experience are important in giving young people the skills they need to succeed. Such interactions help open young people’s eyes to choices and opportunities, raise aspirations and prepare them for the world of work. As such, we want to create quality interactions between schools and businesses. The careers statutory guidance makes it clear that schools should offer work placements, work experience and other employer-based activities as part of their careers strategies for pupils in year 8 to year 13. Secondary schools will be expected to provide pupils with at least one meaningful interaction with employers per pupil per year, with a particular focus on STEM employers.

With an expanded role, the Careers & Enterprise Company, which was established in 2014, works to link schools with employers, making sure that every young person has access to inspiring encounters with the world of work, including work experience and other employer-based activities. It does that through its enterprise adviser network, which is delivered in partnership with local enterprise partnerships, providing information tailored to local needs and the local labour market. The network operates in all 38 local enterprise partnership areas and has grown rapidly. More than 2,000 business volunteers have been mobilised to work with schools and colleges
on their careers strategies through the enterprise adviser network, and participants have reported a 50% increase in employer encounters for pupils. That partially answers the question raised by the hon. Gentleman, but we will come back to him with a fuller answer.

Through its work, the Careers & Enterprise Company has identified and is targeting those areas where additional provision is most needed. It is funding work during 2019-20 to test new approaches and produce resources to improve careers information, advice and guidance for individuals who are disadvantaged, including those with special educational needs and disabilities, looked-after children and those from minority ethnic groups.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon referred in particular to children in care. Last Monday, we published our children in need review. He also referred to the post-16 qualification review and expressed his view about BTECs. That consultation opened on 19 March 2019 and closed on 10 June 2019. We will respond in due course, and the views that he has expressed today will be taken into account as part of that review process.

Since 2010, the Government have introduced a range of reforms with the sole focus of raising standards. I have set out those standards in relation to secondary education and highlighted how those reforms have been complemented by a range of targeted programmes to support and develop teachers’ practice and to provide timely and effective careers advice for students.

3.49 pm  

Dr Offord: We have certainly had a good opportunity to discuss the issue. Given the nature of today’s debate, I did not want to intervene on either the Opposition or Government Front Bencher. However, I will raise a few issues.

The Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), mentioned young carers, which is a very important aspect that is often overlooked. They are a hidden problem within the education system, and it is not always possible for teachers or other school staff to be aware of the requirements being levied on young pupils through disability or social problems experienced by their parents. We certainly need to take their responsibilities at home into account, particularly with regard to their attainment and aspirational opportunities.

The hon. Gentleman spoke particularly about teachers. However, I discussed the influence of not only the teaching establishment but external education providers, such as the Duke of Edinburgh scheme. It is not just about the number and remuneration of teachers. I disagree profoundly with the Labour party’s recent policy of opposing SATs and their commitment to abolish them. That would be a retrograde step. Parents need the opportunity to gauge a school’s progress and understand how their children’s education is being advanced.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the 600,000 NEETs, which he said has been a stubborn figure that has not moved. That is certainly another area that I would like to look at, and I encourage the Government to do likewise. The Local Government Association should take the lead when it comes to both NEETs and young carers. The Local Government Act 2000 allows local authorities to do anything within their social, environmental and wellbeing powers to address problems in their local areas. This is a particular problem, not only in rural areas but in coastal constituencies, and local authorities are best able to address it.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned a 27% decline in access to higher education among coastal communities. We should be careful with statistics—I certainly have been very careful with the ones that I have used today—because it could simply be that those people have gone into forms of education and training other than higher education. Indeed, they may even have gone into employment of their own accord, such as self-employment.

To address some of the Minister’s comments, I have become a great fan of the EBacc system. Making choices about A-levels at a younger age—often 15 or even younger—is not always the best option. When I visited Middlesex University I was told that when pupils are asked whether they want to be a doctor or surgeon most of them say, “No way! Why would I want to do that?” However, when they are asked questions such as whether they want to work with people, they are more likely to say that they would. That can be extended to considering other opportunities. Whether somebody ultimately engages in medicine and becomes a surgeon or looks at other areas, offering an occupation rather than an opportunity at a young age is the wrong approach.

The Minister and I have previously discussed reading, which he is as passionate about as I am. I know that he reads every day before he goes to sleep, and I read every day, on the tube and whenever I can. I am very encouraged by the statistics that he mentioned about reading ability. For me, reading has become a lifelong passion. It is my mother teaching me to read, as well as my education, that has led to lifelong learning. That has all come from reading, so it can only be good.

Finally, the Minister mentioned the Baker clause, which is very welcome, and the 23% increase in the number of STEM subjects at A-level. I have certainly seen that in schools in my constituency, including Copthall School for girls, which I have now mentioned on two occasions in this place.

Action has been taken by the Government and progress has been made, but raising aspiration cannot be achieved simply by Government. I mentioned the Local Government Association, and the Opposition spokesman mentioned teachers. Parents and relatives also have a responsibility to ensure aspiration in their children by providing guidance and encouragement along their pathway through life. Through a collaboration of all those different influences, we can achieve higher rates of aspiration, and make our country an even better place.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered raising aspiration in secondary education.

3.55 pm  

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 24 June 2019

[SIR GEORGE HOWARTH IN THE CHAIR]

Unsustainable Packaging

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 14 May 2019, on Plastic food and drink packaging, HC 2080, and written evidence to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on Plastic food and drink packaging, reported to the House on 8 May, 14 May, 21 May and 12 June 2019, HC 2080.]

4.30 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered e-petition 232684 relating to unsustainable packaging.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir George.

I welcome both Front-Bench spokespeople: my good friend and neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), and the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. When I entered this place, he was the Minister responsible for cycling, and since then he has held a number of important positions. I am tempted to say that although we might be debating single-use plastics today, there is no such thing as a single-use Minister. I wish the Minister well when the recycling period comes round soon, and I wish both him and my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich success in their search for a solution to reusable packaging, which is a subject I am pleased to raise on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

Let me start by reading the petition:

“Ban the use of all non-recyclable and unsustainable food packaging. Today the Earth is at a crisis point due to our plastic consumption, and as a result, people in the UK are more willing to recycle but we can’t get away from the vast amounts of waste vacuum pack plastic, to name a few. The British public WANTS to recycle and we can’t get away from the vast amounts of waste plastic that poorly designed packaging creates—appoint people to design alternatives and the UK will thank you!”

What an uplifting petition. The sentiment behind it speaks for itself. It has been signed by 247,048 people—nearly a quarter of a million people—illustrating the strength of feeling. That includes nearly 1,000 people from my Cambridge constituency, where this is a matter of great interest and concern. It is clear that the public mood about packaging, whether it goes to landfill or pollutes our oceans and rivers, has changed over the past few years. We have woken up. There is genuine public recognition of the climate crisis and concern about the natural destruction caused by non-recyclable waste.

Over 14 million of us watched Sir David Attenborough’s “Blue Planet II”, which revealed the impact waste is having on our seas and wildlife. Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall’s “War on Plastic” found UK plastic waste abandoned all the way in Malaysia.

And we have seen regular showings of those programmes, as they are so convincing and powerful. I suspect in Cambridge they are rewatched on a regular basis already.

Attenborough calls plastic waste an “unfolding catastrophe”, and, sadly, the evidence backs that up. A report from charities Tearfund, Fauna and Flora International, and WasteAid has warned of a public health emergency, claiming that between 400,000 and 1 million people die each year because of preventable diseases linked to mismanaged plastic waste in developing countries. These diseases include diarrhoea, malaria and cancer, all of which researchers have linked to plastic waste building up near people’s homes or being burned, which can result in damaging fumes.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I am pleased that in my local authority of Lewisham, recycling rates have rapidly increased in recent years and that there will be a consultation looking at continuing barriers to recycling in the area. I am also aware that many local authorities find it difficult to find solutions for certain types of black and low-grade plastic. Does my hon. Friend agree that if the Government are to reach their stated target of eliminating plastic waste by 2042, the Minister would need to better regulate the type of plastic businesses are using and to do more to establish suitable sites for recycling?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which I will come on to and which I suspect will be brought out in the wider debate. The black plastic issue is very real, and we need to ensure that our recycling systems are consistent across the whole country and can deal with these more difficult issues.

To return to the international significance of where our waste sometimes ends up, the reports I referred to suggest that one person dies every 30 seconds because of diseases caused by plastic pollution in developing countries. Such a statistic brings home how significant this is. What we do in our local recycling has global consequences. It is not simply waste in the United Kingdom that we must consider, and our ability to recycle.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing the debate. He is of about the same vintage as I am, so he will remember fish and chips in newspaper. Does he welcome the commitment made by some chip shops and fast food outlets to focus on paper rather than plastic? That should be praised. Does he also agree that there must be more focus on packaging for online businesses and they...
should work with the Royal Mail to determine what level of packaging will protect goods, as well as the environment? Chip shops and fast food outlets are doing their bit, but more can be done with the Royal Mail and online packaging.

Daniel Zeichner: We are already diverting into a range of issues, and I will mention some examples. The hon. Gentleman gets there first on fish and chips; I am of an age that I can remember fish and chips in newspaper, so I agree with him on that. The point about the Royal Mail is not one I intended to make, so he has added an important point to the discussion.

To get back to the wider issues, it is clear to me that public pressure for action on all these issues is growing. We saw from the Extinction Rebellion protests, which have happened nationwide and are strongly supported in Cambridge, that these issues have seized the public policy agenda. The school climate strikes, which I found magnificent, uplifting and inspired, show that the next generation demands change. I am sure we all have examples in our local areas. Last Friday, I was at the Spinney Primary School in Cambridge, and I was impressed not only by the quality of the questions the young people asked but by the fact that they had held an “empathy for earth” day a week or two before, and one could see the young people’s enthusiasm.

We can see the public’s desire for meaningful change. The question is, what can we do? One area that we can start with is the food we eat. When options are given to people to avoid non-recyclable packaging, they can be popular. There are good examples of that, which we have begun to touch on.

I thank the Petitions Committee staff for their excellent work surveying more than 20,000 people on their attitudes to food packaging. For fruits and vegetables, such as bananas, apples, potatoes and onions, more than 99% of respondents said that, given the option, they would choose to buy the items without plastic packaging—that is, almost everybody. A large majority said that they would buy bread without plastic packaging—94.6%—whereas 94.9% said they would buy breakfast cereal without it, and 97.1% said they would buy nuts and dried fruit. Nearly 80% said they would choose to buy meat or fish without plastic packaging, so there is considerable public appetite for change. I will come to some issues around that later.

Last Friday, I welcomed the Petitions Committee engagement team—I thank those involved for their work—to Cambridge. We held a roundtable discussion with various organisations that are working hard to improve sustainability in how we eat and live our lives. In that discussion I heard from owners of sustainable shops, cafés and businesses, such as BeeBee Wraps, the organic reusable food wraps business; Cambridge Carbon Footprint, which promotes sustainable living, local resources and services; and Cambridge Sustainable Food, which focuses on partnerships, projects and campaigns that capture the imagination and increase the sustainability of local eating.

That was an illuminating discussion, and many complex issues arose. For example, inventing new types of potentially sustainable packaging seems to be easier than putting in place the infrastructure and processes to deal with them. There was a concern about the proliferation of new so-called sustainable packaging products and different recycling schemes. Jacky Sutton-Adam described the situation, saying

“we’ve broken all our eggs into a bowl, mixed them up but haven’t made the omelette yet.”

While the Government ought to be investing more in solutions and incentivising people to try new things, Irina Ankudinova and others believed that manufacturers should be required to show that a system was in place to deal with the waste before new packaging products were brought to the market.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about the packaging surrounding the goods we buy, but there are also the goods themselves. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the prevention of plastic waste, I note that we have weaned ourselves off natural products and fibres and on to plasticised ones. Many of our clothes and carpets are polypropylene. We are wrapping plastic in plastic, and that is a real concern. Does he agree that we need to look at the big picture and have a shift back toward both more natural packaging and more natural fibres within the packaging?

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who makes a powerful point; I will touch on it a little later, but I suspect that others will want to amplify it further. When I look around the world, there are other countries that have perhaps not gone so far down this path, and some of their lifestyles are very attractive—dare I say it, but even some European lifestyles are very attractive indeed.

On Friday, I was also able to visit the Cambridge Cheese Company, which cycles its cheese deliveries around the city and presents gifts in recycled wooden cheese boxes. I am grateful to a very helpful assistant in its shop, Jade Tiger Thomas, who showed me the amazing aforementioned BeeBee wraps and explained a scheme that allows customers to bring their own Tupperware or reusable boxes to carry cheese home, and reusable jars for olives and deli items. The company is a long-established Cambridge gem. Many hon. Members find themselves in Cambridge from time to time, and I thoroughly recommend that they pay it a visit.

This is not an entirely new phenomenon. A long time ago, when I was a student in Cambridge, I remember going to the legendary Arjuna Wholefoods and buying spices measured into brown paper bags. That was happening long before it became fashionable, and Arjuna’s has proved itself a long-term Cambridge institution committed to sustainability and reducing food waste.

Buying food without throwaway packaging is becoming increasingly popular across the country. At the start of the month, Waitrose began a trial in its Oxford Botley Road store of a new “Unpacked” model, with a dedicated refillable zone of products from wine to cereals, frozen pick and mix and a borrow a box scheme. It also has refillable cleaning products and sells plants and flowers without plastic. Most of us have probably read the stories in the newspapers. It is too early to have solid statistics on the success of the trial, but Waitrose tells me that the reaction on social media to the announcement
of the trial was 97% positive and the store sold out of some products within the first week of the trial. I was told that customers have bought into the concept readily—they arrive with their own containers ready to fill with the loose cereals, pasta, fish and more. This started to happen within just a few hours of us announcing the trial”.

That put me in mind of happy times past in my life, in places such as Venice, where the wine shops allow people to take bottles to be refilled on a regular basis. Now, perhaps, we can extend that to washing-up liquid, even if it is slightly less enticing.

When these schemes are well advertised and communicated and efforts are made to help people to get acquainted with new ideas, such as the borrow a box scheme for those who may have been unaware or do not have their own, behaviour and culture change are possible. That can also be done on a smaller scale: the University of Sheffield students’ union has its own Zero Waste Shop, which sells a huge range of spices, herbs, grains, legumes, dried fruits and nuts by weight, so people can buy as much or as little as they need. Customers simply bring their own container, buy one from the shop or use one of the recyclable paper bags.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning the University of Sheffield students’ union Zero Waste Shop. That is a well-established initiative, and I join him in celebrating the groundbreaking work that it has been doing for some time now.

Will my hon. Friend also celebrate the work of the university’s Grantham Centre for Sustainable Futures, which is looking at a range of approaches to eliminating plastic waste, recognising that, while we should be doing everything possible to minimise the use of single-use plastics, there will be some areas in which that is difficult? For example, we need to explore whether there is an opportunity to reuse single-use plastics currently used by medics. Similarly, the carbon emissions of recycling single-use plastic bottles could be more damaging than developing reuse. Does he agree that those areas are the innovations we should be looking at?

Daniel Zeichner: True to form, my hon. Friend raises the more profound points of the debate. Those are exactly the trade-offs that must be considered in depth and detail, and I will come on to some of them in a moment. He makes a powerful point that sometimes, the more obvious routes to doing the right thing might not have the consequences that one understood them to be liable to have.

I suspect the argument I am making is to encourage the zeal of the public to embark on this path, and the conclusion I will draw at the end is that they must be given help to ensure that they are indeed achieving the good outcomes that they are intending to achieve. This is a subject littered with potentially difficult trade-offs, and I am sure both Front-Bench speakers will refer those in the debate.

I will complete my tour of some of the great initiatives—

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab) rose—

Daniel Zeichner: Or perhaps others might help me in that.
which enables that meat to last a lot longer. If you did not have it in that pack, that meat might last three days. If you have it in a really good sealable pack, it will last 10 days. You start then thinking about what consumers want, reducing food waste and the fundamental economic value of that piece of meat. You need to think about it in terms of the whole product."

Having read through the evidence, that message comes through loud and clear. The whole product and the whole life-cycle analysis are key. We must recognise that as we continue our efforts to reduce non-recyclable packaging. There is so much we can do, but it is realistic to admit that we cannot eradicate its use completely overnight.

However, we must not lose our ambition. The Royal Society of Chemistry, based in Cambridge, highlighted in evidence to the inquiry that, although bio-derived and biodegradable plastics will play a role in addressing the challenges caused by conventional plastic waste, they should not be used to legitimise a throwaway culture; they are not necessarily more environmentally benign than conventional plastics; and their impact as a replacement for conventional plastics must be considered on a life-cycle basis. This suggests that despite technological advancement, cultural awareness and change are still crucial. The UK cannot absolve itself of responsibility for mass corporate and personal behaviour change just because technology is advancing.

At the roundtable in Cambridge last week, Seigo Robinson and others were concerned that reducing non-recyclable plastic packaging was not necessarily compatible with the drive to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. For example, it was said that “carting around loads of refillable jam jars” would use “loads of CO₂”; we may not have been precise or measurable on this occasion, but hon. Members will get the point. Alternatives to plastic packaging, such as paper, steel, wood and glass, could sadly have far worse carbon footprints. People said that plastic pollution of the oceans and carbon emissions needed to go hand in hand, and argued that recycling ought to be a last resort; people should look at using reusable containers for many years before thinking about the need for recycling.

Continuing my spirit of generosity towards the Government—I have no idea why I am in this generous mood, but I am—

**Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): He is a generous Minister.

**Daniel Zeichner**: Perhaps, and perhaps I have some sympathy with the Government’s current travails. However, it is fair to say that we have seen progress. The Government have looked at banning plastic straws, drink stirrers and plastic cotton buds, but I fear that they have so far been rather reluctant to introduce the fiscal measures that we now know do work: The plastic bag charge was discussed over many years, and it has now taken 15 billion plastic bags out of circulation. Imagine what proper fiscal incentives and taxes could do to change the way our society considers waste and how committed we all are to recycling.

The drink stirrer announcement grabbed headlines, but we need to seize this moment to make the “rapid”, “unprecedented” and “far-reaching” transitions that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report called for in October. In evidence to the EFRA Committee’s inquiry, the Green Alliance recommended moving away from piecemeal action and approaching plastic packaging and resource use in general in a much more systemic way. This means viewing plastic as just one resource among many used in our economy, all of which have environmental impacts of some sort.

**Jim Shannon**: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the general public need to have a good look at how they perceive foods? I am always aware of this issue when it comes to the general public buying potatoes. What they want to see in Asda, Tesco and all the big supermarkets is a nice wee carton of half a dozen potatoes, washed, cleaned and ready for the pot. Potatoes as I and others in the Chamber know them come in a half a hundredweight bag bought from the farmer. You know something? That is real potatoes.

**Daniel Zeichner**: I am grateful for the intervention, but I think it leads us into a slightly broader discussion about people’s view of the world. I have to say that I rather hanker after a less homogenised culture in general. In a discussion we had last week, I recalled a time when we respected the seasons. We did not expect peppers to be available for 365 days a year, which perhaps gave us something to look forward to. There is something in the human spirit that we could look into. However, the supermarkets will say that it is what people want. That is the dilemma that we face.

Returning to the Green Alliance—I am on the way home from the supermarket—its overall recommendation is, to coin a phrase, to go back to basics: reduce the amount of unnecessary plastics used, reduce dangerous chemical use and rationalise the number of polymer types that go into plastic production to improve recycling, which is really important. That is all while promoting systems for reuse and ensuring that we use recyclable and recycled materials. It argues that this requires a more strategic approach to infrastructure, not simply leaving it to the market. I suspect this is where some of the political disagreements may emerge. However, I very much agree. I wish the Government would accept that challenge and develop a framework that advocates system change.

As the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton said when chairing the inquiry, reducing non-recyclable waste “is going to be quite difficult to do...but it is how far we go and how wide we go...it is down to the big retailer as well as the consumer. It is going to be an interesting education for all of us”.

I very much agree. This is the point: we must take people with us, rather than being punitive, which is why education and making change easy for people are crucial. Essentially, if we make it too much of a faff for people to change their behaviour, people will be turned off and will not do it.

I believe that people want to do the right thing—to be environmentally conscious and to live sustainably—but time and resources dictate that we have to make this the easy choice, in a socially just way, and not simply for those who can afford the time or money to change their consumption habits. I hope the Minister will tell us how the Government might go about making this happen.
4.56 pm

**Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for securing this timely debate and for his favourable quoting of me as Chair of the Select Committee. We are very much on the same page: I think we have to reduce plastics, and we have to get more compostable plastics, but we also have to be quite sensible in how we go about that. Let us use some carrots as well as sticks to try to persuade people to change their attitudes. I very much welcome the debate, which comes on the back of the petition on stopping the use of non-recyclable, unsustainable food packaging.

I would be told off by my Committee Clerks, if they were here, if I went into too much detail of what I thought the Committee might or might not decide after taking our evidence. However, naturally, I will go through the evidence that we have taken so far. We have really seen that we can actually reduce a great deal of the plastics we use. Whether they are recyclable or not, do we actually need the amount of plastic that we have? Some people here are younger than others, but most of us have grown up gradually using more and more plastic. I still remember glass bottles and things like that, which were recyclable and came with a deposit on them—Corona bottles and the like. I used to go around collecting them as a boy, especially if they washed up in the river, because I could then get the deposit back. All these things are useful, because people not only returned them but they collected them as well.

I was at an event last week where Water UK suggested having more fountains, and making sure that we carried a reusable water bottle around with us. Millions and billions of plastic bottles are used for mineral water. We probably have some of the best tap water in the world. Do we need all this bottled water? It has become a real point. The House could of course lead by having bottled water, because it needs to feed those machines. It is a dilemma: the more we take plastic out of the system, the more recycling becomes too expensive to do. That is something we have to think about.

**Mrs Main:** On the recycling of bottles, I took the APPG to the Veolia recycling plant in Dagenham. A problem that we have is that a lot of plastic cannot be used more than once. That plant had empty machines because it was a long time ago that we had lunch—but I think the hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. We can recycle plastics, but if we recycle a mix of different plastics, we find that we get a very low-grade reusable plastic. If compostable plastics are mixed with the non-compostable, we have another problem. Everything in life is not simple; as with every inquiry that one does, the more one looks into the issue, the more complicated it becomes. I am a practical farmer, and the one thing that I want to see is that we really do good by reducing the amount of plastic, having properly compostable plastics and doing something that actually works. We have to be careful. Governments of all colours will naturally say, “Let’s tick this box. We’ve recycled this; we’ve done this; we’ve done that.” But does it actually work? Does it improve the environment? That is the issue.

Moving on to compostable plastics, we have to be certain that they will decompose properly so that the molecules break down and we can grow plants in our garden or put the material on to our fields and grow our crops and it does not leave tiny little particles of plastic that has not broken down. Most of it will compost, but it has to be composted in a certain way. If I put the beaker that I have with me in the Chamber in my garden with a whole load of other beakers and leave them together, that will never decompose, or it will take a very long time to do so. If we mix it with garden waste and other organic materials and can get the temperature up to 60°, it will break down, probably within 12 weeks to six months, so that can be done. It will break right down, but as I said, it has to be done properly. We do not want the plastic in these beakers mixing with other plastic that is not compostable. That is why the collection of plastics and the recycling of them are vital. We have local government all over the country. I was in local government before I came to this place—and local authorities are fiercely independent, but of course we have lots of different ways of collecting and recycling and so on.

The Government will probably have to be braver on this issue and give stricter advice to local authorities on how they recycle and having a similar system across the country. For example, I do not have the patience that my wife has to sort things into every tiny little thing. I think that we need to make recycling a little bit
[Neil Parish]

more idiot-proof for people like me, dare I say. Do not smile like that, Minister. I was going to say something nice about you in a minute, but I may not now.

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. As a farmer, the hon. Gentleman should know that when you are in a hole, it is best to stop digging.

Neil Parish: Yes, I will carry on with my speech, Sir George; I apologise. On compostable plastic, we need to ensure much better public awareness. We also have to ensure that we collect the material separately and do not mix it with plastic that is not compostable.

I think that if we were to bring in a tax at the source, where plastics are made, that would raise the cost, but those plastics that were genuinely compostable could be made exempt or there could be a reduction in the amount of tax put on that particular plastic. That would ensure that the compostable plastics were more competitive in the marketplace.

The hon. Member for Cambridge rightly went into quite a lot of detail about what we actually need to wrap in plastic. When it comes to meat, fish and things that we want to keep for a long time, we can improve the shelf life by using plastic. We do not want to waste food; that is the last thing we want. We do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater, so we need to be a little careful. As I have said, we must ensure that we do not waste food. When it comes to those vacuum packs, let us ensure that it is those foods that require a longer life that we concentrate the plastics on.

Other hon. Members have made this point: do we really need potatoes, carrots, onions and all those things wrapped in plastic? Do individual bits of broccoli need to be wrapped in plastic? When we go to the supermarket, the food is almost pre-digested and pre-eaten. We wash our potatoes, carrots and all those things and then put them in plastic bags. That is all very convenient, but I was told as a boy, “You have to eat a peck of dirt before you die.” I think people would have a job to eat a peck of dirt today, because everything is washed so clean. Carrots, potatoes and all those root crops grow in the ground, believe it or not. They get soil on them, and a little bit of soil—all, I will not diverge from the subject too far, but there is iron in soil. All these things are part of life.

Without getting too romantic and reminiscing too much, we could look a lot more at how we used to eat our food. Not everything will work, and as I have said, we will still need some plastics, so let us make them compostable. Take cheese, for example. Does all of that need to be wrapped in plastic, so that it seems to be made of rubber, and delivered to us? We could have some really good flavoured cheese that is done in a more traditional way; perhaps we could take it home in some greaseproof paper or whatever. Do we need all the plastic and cardboard packaging that is used to package strawberries? For all these things, do we need it?

Another issue that we have not looked at is the glossy leaflet that we receive through the post. They are all plastic-coated. I do not think that the Select Committee will look at this in our inquiry, but when we start looking at something, we suddenly start looking at everything that arrives with different eyes. One of the agricultural merchants sent me a whole thing to do with cattle drenches and goodness knows what, and it was all in a very glossy leaflet, all plastic-coated. That is not necessary. In fact, if we use something that looks more old-fashioned, with old-fashioned print, and put it on some proper paper, instead of a plastic-coated leaflet, it might work a lot better than carrying on with more and more plastic.

Mrs Main: We have all become used to seeing huge bales of hay in fields covered in plastic shrink wrap. Does my hon. Friend have a view on that?

Neil Parish: If my hon. Friend could guarantee the weather, so that we did not have to wrap the silage because of the rain and could make it all into hay, we could do away with a lot of plastic. She is right that we could use less plastic.

My issue—I will get into trouble with some farmers now—is the amount of plastics in the fields used for growing crops. We are all chasing the early market. We put down more and more plastic, but I wonder whether that is right. The plastic used to wrap those silage bales needs to be properly recycled. I suspect that we could look at the type of materials used, to ensure that they are properly compostable. Of course, one has to be careful to ensure that the acids released in the fermentation of the silage do not dissolve the wrapper. I think that more can be done. Farmers will have to look at that quite seriously. I am sure that the Minister probably does not want to talk about that today, but the farming industry will have to look at that seriously.

I will not carry on talking all day—although I probably could. The hon. Member for Cambridge has brought a very important issue to the Chamber. The real way forward is for the Government, industry and consumers to look at everything we do—the way we live—and ask whether we can carry on with this lifestyle. Do we need as much plastic? Can the plastic we use be properly compostable? If it is not compostable, can we ensure that it is properly recycled? Can we ensure that we collect that plastic in a way that retains the value of the plastic for recycling, rather than turning it into a low-grade plastic?

We can do a lot more. The Government need to consider taxation. I am not a great lover of taxation, but we could tax the overuse of raw mineral plastic made from oil and move people on to compostable plastics. Let us ensure in the future that we use half as much plastic as we do now, and not less than that, that most of it will be compostable and that we genuinely recycle the rest. That way we can use it for good purposes, such as making plastic fencing stakes, which would last forever, rather than rot out. That would be a good use of plastic.

There are many ideas out there. I look forward to the Minister’s response, as well as that of the shadow Minister, who is a good member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. The Minister is making, and will make, an excellent Agriculture Minister.

5.13 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and the Petitions Committee for securing this important debate.
By 2050, some 34 billion tons of plastic will have been manufactured globally. The waste might be shipped around the world and will blight many countries—many of which do not use, distribute or test the waste, but host it. That is a wicked thing that some countries impose on others. It seems inexplicable that we have come to produce and rely on a material that is potentially detrimental to our future—but indeed we have. This material is allegedly cheaper to produce now than by recycling existing products. If it is subjected to fire, it will, in most circumstances, give off a potentially deadly cocktail of toxic gases, and if it is discarded in watercourses, it will continue to pollute our oceans. Neither of those outcomes is welcome.

The UK Government have confirmed that their strategy, as part of their new 25-year plan to improve the environment, aims to eliminate avoidable plastic waste—a worthy aspiration. Having spoken previously in debates on this subject, I am well aware of bans on microbeads, straws, stirrers and cotton buds, together with plastic bag charges and refill facilities for plastic bottles. I commend Scottish Water for its promotion of such facilities throughout towns in Scotland. Eventually, these measures will all have positive impacts on the environment.

Those actions alone are not enough and we need to do much more, but from that beginning I understand that the UK Government are consulting on proposals to incentivise producers and retailers to take responsibility for the environmental impacts of the packaging that they choose to use. Added to that, the Government have committed more than £60 million in funding for global research and to assist Commonwealth countries in preventing plastic from entering the oceans.

A constituent of mine recently highlighted to my office staff the fact that receptacles have been placed on Turnberry beach in South Ayrshire, into which the public can place plastic waste washed up on the shoreline. That is a good local initiative. I also commend the local rotary clubs in Ayrshire for their effective annual beach cleans. I am sure that that goes on all over the United Kingdom, and I commend the work of rotary clubs throughout the UK and Ireland. These beach cleans remove tonnes of potentially polluting plastic each year. Although I am not always there, I am happy to join them, when I can, on a Saturday morning.

I understand that another of the Government’s aims is to work with retailers to explore the introduction of plastic-free supermarket aisles. Of course, as has been mentioned in previous debates, other more traditional forms of packaging—such as glass bottles—might have a similar cost to the environment in their production and transport, even if disposal and recycling can be easier. As glass is heavier than plastic, transporting it carries a higher carbon footprint. As with all things, we need to strike a balance.

I want to commend a local initiative, whereby reusable glass milk bottles have been introduced by the Kerr family of South Corton farm near Ayr. Their customers secure glass bottles, which they take to the farm to get fresh milk for themselves straight from that wonderful dairy farm. They get the freshest milk and reduce the use of plastic bottles, which are so commonly used for the conveyance of milk.

In the meantime, I note in the media that Asda, like Waitrose, plans to make its packaging 100% recyclable by 2025, and is encouraging local primary school children, including those in Girvan in my constituency, to take part in a series of interactive activities to learn about plastic use and recycling.

The dangers of plastics are clearly being recognised by the younger generation. Pupils at Belmont Academy in Ayr have recently taken part in the “Full Cycle 2019” connected world challenge at Dunfries House in Cumnock. I am pleased to report that they received a pupils’ choice award—well done to them and their teachers.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman mentions that people are moving towards the use of milk bottles as opposed to plastic containers. There was an interesting article a couple of weeks ago—in fact, it was on television in the midlands—which showed that more and more people are going back to their local milkman, because they use bottles rather than plastic containers. Does he agree that that is a good thing?

Bill Grant: Yes, exactly; that is a good thing. Many if not all in this Chamber will remember the wee phrase on milk bottles: “Rinse and return.”

Mr Cunningham: I used to deliver them.

Bill Grant: Yes, it is a good step forward. It is a small step, but a step in the right direction.

The pupils’ choice award was won by the pupils for their innovative project on plastic pollution, and I commend them for their efforts. Let us hope that the politics of plastic proceeds with the same enthusiasm.

We must not fail our future generations. As has been mentioned, this might be one occasion when we should turn the clock back to the days of our parents and grandparents. They managed daily tasks, and to sustain themselves and their families, without the same reliance on plastic. The fish-and-chips wrapping of that era has been mentioned, and we all remember the days when fish and chips seemed to taste that wee bit better in yesterday’s newspaper.

Finally, will the Minister provide an update on the consultation that closed last month, and can he confirm that the introduction of a new plastic packaging tax in April 2022 is still on target? A quarter of a million signatories to the petition cannot be wrong, and they have to be listened to.

5.19 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George, and to participate in this timely debate. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the prevention of plastic waste, I must put it on the record that, as a society, we cannot turn back the clock. I recognise that there is nostalgia for days past, but I really believe that the public would struggle if we tried to get rid of plastic altogether. What we need is to minimise waste from plastic by reusing it wherever we can and ensuring that it is not a throwaway, disposal commodity.

We have got addicted to plastic—we even have chocolates with plastic toys inside. It is so important to slim down the plastic agenda, but we must recognise that some things need to be made of it; I really stress that point, because, if we are not careful, in our desire to take a
We, the countries of the modern age, have been the worst polluters. Our plastic piles up on shores or beaches and drifts around. That was the focus of David Attenborough’s wonderful “Blue Planet”: people may think that they can scoop up the floating bottles and the job is done, but the reality is that a lot of plastic has become a soup, which is very hard to remove. I would like to see more of our investment in international aid spent on clearing up that soup made from the plastic of years ago. I am all for improving the environmental impact that we are having now, but we cannot rebalance the scales without taking into account the damage that we have all done over the years.

We have become a throwaway society. We throw away clothes that may have been worn only once, which have been produced incredibly cheaply and are often wrapped massively in plastic when they come through the door. We are addicted to online retailing, which often comes with huge amounts of polystyrene around the more delicate items. We have to start looking at how we are shopping as consumers and at how we are living.

This is a massively important debate, but it can make you feel as if your head is going to fall off, because there are so many strands to the plastic story. I am keen to avoid a silo mentality. I applaud the petition for its genuine interest in packaging, but we must also look at the composition of packaging and help businesses to have a much better recycling rate. It seems perverse that in St Albans there are recycling boxes and cartons outside houses, yet businesses have to deal with the waste themselves. We need to incentivise big companies about their packaging and ensure that there is a market for it.

To my shame—although it is nothing to do with me—my constituency has one of the biggest waste tips for supposedly compostable and recyclable wood. The Appspond Lane site has been a disaster over the years because there is plasticised paint on most of the wood that is left there, so there is no market for it; it has sat there as a wet, rotting mountain that catches fire when it exceeds the allowed level. That means that we are kidding ourselves when we put packaging on our doorstep and think that it is being dealt with properly elsewhere.

The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) mentioned Tearfund, which I hope to do some work with in Bangladesh in September. From the work that I do in Bangladesh, I know that it has an awful lot of plastic packaging but does not have a good recycling industry. We have exported our waste, but not the technology for recycling. When the Department for International Development puts money into countries like that, I would like to see us doing more than trying to stop the tide of waste. There is so much legacy plastic—when we go to those countries, we see rivers, lakes and beaches polluted with it. We need to help countries to increase their recycling, but we also need to cut down our own waste. There is so much legacy plastic that we are seeing a crisis. We have to look at how we are living and how we are shopping as consumers and at how we are living.

I welcome today’s debate, which I think will be the first of many. We need to look at how we have got addicted to plastic. At the event that I mentioned, David Attenborough left us with the words that plastic is with us forever. Every time even the smallest bit gets thrown away, we have to remember that it will be there somewhere, and the fact that it may not land on our shores does not mean that it will not land on someone else’s.
I really hope that we will hear some joined-up thinking from the Minister today about weaning ourselves off plastic goods, including gratuitous plastic toys given as freetimes to small children with meals at certain restaurants, as well as polystyrene foam wraps from fish and chip shops or other outlets.

We have to wean ourselves off plastic, but we cannot expect young mums to do away with disposable nappies. I have met the Nappy Alliance, which is trying to get people to use less plasticised nappies, but there is a huge amount of plastic that we have welcomed into our lives because it stops leaks or protects against things. The amount of clingfilm that we use, some of which is putting gender-altering phthalates into the environment, has concerned me for years. That is why it is thought there has been a rise in the hermaphrodisation of fish, and so on.

Our contact with plastic is huge and in the future people will ask why on earth we did not realise quite how injurious this was, not only to the environment but to those people and animals and plants in the environment that suffer as a result of plastic toxicity. I hope that this debate is part of a joined-up debate, Minister, and that we will all be encouraged today by hearing about lots of different avenues that will be open to us. We should not just be picking up our plastic waste, but cutting off the stream.

5.30 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George.

The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) spoke about the mood of the public changing—he noted that—and this petition is a testament to that, as is the quality of the contributions to the debate today; that quality has really shown that change, as well. There has been a great deal of passion and commitment to real change shown by the speakers in this debate and I commend everyone who has taken part for that.

The hon. Gentleman also paid tribute to those programmes, such as “Blue Planet II”, that have brought these problems home to each one of us; indeed, they have brought them directly into our homes.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the impressive work of the Petitions Committee staff, with some 20,000 people having been surveyed. That is a huge number of people whose views we have taken into account and the survey has given us some incredibly useful statistics. I thank him for listing some of those statistics and looking at some of the Petitions Committee staff, with some 20,000 people having been surveyed; I will say more on the company later.

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The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) mentioned the excellent initiative of Scottish Water, which I would love to see being rolled out throughout the UK by different water companies. It involves installing free water fountains, like the Victorian fountains that were once so common everywhere. They are fountains for residents and visitors alike throughout Scotland, and it is a pleasure to see them after so many of the older, mainly Victorian water fountains fell out of favour.

The hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) quoted David Attenborough speaking of “the age of plastic”. She rightly pointed out that plastic was once very enthusiastically welcomed, but also spoke of the flipside of the “plastic curse”; she mentioned nurdles and microfibres and many other things that I have certainly become aware of through some of my beach clean-up days with the Wardie Bay beachwatch in my constituency. She also spoke of other very serious legacy issues for plastic. She called for the Government to address those and to commit to actions to deal with that “plastic soup”, which is a phrase that I think will stick forever in my memory: it is very unfortunate that we even have to think of such a thing.

The hon. Lady also called on us all to show joined-up thinking, saying that we should aim for that truly circular economy. She also mentioned clingfilm, so I should mention the fact that my mother still washes clingfilm and drapes it on the kitchen taps. She has done so for many years and was a very early recycler.

The phrase “horrors from the deep” took on another significance recently, when a plastic bag was found in the Mariana Trench, the deepest part of the world’s oceans, along with sweet wrappers of course. We also heard that “there ain’t no mountain high enough”. When 11,000 kg of rubbish, including plastic, was removed from Mount Everest. Still, plastic keeps fruit clean, right?

The hon. Member for Cambridge spoke of TV programmes that helped to create the increasing pressure for action. The recent disclosure that nations in other parts of the world are refusing to continue to accept waste from the UK, and plastic waste in particular, also brought that issue into the public consciousness with a bang. I am sure that many of us here muttered a wee profanity in relief as we realised that this news was

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) brought back happy memories for me of hunting for returnable bottles and exchanging the extra cash for sweets. I am afraid I also called for an end to Government box-ticking exercises, a proper appreciation of what is recyclable, and proper co-ordination between different local authorities. That issue exists in Scotland too, and I know that the Scottish Government are keen to try to iron out some of the differences in recycling approaches.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about the compostable cups that are now in use in Parliament. It is perhaps worth pointing out for the record that they are for commercial composting—they are not really for household composting—and the company that produces them also provides a collection service to enable that commercial composting to happen. I know that because the company’s HQ is located in my constituency; I will say more on the company later.

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being laid out clearly on the public agenda—hooray, indeed. But it must not just be a press story that is here today and gone tomorrow.

It was no surprise perhaps that we were foisting our problems on countries that we regard as “developing” while we think of ourselves as “developed”, which is to our shame; there is perhaps no surprise either that we are happy to leave it to someone else to clean up after us; and there is perhaps no surprise that we did not think about the consequences before we made the mess.

The sheer volume of waste that cannot be recycled and that represents a hazard to other life on this planet is as mind blowing as the scale of our idea that it can all simply be swept under the global carpet. The task of cleaning up this mess, and the job of getting some semblance of order back, is of similar measure to that of sending people to the moon after Kennedy made that declaration in Houston in 1962.

We need to have a similar belief in our ability to achieve. We need to think that it is not only necessary but within our reach to take action; that this action is not only possible but desirable. We have to set our collective human mind to the task of setting right what we have made wrong. I do not think that anyone has all the answers yet, but at least we have started asking the questions.

We need to clear the backlog of waste that we have created, but we also need to do more to stop creating the stuff in the first place. I find myself going backwards and forwards, between praising supermarkets—as some speakers have done, quite rightly, today for developing products and packaging that can be composted or recycled, or that are even biodegradable, which are moves in the right direction—to thinking that if those supermarkets spent a fraction of their advertising and promotion budgets on this issue, we might see some real differences.

Since each supermarket watches all the other supermarkets and switches at the smallest possible movement, smart supermarkets that find a way to market some real moves to sustainability will not only gain a commercial advantage, which they will keep, but trigger a chain reaction in the other supermarkets. It is good to hear that the first, somewhat tentative steps are being taken in that respect and that that opportunity is finally being grasped.

However, it is not enough simply to find ways to use a bit less packaging. Where packaging is desirable or necessary, we should make sure that it does not cost the future. We must make the packaging sustainable, recyclable and biodegradable—making it properly biodegradable would be even better.

In my constituency, there is a company called Vegware, which produces foodstuffs packaging that, as can be seen by looking at this cup, people might take for plastic, but it is not. Instead, it is made from plants and can be recycled with food waste, where it composes—commercial composting, yes, but that becomes nutrients for plants. That is a virtuous circle that is simple and rather beautiful.

Vegware has been in business only since 2006, but it has operational bases in the UK, the US, Australia and Hong Kong, and it distributes throughout Europe, the middle east, South America and the Caribbean. It has corporate clients the length of the UK and, indeed, in this very Parliament. It has demonstrated onsite composting at Dundee and Angus College that produces horticultural compost from waste in just two weeks. It is showing the way forward, and that is not unusual in Scotland, either. The Scottish Government are showing leadership within their restricted scope for movement.

I am delighted to see that the deposit return scheme is coming in Scotland. I have often wondered why there has been so much attention on plastic straws, important though that matter is, and not enough on plastic bottles—as the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee mentioned—especially when we can get compostable straws from Vegware, a company in my constituency that I might have mentioned previously.

Scotland’s recycling rates are high. More trees are being planted each year and communities up and down the country are taking action. I mentioned Wardie Bay beachwatch and I will also mention the fantastic Leithers Don’t Litter, a completely voluntary organisation that has been making a huge difference for years now to the Leith community with its clean-up days. I particularly pay tribute to Gerry and Zsuzsa Farrell, who have been utter champions in that regard.

Schoolchildren have become the environmental activists that our generation failed to be, and the future is brighter than it might have been as a result. But that is not enough; much more needs to be done. Governments need to go beyond strategies, plans and visions to some actual actions, and I will be delighted to see the Minister getting on with it.

5.41 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for his excellent speech introducing the debate. As he says, the public determination to deal with the scourge of plastic packaging is overwhelming, and MPs and the Government need to take heed of those concerns and act now.

I also thank all hon. Members who spoke and intervened, and I am delighted that there is a high level of agreement across parties on the issue. I will pick out a few points. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) said that any recycling solutions we introduce need to fit with local authority capabilities. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) mentioned that there is no point trying to prevent plastic pollution in this country if we do not manage to prevent it in other countries and in their oceans.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), in his substantial speech, made the strong point that we can reduce plastic packaging—that that is eminently achievable—but that we need to ensure that the correct plastics are treated in the correct way. He also made the case for a coherent national system, a case with which I very much agree. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) pointed out the importance of enabling communities to combat plastic litter. The hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) said that we need to recognise the difference between items for which plastic packaging is unnecessary and those for which it is a sensible solution, and the importance of ensuring that compostable plastic really is compostable.
The petition calls for an end to non-recyclable and unsustainable food packaging, and goes on to call for a 100% recycling rate. My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge made the point that it is not enough to call for packaging to be recyclable—it has actually to be recycled. Virtually every form of waste could be recycled if the public were able to separate it out, the local authorities were able to collect it, the plant were there to process it, and the manufacturers were willing to use the resulting recyclate rather than cheap raw materials. Some materials are clearly far more easily recycled than others, and when materials can be and are being recycled for packaging to be recyclable—it has actually to be recycled. Virtually every form of waste could be recycled to be a market, some incentivisation to use the recycled goods? Otherwise, they become a valueless commodity; they might be recycled but no one wants them.

Mrs Main: Thinking about my Appspendon Lane heap of wood, does the hon. Gentleman agree that there has to be a market, some incentivisation to use the recycled goods? Otherwise, they become a valueless commodity; they might be recycled but no one wants them.

Sandy Martin: The hon. Lady is exactly right. That is clearly an important part of the entire recycling cycle.

There is no point allowing manufacturers to claim that a package is recyclable when they know that the facilities do not exist, and even less so when the cost of doing so would be ridiculously prohibitive. For instance, it is theoretically possible to recycle the traditional crisp packet, but I believe it currently costs more to recycle it, taking into account the collection costs, than the original cost with the crisps in it. The Government’s strategy paper “Our Waste, Our Resources: A Strategy for England” acknowledges that to a certain extent, but it still refers to targets for making packaging recyclable, so my first ask of the Minister is whether the Government will measure recyclability in future by whether the material is actually recycled, or simply on the basis of a theoretical claim by industry?

My second ask of the Minister is whether the Government will consider a graduated tax on plastic packaging, rather than a flat-rate tax on that which contains less than 30% recyclate. Many manufacturers are already pledging to move well beyond 30% recycled packaging, and I would submit that any regulation that aims to persuade people to do less than they are already doing voluntarily is either pointless or window dressing. Major multinational companies, such as SC Johnson, the American cleaning products company that makes the Ecover brand among others, are already aiming for high percentages of recycled material in all their packaging, and it would be a travesty if the 30% flat rate allowed other less ambitious companies to undercut their prices simply because the tax regime did not incentivise higher rates.

The plastics packaging industry makes various claims trying to minimise the perception of its impact. Plastics do not make up the majority of waste, measured by weight, but neither the climate change impact nor the pollution impact of waste is dependent on weight. Yes, of course, we want a sustainable solution for construction hardcore, but the environmental impact of a tonne of inert mixed rubble is negligible in comparison with the enormous problem that would be represented by a tonne of polystyrene foam or polythene bags.

The feedstock for most plastics is still fossil fuel, and the absolute necessity eventually to bring to an end the consumption of fresh fossil fuels, if we are to achieve net zero emissions by 2050, must include an end to the use of fossil fuels to create plastics as well. The industry proudly insists that 78% of plastics are currently recovered, but that mainly refers to recovery through incineration in energy-from-waste plants. The exact efficiency of the electricity generation varies from plant to plant, and depends on the mix of waste being incinerated, but we can be sure that plastic incinerated in an energy-from-waste plant will generate significantly less electricity than the oil it was made from would have done in a conventional oil-fired power station.

We do not use oil-fired power stations any more, as a rule, because of their unsustainable climate change implications. How much more unsustainable is it to incinerate plastic in an energy-from-waste plant? My third ask of the Minister is whether the Government have any plans to ensure that the proposed extended producer responsibility for packaging production will simply be allowed to subsidise more energy-from-waste plants, or whether they have any plans to ensure that the money is used to incentivise recycling instead?

As the petition makes clear, the public want to be able to recycle their packaging, but the best way to deal with unwanted plastic waste is to not create it in the first place. My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge mentioned all sorts of imaginative ways in which mainly small retailers are avoiding the use of plastic packaging, all of which are laudable. However, we need a consistent, across-the-board step change in the way we purchase goods, the way packaging is designed, the materials it is designed from, and the way it is dealt with at end of life. Only a coherent national strategy from Government can achieve that, so my final ask of the Minister is this: will he pledge to ensure that all the good intentions, suggested actions, aims and targets in “Our waste, our resources” are pursued, accelerated where possible, and not shoved into the long grass under the next Prime Minister?

Dealing with our waste will be a crucial part of our ability to deal with the environment and climate emergency that we face. We need to reduce the amount of waste we create, and to reuse our packaging wherever possible and recycle or compost what is left, if we are to achieve zero net emissions by 2050 or stand any chance of maintaining any quality of life on our planet, for ourselves or any other creatures.

5.51 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner)—he represents a city that leads the world in many ways, including cycling—for securing this debate, as it comes at a time of significant public interest in plastics and concern about their environmental impact. Plastics used in food packaging, which generates a considerable amount of waste plastics, are a great concern. The number of signatories to the e-petition—almost 250,000—is testament to the public’s concern, and I welcome a debate on the issue, not least because I was involved with it as a former member of the Environmental Audit Committee. Having heard the contributions of Members across the Chamber, I think we are all pretty much on the same page, and I hope I am paying the hon. Gentleman a compliment when I say that I could happily have read out his speech.
The Government share the public’s concerns about the environmental issues surrounding plastics and have set out ambitious plans to address the problem. When plastic use cannot be prevented or plastics cannot be reused, they should be recycled wherever possible. However, managing plastic waste that cannot be reused or recycled is complex and depends on a number of factors, including the type of plastic, the overall environmental impacts of landfill and the efficiency of energy-from-waste facilities. As we have heard, it is not just Government-led initiatives that can push this agenda, but consumer-driven progress in places such as Sheffield and Cambridge. Indeed, in the meal I ate last night, the spinach and the strawberries were picked in the garden without any need for packaging; the potatoes were in a 25 kg paper sack from a farm less than 10 miles away, not using any plastic; and the beef was produced on the estate where we live.

Bans or restrictions on international export markets for waste, such as China’s bans on typical types of paper waste and plastic, present us with a longer-term opportunity to focus on the quality of recycle we provide and ensure there are end markets for it. The Government have therefore set out ambitious plans to address the problem of plastics. A key commitment in our 25-year environment plan is to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste within 25 years, and we want to move faster for the most problematic plastics. In our resources and waste strategy for England, published last December, we committed to work towards all plastic packaging on the UK market being recyclable, reusable or compostable by 2025.

I stress that we currently have no plans to ban the use of food packaging that cannot be recycled. Most food packaging is technically recyclable, although as we have heard, the current market does not make all recycling economically viable. Our general approach is to help people and companies make the right choice and develop alternatives, rather than ban items outright. There are circumstances in which a ban is appropriate as part of a wider strategic approach: we have already banned the inclusion of plastic microbeads, and Members might be aware that we will be banning the supply of plastic drinking straws, stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds in England from April 2020.

The European Commission recently published its single use plastics directive, which includes a ban on cups, food and beverage containers in takeaway packaging made of expanded polystyrene, and—as my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) pointed out—all products made of o xo-degradable plastic. We will, of course, consider that requirement in the context of our work on eliminating unnecessary plastic waste. However, in the case of food packaging, we are of the view that alternative measures would provide strong incentives for businesses to move away from using packaging that is unrecyclable or environmentally damaging and towards more sustainable packaging. We therefore made a commitment in our resources and waste strategy to reform the current producer responsibility system as an immediate priority, in order to incentivise producers financially to take greater responsibility for the environmental impacts of their products.

Our priority is to prevent or reduce waste in the first place. The system already requires businesses to ensure that all their packaging does not exceed what is needed to make sure that their products are safe, hygienic and acceptable for both the packed product and the consumer. The regulations apply to those responsible for the packing or filling of products into packaging and those importing packed or filled packaging into the UK from elsewhere. This is a market-based system that has succeeded in ensuring that the UK has met its wider packaging recycling targets at the lowest cost to producers. The UK reported to Eurostat that 64.27% of UK packaging waste was recycled in 2018, surpassing the 55% recycling target set in the European directive.

The current system does not, however, sufficiently incentivise design for greater reuse or recyclability, and less than a tenth of the cost of managing household packaging waste is covered by producers. In February, we published a consultation setting out our proposals to reform the system. That was one of several Government consultations published on overhauling the waste system, including a consultation on introducing a deposit return scheme for drinks containers and increasing consistency in recycling collections—in that regard, we look forward to drawing lessons from the Scottish experience.

We also consulted on introducing a tax on plastic packaging containing less than 30% recycled content. The proposal is for that tax to apply to all plastic packaging manufactured in the UK and to plastic packaging imported into the UK with less than 30% recycled content. It will be charged on plastic packaging that manufacturers place on the market, and the consultation sought views on the precise tax point. Imported unfilled plastic packaging—packaging that does not yet contain goods—will be taxed when it is released on to the UK market, and unfilled plastic packaging that is exported would not be chargeable. The tax will be charged at a flat rate per tonne of packaging material. We plan to introduce that tax in 2022; in its consultation, the Treasury asked whether it should be at a flat rate of 30% or should vary for different purchasing formats, and whether the threshold should increase over time.

The proposals for reforming the packaging producer responsibility regime tie together the broader set of principles for extended producer responsibility included in our resources and waste strategy and our ambitions for the packaging sector in future. Those include the reduction of unnecessary packaging, the reduction or elimination of materials that are difficult to recycle—for example, composite products such as coffee cups, made of cardboard material with plastic applied to it—and the increased recycling of packaging waste. A key proposal is that producers fund the net cost of managing the packaging that they place on the market once it becomes waste. That creates an incentive for companies to use less packaging, as that will reduce the cost of complying with the regulations. A further proposal includes adopting approaches to incentivise producers to adopt recyclable packaging along the way.

In conclusion, I stress that the Government see the elimination of avoidable plastic waste as a priority, and we look forward to introducing further measures to make this country greener still. We are already the greenest Government ever, and we plan to build on that. I will allow a little bit of time for the hon. Member for Cambridge to respond.
Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to everyone who has contributed to this interesting and useful debate, which has been conducted in a positive and constructive spirit. The contributions from all the Front-Bench speakers were very welcome. I was particularly enthused by the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), and his passion for change, and I was very much taken by the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) and her talk of a plastic calamity or crisis.

I will conclude by returning to the petitioners. When they say: "The British public WANTS to recycle but we can’t get away from the vast amounts of waste that poorly designed packaging creates", they are putting out a plea to us to get this right. When they say, "appoint people to design alternatives", I am not sure who they have in mind, but if we do get it right, "the UK will thank you!" That is something with which we could all agree.

I will end on a slight note of difference: I do not entirely agree with the Minister that we are in exactly the same place. I suspect that in the end, the Opposition are a touch more interventionist—in fact, we are much more interventionist.

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Let me take the slightly unusual step of saying from the Chair that this subject, which is hugely important to the people we all represent, has been covered so well that I am hugely impressed. I do not think that a single word was wasted in any speech made by anybody, on whichever side of the House. It has been a privilege to chair the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 232684 relating to unsustainable packaging.

6 pm
Sitting adjourned.
The report from our latest inquiry, on dementia and disability, was launched last week. More than 2,500 people affected by dementia responded to our call for evidence—one of the largest responses to any all-party group inquiry. What the respondents had to say is very important. According to the Equality Act 2010 and the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, dementia is a disability. As one family carer put it:

“If this isn’t a disability then I don’t know what is.”

However, the all-party group was told that society is lagging behind in that understanding and failing to uphold the legal rights of people with dementia. Evidence presented to the inquiry revealed that, across the country, the disability rights of people with dementia are not being upheld. Shockingly, 98% of the survey respondents thought that people living with dementia are treated differently from people with other health conditions or disabilities. They believe that that is due to the hidden nature of dementia, and the stigma that surrounds the condition. That is simply not good enough, and we need to do more.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on obtaining the debate, and those who supported her. I hope she will touch on the cost of care. The cost of looking after people with dementia is astronomical, as it is with care generally. I hope she will also touch on progress being made in research.

Debbie Abrahams: I thank my hon. Friend, who anticipates me. I shall certainly talk about social care in relation to people living with dementia and their carers. My speech is focused on our inquiry report, but other hon. Members may want to look on progress being made in research.

A central finding of the inquiry is that the public, employers, organisations, Governments and public bodies need to do more, and need to recognise the rights of people with dementia. The inquiry also revealed that a range of societal barriers prevents people with dementia from living independently. Action needs to be taken across a number of key areas to ensure that people with dementia receive the protections and safeguards provided by legislation and convention. The key areas that were identified as having a direct impact on people’s daily lives include employment, social protection, which is also called social security or welfare benefits—I consider that a misnomer because most people who receive so-called welfare benefits have contributed, so they are an entitlement, not a benefit—social care, transport, housing and community life.

On employment, the importance of work in giving people a sense of purpose, self-esteem, status, companionship and income was raised. Work can also provide a routine. Without it, people can feel a loss of identity and sense of purpose. One person with young onset dementia told us:

“I applied for so many jobs and I just got rejections. I used to lecture at a university and now I can’t get a job collecting trolleys. Any job is worthwhile. Not having a job destroys self-esteem.”

At the launch of the inquiry report last week we heard of a woman who had worked in a Government Department and had been diagnosed with early onset dementia. She became ill because of the condition, was then disciplined and had been diagnosed with early onset dementia. She became ill because of the condition, was then disciplined and had been diagnosed with early onset dementia.
[Debbie Abrahams]

redundancy. I know that the Minister will be as concerned as I am about that disgraceful position. If Departments are setting out how we should lead, we must make sure we have our own house in order.

There needs to be more awareness among both employers and employees of the employment rights of people with dementia. People need to feel empowered to tell their employers about their diagnosis and employers should feel supported in fulfilling their responsibility to make reasonable adjustments so that people with dementia can continue to make a meaningful contribution in the workplace. The Government have a hugely important role to play, by providing guidance and support for employers. The Access to Work programme could go some way to addressing the unmet needs of people with dementia in relation to employment. However, as I know the Minister recognises, that is a small pot of money, which currently supports only about 35,000 of the 4 million or so disabled people who are fit and able to work. We need to make sure that that is extended.

In relation to social protection, people raised issues about the extra costs associated with living with a disability. Access to extra financial support can provide a lifeline for people with dementia and help people to continue getting out and doing the things they enjoy. One of the key challenges for people affected by dementia is knowing what financial support is available to them. One family member told the all-party group that they felt that “people with dementia are effectively ignored by the disability benefits system.”

People with dementia and their carers need access to more support to enable them to know what financial help they are entitled to and how to make a successful claim. The Minister knows my views on both the fit-for-work and personal independence payment assessments. Until those assessments are scrapped, people with dementia deserve to be assessed by professionals who understand the condition, and they should not have to undergo unnecessary reviews or reassessments, as currently happens.

Assessment processes need to be clear and appropriate for people with cognitive impairments. That is why we are calling for the Government to mandate the Department for Work and Pensions to convene an expert group to review access to social protection for people living with dementia and their carers, recognising their specific needs. This group must include those who are experts by virtue of their own lived experience. The Government should also mandate the DWP to exempt personal independence payment claimants below the state pension age and with a dementia diagnosis from reassessments, which are unnecessary and cause a lot of distress for people living with dementia and their families.

A further key issue was social care. The inquiry received considerable feedback about inadequate or inaccessible social care for people affected by dementia living in England. There are many ways to improve the lives of people with dementia, but it is difficult in the current context of the well-documented social care crisis across the country. It is now recognised that that social care crisis is a dementia crisis. We need to fix the broken care system, and I am proud to support the Alzheimer’s Society’s “Fix Dementia Care” campaign. I know the Minister is eager to publish the Green Paper as soon as possible, and I urge the Government to recognise that.

In the context of social care reform, I will mention the Alzheimer’s Society’s campaign for a dementia fund. The system of dementia care in this country is in urgent need of reform and extra investment. In May, I tabled early-day motion 2360 in support of the campaign, calling for a financial injection into the social care system in the short to medium term, allowing for greater provision of safe and quality care, longer visits and savings to the NHS. My EDM now has the backing of more than 100 MPs of all parties, and I know that thousands of Alzheimer’s Society campaigners have written to their own MPs as well. I would welcome a commitment from the Minister to look at the proposal, and her support in getting the Government to include a dementia fund in the forthcoming spending review, to end the unfairness for people with dementia.

Another key area is transport. Access to public transport can have a huge impact on the lives of people affected by dementia, helping to reduce loneliness and social isolation by linking someone to their community and friends, and providing links to essential services such as necessary respite care. Access to public transport is therefore critical to maintaining someone’s quality of life. However, accessing transport can be very challenging for people with dementia. We heard many stories of how poor or inaccessible transport is, preventing people with dementia from participating in society, despite rights to accessible transport being enshrined in the Equality Act 2010.

Our report stresses the importance of reviewing any changes to bus and community transport services in the context of the public sector equality duty, to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made to enable people with dementia to continue to use public transport. Local authorities have a huge role to play here, and I hope that they will take steps to support people living with dementia in their communities.

On housing, the inquiry found that people with dementia are frequently being denied their right to live independently in their own homes, where they are able to make their own choices. It is important that people with dementia are supported as much as possible to stay as long as possible in their own home or to access suitable supported housing. People with dementia have the right to personal choice over where and how they live. We believe that people living with dementia must have access to adaptable housing, trained home care staff, and specialised supported housing schemes.

The final area is community life. The evidence supplied to our inquiry reaffirmed the importance of supporting people with dementia to continue to lead full and independent lives. That means creating communities where no one is excluded or has to face dementia alone. The all-party parliamentary group praised the work of the Dementia Friends programme, which helps to raise awareness of the condition and has created almost 3 million Dementia Friends in England, Wales and Northern Ireland—5,000 of them in my constituency of Oldham East and Saddleworth, a fact that I am very proud of.

A particularly relevant recommendation of the report is for Westminster to become the world’s first dementia-friendly Parliament, including ensuring that
the parliamentary estate is a safe and welcoming place for people affected by dementia to work and visit. I have met a number of people today who are visiting Parliament; I hope they will be able to report positively on how they have been received today.

Our report is wide-ranging and covers a number of different issues that need to be addressed if the disability rights of people living with dementia are to be realised. Over the coming months, the all-party parliamentary group on dementia will work with the Alzheimer’s Society and other partners to turn the report’s recommendations into reality. That has the potential to have a huge impact on the lives of people living with dementia and their carers, and I hope that everyone in the Chamber today and beyond will offer their support.

9.44 am

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this important debate, in conjunction with the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and the Backbench Business Committee.

Hon. Members should be dismayed to learn that, according to a recent survey, 98% of the 2,521 respondents felt that those with dementia were treated differently from people with other health conditions or disabilities. Some even found that employers would not make reasonable adjustments to the workplace. Those respondents believed that they were discriminated against, facing unnecessary stigma and often negative attitudes. It is a worrying statistic given that, apparently, 850,000 people in the UK live with dementia. Indeed, 70% of care home patients live with the condition.

Media coverage of the condition tends to occur only when it befalls a prominent person in public life, when relatives have the courage to publish their experiences, as the TV presenter Sally Magnusson in Scotland did in relation to her mother, or when a member of the public sadly goes missing and the police issue an urgent appeal for help in locating them. It is important that we raise wider and more regular awareness of a condition that appears to be on the increase throughout the United Kingdom.

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David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I apologise for being late to this debate. Last November, my father passed away. He was a sufferer from dementia and, while he got fantastic care, we found as a family that there was a lack of staff with the experience to diagnose dementia, because there are different stages and diagnoses. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one area that is forgotten about is young carers, who have to dedicate a lot of their time to looking after their parents while still keeping up their studies? We seem to forget about them.

Bill Grant: The hon. Gentleman is right that we often seem to overlook the young carers. In my family, we have experience of hosting my mother-in-law. I was very fond of her, but we had two or three months of hosting her, and despite having two daughters who are nurses, what a challenge that was in my life and that of my wife. We thought we knew about dementia, but we knew nothing about it until we walked for several months with my mother-in-law, who I was very fond of.

When I served as a councillor in South Ayrshire, one of my colleagues, Councillor Hugh Hunter, and others were active in ensuring that the needs of dementia sufferers and their carers were to the fore. In his council area, in 2016, a dementia-friendly project was launched, with the laudable aim of building a community that supports people with dementia, enabling sufferers to remain in their community for as long as practicable and reducing the stigma. Indeed, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), which borders mine, is the Carlton Hotel, one of the first in Scotland to provide a dementia-friendly bedroom. I think she and I would both agree that that is delightful, and I give credit to that hotel and others that do the same.

In 2015, the UK Government launched the Dementia 2020 challenge, a vision for dementia care, support, awareness and research, which includes awareness training for NHS and care staff. I understand research spending is around £60 million a year to 2020, but not beyond. Four years on, I wonder whether the Minister might provide us with an update and an outline of what the future might hold for those with dementia and—equally importantly, as was said earlier—their carers.

In particular, I am sure sufferers and carers would be grateful for more detail on the proposed Green Paper on a new social care policy, especially the Alzheimer’s Society’s desire for a dementia fund to afford financial support for the very real additional costs associated with dementia treatment and care. An update on the Accelerated Access Collaborative introduced last year, which enables patients to benefit from rapid uptake products, breakthrough medicines and technologies with the greatest potential to change lives, would also be welcome. I know an update would be gratefully received by many of my constituents and others elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

I very much welcome the fact that mental capacity legislation should enhance safeguards against deprivation of liberty and ensure that those living with dementia have a person to advocate on their behalf. However, the Government could further assist by making form filling easier and considering whether there is truly a constant need for reassessment, given that dementia is sadly a progressive condition for which there is currently no effective cure.

All our Governments and other organisations must ensure that those living with dementia are able to do so with dignity, respect and, most importantly, compassionate care, to remain safely independent for as long as is reasonably practicable. The Alzheimer’s Society’s mantra that everyone affected by dementia should feel part of—not apart from—society sums the situation up. It is to be commended for encouraging more than 2 million people to sign up as Dementia Friends, and its informative website is truly well worth a visit.

During Dementia Action Week last month, I belatedly became aware that some stores in Ayr—a town in my constituency—such as Specsavers, have several Dementia Friends on their teams. Hopefully this small step will be a growing trend in retail, hospitality and, equally importantly, transport throughout the UK, to extend that hand to those living with dementia who need that wee bit of extra help.
Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), who so expertly laid out the issues. I will say a little bit about social care and then move on to research.

Some 1,179 people live with dementia in Cambridge—around 1% of the constituency population—meaning that thousands of my constituents care for or know a close friend or relative with dementia. My hon. Friend touched on some of the social care issues. It seems hard to deny that we have a crisis in social care. In March 2017, the Government said they would publish a Green Paper on ensuring that the system will be sustainable in the long term. However, two years on, and after many delays, Ministers have still not given a date for when it will be published.

I understand that 400,000 fewer older people receive publicly funded care than in 2010. With local authority budgets cut by 49.1% since 2010, including £7 billion lost from adult social care, and a further £1.3 billion to be cut in 2019-20, it is hard not to conclude that the situation for many of those living with dementia, and for their families, has been made much harsher and more difficult.

Alzheimer’s Research UK has campaigned for more money to be invested into research, so that with new treatments we can really change the lives of those who have dementia. As we all know, research has revolutionised the ways we treat, cure and prevent diseases such as cancer. There is no reason why that cannot be the same for brain diseases such as dementia. New treatments would also ease pressure on our healthcare and social care services, improving lives and saving public service resources. Public donations have allowed Alzheimer’s Research UK to invest £100 million over the last 20 years to drive forward its research, but that funding alone does not allow it to further explore emerging fields.

However, when we do invest in dementia research, look at what we can achieve. Alzheimer’s Research UK’s Drug Discovery Institute in Cambridge couples the deep disease knowledge and biology expertise of the academic community with high-quality, innovative drug discovery technologies. More than 100,000 combined hours have been committed to drug discovery by 30 new staff. The institute is currently investigating 10 new potential drug targets in its own work or through collaborations, has generated 12 new internal collaborations at the University of Cambridge and has attracted nine new partners from both the private and the academic sectors.

In addition to the institute, the Cambridge Network Centre, launched 20 years ago, has grown to include 2,200 dementia researchers across the UK. It has helped researchers to buy cutting-edge technology to carry out their research, supported grant applications and fellowship applications and enabled PhD students to buy equipment such as virtual reality technology to further their research. I suspect I am not the only one to have seen the virtual reality dementia simulation and met Helen Davies when Alzheimer’s Research UK was in Parliament. I—like others, I suspect—found it extremely interesting and slightly surreal, but also very impressive at explaining the effects of the disease.

While £269 million is invested in cancer research, only £83.1 million is invested in dementia research—just 0.3% of its total cost to society. Alzheimer’s Research UK is calling for the Government to increase that to just 1% of its total cost, which would unlock the resources needed to really cement the UK as the world leader in dementia research and to make real breakthroughs. I very much hope that the Minister will commit to discussing that with her colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Treasury—even possibly one or two Conservative party leadership candidates, for whom money suddenly seems to be no object—to ensure that we make the progress that we all need.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this important debate, and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

Both my grandmothers suffered with dementia, so like many here today I have seen at first hand how people slowly become a shadow of their former selves, all living longer than before, but with the gift of more time comes complex illness and disease. It is expected that, by 2020, more than 1 million people across the UK will have dementia, with one in five people aged over 90 suffering from it. Chichester has a significant elderly population, and we therefore have more sufferers than the national average.

We know that this area of health will only become more of an issue in the coming years, so policy around it needs to be robust, for both patients and their families. In 2015, the Challenge on Dementia 2020 was launched, setting out the vision for how dementia care support, awareness and research will be transformed by 2020. A big part of this is awareness raising, so people can spot the signs in loved ones. I and my team are registered to take part in Age UK’s dementia awareness training, and I am sure that many people across the country are doing the same. More people are receiving a dementia diagnosis than ever before, helped by the fact that more than 660,000 NHS staff have received dementia awareness training. That is important, because the earlier the diagnosis, the more time patients and their families have to prepare for what is to come.

From my own experience, I know that dementia is a very changeable disease, with good days and bad. Sometimes I would sit with my nan and she would be as black as thunder when she realised I was standing as a Conservative—and wanted to show her my election leaflets. Out of her council house and into a local care home in Huyton. I had just finished my first election campaign, contesting St Helens South and Whiston in 2015—as a Conservative—and wanted to show her my election leaflets. At the time, she was in the advanced stages of dementia. She looked at the photos and admired the different outfits I was wearing, but all of a sudden her face went as black as thunder when she realised I was standing as a Conservative. “That is not my party,” she exclaimed. I said, “Goodness, nan; you can’t remember what you had for breakfast but you still remember that you’re Labour.” I went on to reassure her that we had never agreed on politics, and she seemed happy enough with that reply.
Having seen how this disease impacted my family, I think it is crucial that we bolster support for family carers. My constituent, Wendy, cares for her husband, Richard, who was always there to care for her in her home in Huyton. However, having 11 children who live within a few miles of each other is quite an unusual care option, and not one that I guess many of us have.

Sage House is an amazing local service. It is there from the earliest stages of dementia to end-of-life care. It has group sessions, which are important to people with dementia because loneliness often becomes more of an issue. Similarly, Chichester Lunch Club offers a fantastic support service that helps people to build and maintain relationships. Anyone who has loved ones with dementia will know how important it is for their wider mental health that they keep up social interaction.

Like most issues of the 21st century, there is always a technological advancement that can help. Chichester Careline is the only monitoring service in West Sussex providing telecare equipment to the most vulnerable in our society. Its services are becoming ever more invaluable, because they are often used by people in the earlier stages of dementia. People with dementia often get confused, and on occasion get lost; they sometimes wander out of their house. My nan used to go out looking for her two daughters, who she thought had not come home for the evening, even though they were in their 60s and 70s. Careline operates a “Mindme” service. That means that if a person becomes lost or disorientated, they can be located through a website, which is monitored by their family, friends and carers as well as Chichester Careline. That service is available 24/7, 365 days a year. The technology can now go further for people who are prone to wandering off. An imaginary ring fence can be installed around a location, and that sets off an alert if a user crosses it.

Dementia is an illness that has touched my family and will affect more and more families up and down the country. A key concern of mine is social care—for those with dementia and for the elderly more generally. I believe that we need a transformative adjustment in policy that genuinely offers a sustainable, integrated model of care. At this point, I urge hon. Members here to protect them, in every way. Some financial institutions have put measures in place to protect their elderly, vulnerable people. I am referring to measures such as monitoring
their bank accounts and having a few days buffering the removal of unusually large amounts from their account to help to safeguard them against fraud.

What is really needed, as we have discussed in this Chamber before, is a legal duty of care from the business world and from the state towards older people—especially those with dementia—who need that extra layer of protection in a world where rogues and thieves are creative and cunning and older people, even those with dementia, are isolated in their own homes without sufficient support. That protection must be put in place. In my view, it should be a legal, statutory duty for all financial institutions to deliver that protection. Those living with dementia deserve nothing less.

As our population ages and people live longer, there are huge cost and care challenges to face in terms of how we look after our older people, and especially those who live with this cruel disease. Those challenges are faced by societies right across Europe and, indeed, the world, and we must do all we can to meet them, despite the difficulties. The Scottish Government are working hard to improve dementia care and have published a three-year dementia strategy, but one challenge, to which money is perhaps not the answer, is recruiting and retaining care staff, whether the care is carried out in an older person’s home or in a care home. Integration of health and social care services allows for more joined-up delivery of services, but the story cannot end there. It is the case that 43% of the Scottish Government’s entire budget—43%—is spent on health. That is before one penny is spent on schools, housing, roads, local authorities or anything else. The costs of social care can only grow and will continue to be hugely challenging, and we must continue to work to meet the challenges. The Scottish Government are looking very carefully at a report from Alzheimer Scotland called “Delivering Fair Dementia Care For People With Advanced Dementia” and some of the issues that it raises about continuing to work to improve the lives of those living with this condition.

I echo many of the comments that have been made today about the need for continuing and improved research into this condition. Given the numbers affected, how we look after our older people, and especially those who live with this cruel disease. Those challenges are faced by societies right across Europe and, indeed, the world, and we must do all we can to meet them, despite the difficulties. The Scottish Government are working hard to improve dementia care and have published a three-year dementia strategy, but one challenge, to which money is perhaps not the answer, is recruiting and retaining care staff, whether the care is carried out in an older person’s home or in a care home. Integration of health and social care services allows for more joined-up delivery of services, but the story cannot end there. It is the case that 43% of the Scottish Government’s entire budget—43%—is spent on health. That is before one penny is spent on schools, housing, roads, local authorities or anything else. The costs of social care can only grow and will continue to be hugely challenging, and we must continue to work to meet the challenges. The Scottish Government are looking very carefully at a report from Alzheimer Scotland called “Delivering Fair Dementia Care For People With Advanced Dementia” and some of the issues that it raises about continuing to work to improve the lives of those living with this condition.

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unique because they may themselves be carers for parents or children, they may be holding down a full-time job and they may have a mortgage to pay. It is particularly difficult. There is mortality, and there is stigma, around telling an employer that one is living with dementia.

There are difficulties in ensuring that the reasonable adjustments that should be made are made. That may be due to a lack of awareness of rights—perhaps employers do not realise that they should be making those reasonable adjustments. However, they may not realise what adjustments can be made. That is why I will give another unashamed plug for the Dementia Friends programme, which explains to people how it feels to live with dementia and what reasonable adjustments can be made.

The Government have an important role to play, which is dealt with in the all-party parliamentary group on dementia report. I ask the Minister to consider asking the Department for Work and Pensions to revise its guidance to employers about their responsibilities to support people who are living with dementia. It can cover reasonable adjustments, information on the Access to Work programme, and how to support employees with dementia. There is much more to do before we can call ourselves a society that is truly dementia-friendly.

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10.13 am

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing this important debate. I support their vision to make this Parliament the first dementia-friendly Parliament in the world. My staff and I have undertaken dementia-friendly training in my constituency office. It is important for us all to try to promote a more dementia-friendly society, sector by sector, institution by institution and, as mentioned previously, shop by shop.

It is great that so many Members want to participate in the debate—it shows how active this is in our personal lives and our communities. A wide range of issues has been covered so far. We have looked at the impact on loved ones who are living with dementia and their carers, financial assistance and protection for people living with dementia, research, social care costs, dementia-friendly shops and institutions, and therapies that can help people who are living with dementia, such as music therapy. I want to touch on the role that I think mindfulness can play in helping people who are living with dementia and their carers.

I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on mindfulness with the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). On Tuesday 14 May, we held a conference in the Macmillan room on mindfulness with the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). On Tuesday 14 May, we held a conference in the Macmillan room on mindfulness. I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on mindfulness. I published later in the summer, and to meet officers of the Alzheimer’s Society to do the same. I also ask the all-party parliamentary group on dementia and the Alzheimer’s Society to do the same. I pay tribute to that APPG and the Alzheimer’s Society, and all of those who work to lessen the suffering of those living with dementia and their carers.

10.18 am

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Paisley, for allowing me to speak in this important debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing this important debate, and commend their work on the all-party parliamentary group on dementia.

The scale of the challenge of dementia is well known, but it bears repeating. In the UK, some 850,000 people live with dementia. That is set to double by 2040. Of course, the figures do not capture the great many other people whose lives are touched by dementia, most obviously family, friends and carers. With so many people affected by dementia, we need a comprehensive and joined-up approach that supports people and their families as soon as they are diagnosed. This must involve health, social care, local government and voluntary organisations.

There is a great deal of innovation and good practice. We must do all we can to ensure that it is shared as widely as possible, which is why I entirely agree with the Alzheimer’s Society that we need a national strategy on dementia. Of course, it is hugely important that the strategy is fully funded. I urge the Government to consider that in the upcoming spending review.

When thinking about a joined-up approach, we should look at the lessons from the integrated personal commissioning pilots. IPC, a partnership between the Local Government Association and NHS England, aims to integrate healthcare and education services around people rather than organisations. It focuses on an individual’s needs, along with the available community and peer support, to build their confidence and skills for self-managing long-term conditions such as dementia. It seeks to offer choice and control to patients by widening access to integrated personal budgets and developing more options to help people to achieve their goals.

An important point that the Alzheimer’s Society has raised is the need to ensure that people with dementia understand the information that they receive. What is told to people with dementia is not always the same as
what they receive and understand. Given the nature of the condition, it is vital that medical professionals and others continually ensure that people are empowered by what they are told.

That point leads me on to the need for improved education about Alzheimer’s and dementia. I pay tribute to the Alzheimer’s Society’s Dementia Friends initiative, which has spread awareness and has seen 2.75 million people—including me and others in my office—become Dementia Friends. However, there is still poor knowledge among much of the public and some medical and care professionals about Alzheimer’s, dementia and what can be done to help people with the disease.

The Department of Health and Social Care should consider implementing a dementia awareness campaign to increase understanding of the symptoms of dementia and the interventions and treatments that can slow the progress of the disease, and to support people with dementia and their carers to lead independent lives for as long as is appropriate. The Government must do more to improve standards within the social care workforce to meet the needs of people with dementia, including by funding training to tier 2 of the dementia training standards framework for everyone who works in adult social care or interacts with people with dementia.

Finally, I turn to the support that we must provide for carers. I pay heartfelt tribute to the many thousands in this country who care for people with dementia and a whole range of other conditions. Out of love, they provide selfless care and deserve our utmost respect. Much more help must be given to those who care for people living with dementia. Carers need a wide range of practical, emotional and financial support. For instance, in its recent report on dementia and disability, the APPG on dementia found that carers need more support to know exactly what financial help they are entitled to, as well as how to make a successful claim. Carers are also time-poor and have little energy and—dare I say it?—headspace left after meeting the demands of caring for someone 24/7. The agencies involved need to take a more proactive approach to ensure that carers can claim the financial help they need, because they are entitled to support for the care they give their loved ones.

As we have heard, the Government’s aspiration to make the UK the best country in the world for dementia care and support is welcome, but it must be met with action and funding to make it a reality. I hope the Minister makes those commitments today.

10.22 am

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): As always, Mr Paisley, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I join colleagues in paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for her leadership and for the compassion she shows in everything she does. I am a Dementia Friend because of her, having attended one of her workshops here in Westminster in 2016. I have since become a dementia champion and was asked by the Alzheimer’s Society to run its workshop for Dementia Friends at the 2016 Labour party conference to 80 colleagues and members, which was quite a challenge for my first workshop. I am incredibly proud to have played a very small role in training some of the UK’s 2.8 million Dementia Friends and sending them out into their communities to make them that bit more dementia-friendly. Once again, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her role in that.

This debate gives us an opportunity to evaluate where we are against the aspirations set out in the Government’s Challenge on Dementia 2020, but also to shine a spotlight on some of the good work that is being done at a grassroots level—not least in Halifax, thanks to some truly inspirational and passionate volunteers. As we have heard time and again, 850,000 people are living with dementia in the UK, a figure that is expected to double by 2040. One in 14 over-65s is living with dementia. If that is not an incentive to us all to do everything we can while we are able and empowered to do so, I do not know what is.

I recently wrote to older people in the Sowerby Bridge area of Halifax on behalf of the campaign to make Sowerby Bridge a dementia-friendly town, and invited them to a day of action to learn more and see the support available in their area. That campaign is driven by Shabir Hussain of Bluebird Care in Calderdale, who is a thoroughly committed community activist, along with Chris and June Harvey, who are truly dementia champions, and who run the wonderful Memory Lane Café for people with dementia and their carers. With their trustees and volunteers, Chris and June run pop-up cafés in churches and community centres in Sowerby Bridge and Halifax, with a dementia-friendly programme of games and crafts, information and support, cakes, music and conversation. Some 540,000 people in England alone care for those with dementia, and estimates suggest that one in three of us will be involved in caring for someone with dementia at some time in our lives, so a dementia-friendly environment that offers a thoroughly positive experience for all those involved in living well with dementia makes a massive difference to the regular attenders.

We also have a young onset dementia and Alzheimer’s group, or YODA for short, which was set up by Julie Hayden and provides support for younger people with dementia and for their carers and families. As we have heard, it is often overlooked that 42,000 people of working age live with dementia. Their requirements can be quite different. People diagnosed with dementia at that time of life usually present between the ages of 30 and 65 and are most likely in work, potentially with dependent children, older parents to care for or financial commitments such as a mortgage to consider. For that group, as other hon. Members have said, living well requires a different support package from that required for over-65s.

I would be remiss not to highlight the work of Inspector Neil Taylor of West Yorkshire police, who is a dementia champion and the chair of Dementia Friendly Todmorden. He has gone over and above in promoting best practice within West Yorkshire police and his local community—all credit to him. West Yorkshire police have introduced the Herbert protocol, named after George Herbert, a veteran of the Normandy landings who lived with dementia. The police and other agencies encourage family and carers to complete a form when someone going missing, the form can be
handed quickly to the police to speed up the search and assist in supporting that person, who may be lost and confused when they are located. I recommend that all forces adopt such a protocol as soon as possible.

We are blessed with dedicated volunteers who have made Calderdale a better place to live with dementia, but what if Shabir, Chris and June, Julie, Neil and others like them were not there? The environment might be quite different without their leadership. How can we ensure that such work is supported and replicated elsewhere?

I give credit where it is due. David Cameron’s Government launched the dementia challenge in 2012, which sought to create dementia-friendly communities, with work led by the Alzheimer’s Society; drive improvements in health and care; and improve research, with a commitment that funding for dementia research be doubled to more than £66 million by 2015. Under Dementia Challenge 2020, as the programme was called when it relaunched in 2015, the Government committed to investing more than £300 million in dementia research and medical innovation.

It has been estimated that dementia costs the UK economy £23 billion a year, which is more than the costs of cancer, heart disease or stroke. With the numbers of people living with dementia expected to double by 2040, predicted costs are expected to treble alongside that increase. For anyone not yet won over by the human arguments for committing to research for dementia, the economic arguments speak for themselves.

To be fair to David Cameron, I believe that he understood the issue. I hope the Minister can assure us that she will seek to make it a continuing priority for the incoming Prime Minister. However, there are still areas in which I would like to see things standardised across the UK to support people, particularly younger people, who live with dementia, as well as their families and carers. To have a dementia diagnosis in the workplace, with dependants or financial commitments, must be incredibly daunting, but with a renewed focus on that group, and with changes to our understanding of the support that those demographics need to live well, we can make a positive difference. I thank the APPG on dementia for its report “Hidden No More: Dementia and disability”, which calls, quite simply, for “equality, non-discrimination, participation and inclusion.” I wholeheartedly endorse those aims.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I thank colleagues for their immensely good self-imposed discipline, which will allow the Opposition spokespersons and the Minister 10 minutes each to speak.

10.29 am

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this crucial debate.

As has been said, the number of people suffering dementia in the UK is 850,000—I apologise, because I have already said “suffering” instead of “living with”, but many people are suffering. We talk about what is being done in pockets, but what is being done well, but that is not happening for all those 850,000 people. Some of them are stuck in their houses, some are tutted at by people behind them in supermarkets and some are made to feel unwelcome in certain places. Until we can say that all 850,000 of those people are living well with dementia, we have not done our jobs.

There are 90,000 people living with dementia in Scotland, and more than 3,000 of them are under 65. The impact on those people has been touched on. It is estimated that only two thirds of people with dementia have been diagnosed, and that means that we do not actually have a handle on the scale of the problem.

Alzheimer’s—a term that many people use interchangeably with dementia—is the commonest form of dementia, but there is also vascular dementia; in many patients, it is mixed. A rarer form of dementia, Lewy body dementia, causes a particular type of dementia, with less memory loss but big impacts on movement. In particular, it causes hallucinations, and our police and firefighters should know about that. If they have had 50 calls from the same patient, it may be not because there is a burglar, but because that person is having hallucinations of a burglar. That is why we need to integrate all our public services, so that they learn from each other. Other conditions, such as HIV and Parkinson’s, can also lead to dementia. Many people know about memory loss, but there is not so much awareness of the difficulties that dementia creates with making decisions, concentrating and spatial awareness. People with advanced dementia have real difficulty moving around in our environment, and the situation is even worse if certain parts of the brain are impacted.

Unfortunately, at the moment treatment is very limited; there have been no new drugs for dementia since 2002. The most commonly used drugs are those that stop the breakdown of acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter that sends messages from one brain cell to the next. Those drugs can improve concentration, but they do not work against the underlying causes of dementia, partly because we still do not understand all the underlying causes. We see the breakdown of proteins, we see bits of proteins appearing in the brain and we see brain cells getting tangled up, but what exactly is causing all that? We need to upscale research to a totally game-changing level to understand the cause so that we can try to prevent and treat dementia. In Scotland in 2013, the Scottish Dementia Research Consortium was set up as an umbrella organisation to try to bring all such projects together. As well as laboratory research into the cause and treatment of dementia, research into a human rights approach to those living with dementia is critical in improving support and care.

We are also looking at adapting our health and care systems. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) mentioned, two years ago Scotland published a national strategy for dementia, which is the country’s third such strategy; the first was in 2010. This one will focus on the whole pathway, from providing post-diagnostic support right through to end of life, and including community co-ordinators.

Dementia is the disease that our generation fears. My grandmother feared tuberculosis—people did not even name it; they called it “consumption”—and the people I looked after as a surgeon feared cancer. What many of us now fear is losing ourself, as we have heard described so graphically this morning, or losing the person we love now is losing ourself, as we have heard described so graphically this morning, or losing the person we have loved all our adult life.

Providing social care is critical for those living with dementia and for their families. In Scotland, we have spent more on social care, which allows us to provide free personal care. That means that if someone can be supported at home to live with independence and dignity,
it will not cost them or their family. Since Frank’s law came into effect in Scotland just two months ago, that has also applied to those under the age of 65. The care they receive is thus related to their illness and particular needs, without a bizarre cut-off at 65 that prevents a 64-year-old from receiving the care that they require.

The problem is that we are struggling to recruit people as carers, whether in care homes or in home care. Most people want to be cared for in their own home, but it is very labour-intensive. Some aspects of the situation are being made worse by Brexit. In parts of Scotland, such as the highlands, 30% of carers are from Europe, so there will be an existential problem for care services. We also need to turn caring into a proper professional career, with training, career development and a decent salary that rewards carers for the very difficult job that they do.

It is critical that we support a person with dementia along their entire journey. All we have to do is to sit in this Chamber and imagine ourselves in that clinic, getting that diagnosis, and then going home and finding that there is nothing—no information, no support and no one to answer questions. The integration agenda, which is further down the line in Scotland, is linking things up. We have linked our NHS back into integration since devolution, but integrating healthcare and social care is a lot harder; social care is much more fragmented, because it is provided by multiple private companies.

We have multiple projects going on in Scotland that are often recognised through Scotland’s dementia awards. My local health board has won one such award for its “Bridging the gap” project, which provides a dementia support adviser to liaise between hospital, community and family along the patient’s journey. In Wishaw, there is a theatre buddy scheme, so that if someone with dementia requires surgery, their buddy—they could be a worker or a relative—is there at the last moment before the operation and when the patient wakes up. One project that I particularly like is the provision of assistance dogs that have been trained by prisoners in Castle Huntly, which involves a double win: the prisoners are proud that they are helping someone in the community, and those living with dementia have assistance dogs.

However, for those who are living with dementia now, the most important thing is to make them feel welcome and included in the communities that we live in. In 2016, I was lucky enough to be invited to speak at the launch of Dementia Friendly Prestwick, which is led by a very impressive team, particularly Julie and Lorna, who are leading lights within it. I had not done any of the work required to set it up; I was just asked to give a speech at the launch. However, I was inspired by that launch to set up Dementia Friendly Troon and Villages, Troon being the community that I live in.

In Prestwick, a relaxed cinema has been running for three years. There are subtitles, the cinema is free, it is not as dark as most cinemas, they serve home-baked food and they have even had a local potter make double-handed cups. The baking is all done by Berelands House, one of our local nursing homes. The cinema was a finalist in the Scottish Dementia Awards, and the sound and screen are of really high quality. I went to watch one of the movies myself. That service is provided by Friends of the Broadway, the Broadway being an old cinema in Prestwick.

In Troon, we have relaxed golf and an allotment, which is supported by other gardeners. We started by asking, “Why do we love living in Ayrshire, and how do we help people to hang on to that for as long as possible?”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate; I had a meeting with the Turkish ambassador, so I just could not be here earlier. Does the hon. Lady agree that greater support should be provided for those living with dementia to enable family members and other close relatives to take care of their loved ones—that is really important—for as long as possible before putting them into care facilities?

Dr Whitford: I absolutely agree; care should be provided in the home, if at all possible. That is where we would all want to be. The hon. Member for ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) mentioned the hotel room that uses colour as well as technology to make it easier for a person with dementia to stay in it, as well as making it easier for their carer to be there.

Guided walks are provided in Troon. Troon promenade is being redesigned to make it easier to move around on, and Troon is part of Cycling Without Age, which provides cycle rides along the promenade on trishaws every Sunday afternoon. Staff at our local airport, Prestwick, have received the training to make it a dementia-friendly airport. That all depends on Alzheimer Scotland, which provides training to staff at the airport and at other, smaller businesses, such as hairdressers and cafés.

We are the ones who have to make the change. All we are asked to do is be patient, rather than tutting behind someone in a supermarket. In our area, we have managed to get two supermarkets to provide relaxed lanes where people will not be rushed, but will be invited and chatted to as they come through. Let us all be less hectic, and let us make everyone feel welcome in our communities.

10.39 am

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing today’s debate and for her excellent work on the all-party parliamentary group on dementia, championing awareness of dementia and support for those affected. I also thank Members present, particularly the hon. Members for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), who have shared very personal stories about how they and their families have been affected. I pay tribute to carers, both paid and unpaid, who do so much to make life bearable for those who are suffering—I apologise for saying “suffering”, but personal experience teaches me that that is the reality.

Dementia is a life-changing disability that affects millions of people in the UK. Some 850,000 people in the UK have been diagnosed with dementia, including more than 1,000 people in my constituency of Burnley. More than 24 million people have a friend or family member who lives with dementia, and that figure is increasing all the time. Alzheimer’s Research UK estimates that one in three people born in the UK this year will develop dementia in later life, and as the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) has reminded us, this is not just a feature of old age; people of all ages can suffer.
Dementia has a huge human cost. My grandmother suffered with dementia—she did suffer—and, regrettably, the support that was needed was not available to my family. Dementia also has a huge impact on resources: each year, the total cost of dementia to the UK is £26 billion, and that cost is expected to more than double in the next 25 years. Given the scale of the issue, it is fitting that Members from all parts of the House have raised their voices today to call for action.

Members have made it abundantly clear that action is needed in three main areas. First, prevention is crucial: *The Lancet* reports that 30% of cases of dementia could be avoided through an increased understanding of risk factors and the implementation of basic lifestyle changes. It is imperative that the Government lead on enhancing awareness among the general public, and on celebrating dementia-friendly projects and looking at other processes. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) for reminding us of the impact that mindfulness can have on preventing the development of dementia.

In the area of research, it is clear that dementia is the poor relation; as my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) has so expertly reminded us, dementia is decades behind other conditions. Alzheimer’s Research UK has asked, very reasonably, that the Government commit to investing an amount equal to just 1% of the total societal cost of dementia into research. After all, the UK has some of the best scientists in this field, although there are simply not enough of them; they are outnumbered four to one by cancer specialists. The 2015 challenge on dementia, which has been mentioned, was most welcome but does not go far enough, and I look forward to hearing how the Minister might take that forward.

While prevention measures and research to achieve early diagnosis and future treatment are still too inadequate, it is vital that those who are diagnosed with dementia are given access to a comprehensive package of support. That is not just a job for the authorities: we have heard many Members describe pockets of really good practice in their constituencies, and I pay tribute to those who are delivering on the ground. However, there is no doubt that Government cuts to social care funding amounting to £7 billion since 2010 have taken their toll—nowhere more so than in the area of social care for those who suffer with dementia.

We often hear talk of the so-called dementia penalty, which is not surprising, as those affected by dementia regularly pick up two thirds of all care costs. Dementia patients often require more specialised and more expensive care. The associated costs can be as high as £500,000, and they almost always exceed £100,000. It is clear that patients with dementia are treated differently from patients with other conditions and disabilities. The failure to fund care adequately is placing additional pressure on NHS resources: last year, there were 70,000 avoidable hospital admissions for people diagnosed with dementia. That causes unnecessary suffering for patients and their families and is hugely wasteful of NHS resources.

What can be done to right this wrong? The recommendations of the all-party group on dementia could be implemented without delay. Dementia must be fully recognised as a disability, with sufferers afforded the same rights, protections and dignities as any other disabled person. Local authorities and health providers need to collaborate to offer a package of support that is both comprehensive and accessible; as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) has trained, it is no good having help available if that help is difficult to access. The eagerly anticipated social care Green Paper must fully address the needs of those living with dementia. The UK Parliament must lead by example, becoming the first dementia-friendly Parliament and actively promoting and supporting dementia-friendly communities everywhere. All members of health and wellbeing boards should be obliged to become Dementia Friends. Most crucially, the Government’s plans for the NHS and care workforce must properly reflect the needs of people with dementia.

The situation is urgent, and now is the time for the Government to listen. As part of the comprehensive spending review, the Government must introduce a dedicated £2.4 billion dementia fund to cover the additional costs of delivering dementia specialist care, and end the inequity between dementia and other diseases that currently leaves affected families facing astronomical care costs. That fund would enable timely access to an integrated package of support and help to facilitate specialist training for all care workers, equipping them to deliver high-quality dementia care.

Will the Minister commit today to addressing the long-term needs of dementia sufferers in the social care Green Paper and in the NHS and social workforce strategy? Will she commit to increasing research into the development of new treatments? Will she go beyond warm words and ensure that those with dementia are not forgotten in the comprehensive spending review? Will she support the establishment of a dedicated dementia fund to give people the support they are desperately crying out for?

10.47 am

**The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage):** As ever, Mr Paisley, it is a great pleasure to serve under your stewardship. I thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this important debate, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for supporting her in doing so, and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for it. I also thank all the other Members who have taken part in the debate, and in some cases shared very personal journeys and stories about their family’s experiences with dementia and, indeed, some interesting and inspiring best practice from their constituencies—things that other areas can learn from.

I also thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth for her personal commitment and dedication to people living with dementia, both through her work on the all-party parliamentary group on dementia and in her constituency. She is so committed to making Oldham East and Saddleworth a really dementia-friendly place to live; she sets an excellent example of what we as Members of Parliament can do in our own communities, and I welcome her vision of making Westminster the first dementia-friendly Parliament. I will do everything I can to support her in that endeavour, because I know that her passion is driven by her experience of having a close family member living with dementia.

Other Members have spoken about their own experiences, and I have also had two very close family members living with dementia: my grandmother and my uncle,
who passed away just before Christmas. I have experienced at first hand the impact that dementia has, both on the person who is living with it and those who love and care for them. Hon. Members from across the House have spoken about the importance of carers, and I have seen at first hand the impact that caring for my grandmother had on my mum—on her relationships, her professional life and her health and wellbeing. Those carers’ commitment should never be taken lightly. A dementia diagnosis is more than a diagnosis for that individual: it is a diagnosis for the whole family, their loved ones, their community and their workplace.

Jim Shannon: In my constituency, 1,152 people live with dementia. As the Minister rightly said, it affects a lot of families as well as the wider family circle. Has she given any consideration to respite care for those families to give them a break from the physical, emotional and mental pressure that they are under?

Caroline Dinenage: Respite care was one of the themes of the carers action plan that we published last year. SCIE is putting together guidance for local authorities on how they can best provide that crucial respite moment for those brilliant carers. [Interruption.]

A diagnosis is very much for an individual, but also for their families and loved ones and for their communities and workplaces. When those come together, it is possible to live well with dementia, as my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) said. Such personal experiences make me passionate about my responsibilities as a Minister. The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) challenged me to continue to push the Government to keep dementia as a priority, and I always will. I am proud of the Government’s commitment to deliver on the dementia challenge 2020 in full to make this the best country in the world to live for anyone with a dementia diagnosis.

The challenge aims to transform the lives of people with dementia, as well as their carers and their families, through better awareness, care and research. We have made significant progress as part of the challenge, but we know, as we have heard today, that there is still much more to do. We have already started our work on our strategy for the period beyond 2020. This is not something that finishes in 2020. It is simply the start of the next phase and we will publish our thoughts on it early next year.

One of the key successes of the challenge has been improved diagnosis. We are meeting our ambition, and today two thirds of people living with dementia receive a diagnosis, but we clearly still have some way to go. Of course, not everybody wants a diagnosis, but we know that a timely diagnosis enables a person with dementia to access the advice, information, care and support that can help them to live well with the condition and remain independent for as long as possible.

We are focusing on reducing the variation in local dementia diagnosis rates. There is a real geographical variation, and targeted support to identify and engage the areas most in need of assistance will really help. Reducing the gaps in diagnosis will ensure that people with dementia have consistent access to a diagnosis wherever they are in the country. We also know that receiving good quality care improves the lives of people with dementia. Equipping our health and social care workforce with the skills that they need is therefore crucial to the quality of care for those living with dementia.

Since 2012—the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) mentioned this—1 million episodes of the tier 1 dementia awareness training have been completed by NHS staff, and more than 1 million care workers completed the care certificate, or common induction standards. We continue to work to meet our commitment that staff have the training appropriate to their role. We want to see more people doing the tier 2 training, which is much more robust, so we are exploring options to see how we can increase take-up for anyone who needs it.

Dr Whitford: Is there an audit of hospital environments? Just before I left to come here, my hospital was redesigned using coloured zones and imagery to help people with early dementia move around the hospital independently. Are there similar projects elsewhere?

Caroline Dinenage: That is an interesting question. I do not know the answer, but I would be keen to look into it to find out. We are looking to explore ways to encourage the take-up of tier 2 dementia training. I recently co-signed a letter to health and care organisations with the chief executives of Skills for Care and Health Education England to highlight the importance of dementia training and education, which is a really important part of our discussions.

We are also meeting our commitment on Government funding for dementia research of £60 million or more each year, to reach at least £300 million invested over the five years up to 2020. The figure is actually more than £60 million this year—it is £83.5 million. In addition, we have the UK Dementia Research Institute, which is funded to the tune of £290 million: £190 million from Government and £50 million each from the Alzheimer’s Society and Alzheimer’s Research UK.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the Minister for giving way and apologise for the earlier interruption; I am glad it did not put her off her stride.

Much of what we have discussed today—the issues around this illness—are devolved to Scotland, but I want to press her on an issue that is not devolved: legal protection for older people with dementia. What measures can be put in place for financial institutions to have a legal duty of care to look after those people? In the debate we have focused on the practicalities of care, which is important, but we have to think about how we protect people in law in financial terms.

Caroline Dinenage: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I am sure the slight disturbance caused by her mobile created a welcome distraction for everybody from my speech. I took note of what she said in her speech and she makes an excellent point about protections.

To go back to research funding, the incredible dementia discovery fund, which other Members have mentioned, was launched by David Cameron in 2015. It is the world’s largest venture fund aimed at a single disease area that looks to develop novel pre-clinical therapies. Our continued commitment to support research has also seen increasing numbers of people involved in the joint dementia research programme, with 20,000 people...
taking part in dementia research studies. To answer the question asked by the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane), I am happy to meet and discuss any other research that comes forward.

Ahead of developing new treatments, we need to be able to support people to live well with dementia in their communities. The Dementia Friends programme, which a lot of people have mentioned—I am also a Dementia Friends champion—is a great example of increasing public awareness. Through the dementia-friendly communities programme—365 so far this year in England—we are making society more inclusive. We are supporting the National Dementia Action Alliance’s work to promote dementia-friendly hospitals across England through its charter to improve the care that people receive.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney asked me about writing to the Department for Work and Pensions about improving its guidance to employers, which I will commit to do. We know that careful reforms are required to ensure that the social care system is prepared for the challenges of an ageing society, including for those with dementia. Many Members, including the hon. Member for Cambridge, mentioned adult social care funding. Many Members also talked about cuts to local authorities, but over the past year we have given councils access to an additional £10 billion: an 8% real-terms increase.

However, the fact that we are still talking about the social care system being on the point of crisis, at a tipping point or under huge pressure, shows the scale of the problem. That is why we have committed to publishing the adult social care Green Paper at the earliest opportunity. I share everybody’s frustration about the delays, but it will set out ideas for an element of risk pooling to save individuals from catastrophic costs, which some have spoken about today. We are committed to ensuring that everybody has access to the care and support they need. More short-term social care funding will be agreed alongside the rest of the local government settlement in the forthcoming spending review.

The NHS long-term plan sets out a 10-year strategy, outlining how the NHS will spend the £33.9 billion cash terms annual increase that will go into the NHS budget. We now know that around a third of dementia cases are preventable. Since 2018, every person attending an NHS health check in England—the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) mentioned prevention—receives information about how to reduce the risk of developing dementia. It includes advice on smoking, safe levels of alcohol and being physically active. Between 2013 and 2018, nearly 7 million people attended health checks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) mentioned Careline in her constituency. There are lots of innovative ways that technology can improve the lives of people with dementia. Jelly Drops are an ingenious way to tackle dehydration using sweet-like capsules. My local county council in Hampshire uses existing technology such as Amazon and wearable technology to help people maintain their independence, stay safe and combat isolation. All those achievements, brought together in the dementia challenge 2020, help to improve the lives of people with dementia, but we know that more needs to be done. We are committed to continuing to improve the lives of people with dementia, and of their families and carers.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I call Debbie Abrahams to wind up.

10.59 am

Debbie Abrahams: I thank everybody for their excellent contributions to a really important debate. I particularly thank those who shared their personal stories. Such empathy makes a difference to people who have dementia and to their carers, and I thank Members for that. There were examples of excellent practice. In different parts of the country, excellent work is going on, and we need to make sure that it goes beyond Members’ own constituencies. The key thing is national leadership. I know the Minister is committed. On the areas around housing, transport and social protection, which are not necessarily in her brief, I would be grateful if she made sure her colleagues are aware of the recommendations.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Gambling Levy: Online Gambling and Greyhound Racing

11 am

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the gambling levy from online gambling and racing greyhounds.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, and to lead this debate. In 2016, as Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, I led an inquiry into greyhound welfare. At the time, we found that there was a distinct lack of data, the regulation was not strong enough, the inspection regimes were insufficient, and there was poor welfare in parts of the greyhound racing industry. We recommended improvements in each of those areas, but funding continues to hold the key to lasting improvements.

I compliment the industry on going forward in many ways. Today’s debate is not about finding fault with the industry; it is about concentrating on the betting industry and the £2,500 million a year that is bet on greyhound racing, and ensuring that enough of that gets to animal welfare charities and the industry in order to make the life of retired greyhounds so much better.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My grandfather kept greyhounds, so there is a particular interest in them in my family. I agree that these dogs are not simply assets; they are living and breathing, and deserve a minimum of care. A small statutory levy may well bring about that standard of care. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a 1% levy will not break the bank for the bookies, but will help a poor animal to avoid a broken leg from inadequate nutrition and the strenuous nature of the races it is involved in?

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend—I believe him to be my hon. Friend—raises a very good point. Not only would 1% not break the bank for the betting industry, but without greyhound racing the gambling industry would lose £2,500 million a year. I will be quite blunt: I think it is criminal that the industry does not pay 1% or more—an increase in cash for greyhound welfare. A levy of 1.5% would generate £100 million to support infrastructure financing. Take horse-racing as an example. The horse-racing betting levy covers the gross profits of all gambling companies based overseas.

The public demand good welfare—it is also in the interests of the industry—and for the betting industry to deliver that money. Otherwise, there will be huge pressure not to have greyhound racing at all. That is the point I stress. The amount of welfare funding at the moment is a voluntary 0.6%. I will talk about the good companies that come up with that. Previously, too few betting companies have coughed up the cash, and there are still a few more to go—especially online betting companies based overseas.

I congratulate the Minister, and her predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), on getting the bookies around the table, and on getting them to contribute to the British Greyhound Racing Fund, which was set up to protect greyhound welfare. I also congratulate the betting companies themselves—Betfair, Betfred, Sky Bet and William Hill—that have committed to meet the 0.6% target in January this year, raising a projected £3 million a year. That will take the total amount raised up from £7 million to £10 million.

However, too many companies still do not contribute. Many independent bookmakers, and a growing overseas betting presence, do not pay their fair share. Not only is it wrong from the point of view of the greyhounds’ welfare, but it is wrong for the rest of the betting industry, because if some companies are making that donation so should they all. Bookmakers profiting from greyhound racing have a responsibility to support it, whether they trade on the high street or online. Of course, high street bookmakers have contributed and still do.

When we consider that £2.5 million is staked annually on live greyhound racing in the UK, the welfare conditions of some of those animals remain shocking. They are improving, but with more money they could be much better. Greyhounds bred for racing are animals, not assets. They are gentle, athletic breeds. They feel pain, whether due to damaged limbs or dental problems, and they need love like any other dog. We must ensure that all kennels are up to scratch.

I thank the Greyhound Board of Great Britain for all the work that it does inspecting and helping to raise standards, and I thank the Kennel Club, the Greyhound Trust and other welfare charities for the great work that they do in rehoming greyhounds. An increase in cash for the British Greyhound Racing Fund would make a huge difference to greyhound welfare. Even the committed made in January for the betting companies to reach 0.6% merely reverses a decade-long trend of drastically declining income from the voluntary levy paid by bookmakers.

Income for the British Greyhound Racing Fund has fallen by half in the last 10 years, from £14 million in 2008-09 to just £7 million last year. While online betting continues to thrive, retail betting is suffering. Some 60% of BGRF funding currently comes from retail betting, but the introduction of the £2 maximum stake for fixed odds betting terminals which, by the way, I am very much in favour of, will result in a decline in the amount of money received. That is why we need to increase the percentage of the levy.

A statutory levy that targets greyhound betting equally, levied on all bets placed on UK greyhound racing, will be fair on betting companies and on greyhounds. A strong greyhound welfare system requires strong long-term financing. Take horse-racing as an example. The horse-racing betting levy covers the gross profits of all gambling operators offering bets on horse-racing in Great Britain. Last year alone, the 10% statutory levy on profits generated around £100 million to support infrastructure improvements, a reduction in injuries, better data and higher prize money.

A similar statutory levy on greyhound racing, but based on 1% of gross turnover, would generate £11.6 million for greyhound welfare. A levy of 1.5% would generate £17.5 million. That is where I would like it to be at the very least, because I do not believe that it would affect the industry very much at all. In fact, it would make for a stronger industry. Immediately, the money would provide a more stable income stream for animal welfare activists and charities that improve kennelling standards,
pay for veterinary bills and rehome greyhounds. It would also create an even playing field between contributing bookies.

As the sixth most watched sport in Britain, the welfare and care of all racing greyhounds, from registration to retirement, must be a fundamental part of its successful future. Last year, 4,963 injuries were sustained by dogs in the greyhound racing industry. We welcome the industry giving those figures, because that was something that we put in our report. Almost 1,000 died or were euthanised. I do not want greyhounds to be euthanised because it is not economic to keep them going. That simply should not happen. Enough money should come from the betting industry to rehabilitate those dogs and get them rehomed.

A campaign is under way to ban greyhound racing altogether. I believe a statutory levy will better protect welfare and the industry in the long run. The industry should embrace that—if it does not, greyhound racing will be under pressure in future. It is wrong of the companies not to embrace the levy and pay more. I congratulate the Minister and the gaming companies that have contributed a voluntary levy on their hard work, but I urge her to do more and greater things to get more money out of the gaming industry.

After Brexit, the Government should come forward at the earliest opportunity with primary legislation to introduce a statutory levy, to equalise welfare contributions and protect greyhound racing. Believe it or not, the statutory levy on horse-racing was introduced before we joined the EU, and it is quite difficult to introduce a levy under EU law. As we leave the EU, we can put a statutory levy on online gambling and racing greyhounds. I would very much welcome that, because putting it in place would bring into line a lot of the gambling companies that are not paying at the moment. We in this House, and people across the country, all want our greyhounds to have a good retirement. Let us ensure that those that can be rehabilitated after racing have a good life. We can then have a good industry that is well run with good welfare conditions that are well funded by the gaming industry.

11.11 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing this debate and on giving us a chance to speak about the breadth of areas he mentioned. It is absolutely right that we do so, because greyhound racing employs over 7,000 people in the UK, with over 2 million people attending races each year. It contributes an estimated £55 million to the Exchequer.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Department’s positive work, including by my predecessor and my officials, to ensure that we have supported greyhound racing, that we increase bookmaker contributions and, vitally, that the welfare of our greyhounds is protected and indeed improved. We recognise the challenges that the sport has faced over the past few years. There has been a decline in racecourse attendance, and betting has progressively moved online, resulting in a drop in contributions from gambling operators to the British Greyhound Racing Fund.

The hon. Gentleman’s words are gratefully received, and in January we announced progress on additional voluntary funding—a commitment to the welfare of greyhounds. It is worth an estimated additional £3 million this year, increasing the expected income to around £10 million annually. This commitment will significantly improve the welfare of thousands of greyhounds, both on and off the track, and it will further support retired or injured greyhounds, ensuring they can enjoy a full and active life—as we heard—both inside the sport and in retirement. Although we recognise that it is a positive step in securing additional contributions from the five largest online betting operators, I am aware—the hon. Gentleman has also made the point—that we want more money for welfare. I therefore urge bookmakers that have not signed up to the agreement to do so to meet their welfare obligations to the sport and the animals.

Neil Parish: The most difficult part is that, to a degree, we can name and shame companies that are not contributing, but those that are offshore and well away from the UK probably do not worry too much about their reputation. How do we get at them to ensure they contribute? More people are moving to offshore online betting.

Mims Davies: On welfare and levies on gambling, my Department has to ensure that bookmakers are at the table. Where profits are in this country, we should seek to ensure that they go back for the good of the sport or to support other areas where there are vulnerabilities. I take his point and will write to him.

The Department has a responsibility to ensure that all bookmakers meet their obligation. I will be meeting the Remote Gambling Association next month, when this will be on our agenda. I also recently met the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), who has responsibility for animal welfare, to discuss our respective Departments’ funding and welfare concerns, and to ensure that it continues to be an important issue across Government. I also met the Greyhound Board of Great Britain, alongside the RSPCA and the Dogs Trust, to discuss everything the industry has to think about on greyhound welfare. I have made it clear that welfare should be at the heart of the sport, as my hon. Friend said, and that standards should be as good as they can be, so that the sport will remain an attractive spectacle and continue to thrive by having people enjoy it. I will continue that work with Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, so that industry representatives and everyone involved ensure that greyhound welfare is absolutely safeguarded. Any greyhound put to sleep due to medical treatment being too expensive or a poor prognosis is one too many, and we must stop it.

The publication of GBGB’s “Greyhound Commitment” is welcome and marks a sea change for the greyhound racing industry. It is driving up welfare commitments and standards, which is what we want, and has led to an increase in voluntary funding. Alongside the publication of the injury and retirement figures in 2018, the “Greyhound Commitment” makes it clear that we are making progress on this journey. It also shows that there is much more to do, and I want to ensure that we continue our commitment to drive these changes.

Over the next three years, GBGB has committed to halving the number of greyhounds that are regrettably put to sleep due to their not having a home or for economic reasons. The ultimate aim is to bring the
figure down to zero within five years, which is absolutely right and an expectation that I thoroughly support. Hon. Members all want greyhounds to find new homes and enjoy a healthy retirement when they leave the sport. There are positive signs of the industry stepping up to the challenge that my hon. Friend laid down in the 2016 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee report on greyhound racing, to build capacity and strengthen welfare in the system rather than just waiting for legislation and indeed enforcement.

On the voluntary commitment, bookmakers and the industry can play an important part in ensuring that there is enough funding for the greyhounds and integrity in the sport. Of course, this is only one source of income for the sport. More than half of the industry’s income, totalling around £119 million, comes from existing commercial agreements and racegoers. It is important that the industry looks at ways of increasing commercial income, so that more support can be used to benefit welfare and raise standards. Of course, this is only one source of income for the sport. More than half of the industry’s income, totalling around £119 million, comes from existing commercial agreements and racegoers. It is important that the industry looks at ways of increasing commercial income, so that more support can be used to benefit welfare and raise standards.

Online betting on greyhound racing has increased in recent years, and the industry should continue to seek opportunities to generate more commercial revenue through online streaming and media platforms. That is another avenue through which we can support the industry directly.

The Government do not currently plan to introduce a statutory levy. My hon. Friend mentioned that state aid is one reason why a levy is problematic. Things may change post-Brexit, but we expect progress even without introducing a levy.

Neil Parish rose—

Mims Davies: I can see what is coming.

Neil Parish: I accept what the Minister says, but I am a great believer in needing quite a big stick to bring people into line now and again. I would have thought that the idea of bringing in a levy in future would concentrate minds in the industry. If it delivered the 1% to 1.5%, we would perhaps not need the statutory levy, but sometimes the stick needs to be available.

Mims Davies: My hon. Friend tempts me. I have never said, for any other aspect of gambling, that levies are off the table. At this point, the Government do not currently have plans to introduce a levy but, as I said, that does not stop us from working with all available tools to ensure that the sport has a successful future.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has committed to securing new funding from online operators, which was worth around £3 million to the sport in January of this year. As I said, that raises the total income to around £10 million annually, which ensures that we can work with GBGB on its long-term strategy for welfare, and shows the cross-Government commitment to doing what we can with the tools that are currently on the table to ensure that the industry is up to scratch. I take this opportunity to remind all operators to ensure that they are contributing and that we maximise commercial income from the sport so that we can deliver on our welfare commitments.

I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue of the welfare of greyhounds. We need to make sure that we have a stronger industry in which the greyhound is at the heart of the sport. As we heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), there is a passion for making sure that that is the case. I remain confident about the new funding commitment announced in January. We will help the sport to ensure that welfare standards are met and maintained.

Like my hon. Friend, I urge all non-paying bookmakers to contribute to the fund so that we can sustain the sport’s future. I commit to working with DEFRA and with bookmakers to make welfare the priority, and to keeping everything under review, making clear that bookmakers should continue to meet their obligations to the sport. I have been delighted to speak about the progress that we have made so far this year. We will always keep everything under review.

Question put and agreed to.

11.23 am

Sitting suspended.
Child Imprisonment

[STEWART Hosie in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered abolishing child imprisonment.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie.

For decades, what has been happening to the forgotten children imprisoned across England and Wales is state-supported and state-sanctioned child abuse. Worse still, those in this place who have the power to stop it have not done so.

At present, 727 children are in prison: 81% in youth offenders institutions and 19% in secure training centres. The lives of many of those children before prison were marked by significant harm and suffering. Up to 92% of children in custody have suffered prior physical or sexual abuse, or neglect, and nearly half have been in the care system. Children in custody are three times more likely than their peers to have suffered the death of a parent or sibling, and three times more likely to have unmet mental health needs. A quarter of them identify themselves as disabled, with one in five having special educational needs. Children who identify as black, Asian or minority ethnic are disproportionately overrepresented. When there is a reduction in the size of the overall youth custody system but a rise in the number of BAME people represented in it, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) led a debate on youth solitary confinement in which the Minister, as he may recall, said that “children are never, and should never be, subject to solitary confinement. They are punished with segregation—solitary confinement, which the United Nations defines as being locked indoors for 22 hours per day—or pain-inducing restraint. Recently, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) led a debate on youth solitary confinement in which the Minister, as he may recall, said that “children are never, and should never be, subject to solitary confinement in the UK.”—[Official Report, 2 April 2019; Vol. 657, c. 339WH.] Instead, he said, they are “segregated” or “removed from association”.

Such statements are repeated in ongoing and lengthy correspondence that I have had with various Ministers from the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Education. As they tie themselves into semantic knots, the repetition of statements to the effect that solitary confinement is not used is simply at odds with the facts. In 2017, the Howard League advocated on behalf of those in this place who have the power to stop it have not done so.

Three years after that 2016 announcement, those institutions remain. Only this year, the chair of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse stated that she was “deeply disturbed by the continuing problem of child sexual abuse in these institutions over the last decade.”

Report after report shows that life for children in prison consists of systematic denial of basic physical needs such as nutritious food, fresh air, exercise, and warm and comfortable shelter. Children live in environments permeated with violence, uncertainty and fear, where meaningful adult contact and education are limited or non-existent.

Adults living in such an environment would struggle. For any child, living with those heightened levels of anxiety and fear, with no trusted adult to confide in or to seek help from, will surely result in trauma and mental health difficulties. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that incidents of self-harm increased by 159% between 2014 and 2017, or that the Royal College of Psychiatrists reported that up to three quarters of doctors specialising in mental health in prisons do not think that it is possible for them to provide adequate care because of the conditions in which they are working.

When children react negatively to such an environment, they are punished with segregation—solitary confinement, which the United Nations defines as being locked indoors for 22 hours per day—or pain-inducing restraint. Recently, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) led a debate on youth solitary confinement in which the Minister, as he may recall, said that “children are never, and should never be, subject to solitary confinement in the UK.”—[Official Report, 2 April 2019; Vol. 657, c. 339WH.] Instead, he said, they are “segregated” or “removed from association”.

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Such statements are repeated in ongoing and lengthy correspondence that I have had with various Ministers from the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Education. As they tie themselves into semantic knots, the repetition of statements to the effect that solitary confinement is not used is simply at odds with the facts. In 2017, the Howard League advocated on behalf of that young boy who had spent 23.5 hours per day in his cell for 55 days in a row. Last year, an investigation by the “Victoria Derbyshire” show found that in the previous year, at least 40 children had been held in their cells for at least 22 hours per day.

Just this week, the children’s rights charity Article 39 informed me about two boys, one aged 15 and one 17. They both have serious mental health issues. They are waiting for medical care and are stuck in solitary confinement for between 22 and 23 hours per day. As they are confined to their cells, prison officers observe them in shifts through a perspex door. When the boys are allowed out of their cells, they are not permitted meaningful contact with their peers. Planned health appointments are missed due to staff shortages and doctors who do visit them can talk to and observe them only through a hatch. Reportedly, that level of confinement would be enough to induce a mental breakdown and possibly psychotic mental states. Article 39 told me about another young boy who was subject to solitary confinement. He was acutely psychotic and in need of urgent in-patient care and treatment, but he sat in his
cell for more than four weeks until a suitable hospital placement was secured and he was transferred out of prison.

This year, the Joint Committee on Human Rights published a report stating that “pain inducing techniques and solitary confinement...are...not compliant with human rights standards”. The Committee called for such techniques to be banned. The report also states:

“Data...shows that children are restrained too often, with...thousands of unjustified restraints each year, and that separation is also used too often”, adding that staff are too quick to use restraint or separation.

The permitted use of pain-inducing restraint is beyond comprehension. Prisons are the only institutions in which staff are trained and permitted to inflict pain deliberately on children. Adult staff are given a green light to cause significant harm to a child in their care. If a parent, foster carer or anyone else behaved in that manner, they would be deemed to be breaking the law and would be dealt with appropriately. In the stark and unforgiving world of children’s prisons, however, apparently it is okay for adults to cause significant harm to vulnerable and frightened children. In the past, I have worked with incredibly distressed and—some would say—violent children who have lashed out. I know that is difficult, but staff in those institutions are put in impossible situations. Their training and the option that they are given is always about restraint. Better training and support are needed for those staff as a matter of urgency.

The techniques referred to as minimising and managing physical restraint are put into four categories: low, medium, high level and pain inducing. The exact details of those techniques are kept hidden from the public, as the Government state that they reflect those used in adult prisons. We do know that sometimes children are kept in holds on the floor for more than 15 minutes, on their front or back. There are reports of children losing consciousness, with blue lips, fingernails and earlobes, having difficulty breathing and vomiting. One boy’s wrist was described as “snapping like a pencil.” Despite the screams, the restraint continued.

Data for the last year from the Ministry shows that medical attention was required in 668 use-of-force incidents. Of those, 30 were so serious that the young people had to be admitted to hospital. In the past, some incidents have even resulted in death, either directly or afterwards when children, unable to take any more, have taken their own lives. I know the Minister will be familiar with the cases of Gareth Myatt and Adam Rickwood. Their deaths led to MMRP, which we know is comparable to something far uglier than their remit of excellence in care and education. Furthermore, having Medway as the experimental site for this new model is not only grossly misguided, but smacks of a lack of understanding of how culture, custom and practice infect an institution and never leave. Rebranding while the centre is stillclassed as requiring improvement for child safety will not lead to the improvements for which the Minister hopes.

The campaign to end child imprisonment, of which I am sure the Minister is aware, is formed by a coalition of groups with a deep understanding of children’s prisons, child development and children’s rights. Those groups are campaigning not just for the closure of those prisons and a more child-welfare-based model, but for a move from responsibility for children’s detention towards children’s services. They want a change in the law so that deprivation of liberty is always an absolute last resort, and to remove punishment and deterrence as reasons for imprisoning children. I would like the Minister to respond to the campaign’s asks, and to outline the Ministry’s timetable for phasing out those institutions. I would appreciate it if he could tell us when we can expect the findings and recommendations of the review of pain-inducing techniques that began more than a year ago.

We are debating the harrowing and frightening lives that some children have to endure day in, day out. Those are children for whom the state has sole responsibility. I urge the Minister to take serious action: abolish child prisons before more harm is done. It is not only his professional duty but his moral duty to do so.

2.43 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) on securing this debate and on the conviction and professional knowledge she brought to bear on it.

I am afraid I do not have much knowledge of the prison estate; I am speaking for the specific reason that shortly after I became an MP, around the turn of the century, there was an upsurge of interest in precisely this problem and a great flurry of official and ministerial attention. As far as I can see, absolutely nothing was learnt from that time. The events centred on Feltham young offenders institution, which is close to my constituency. There were disturbances; there was a suicide caused by racially aggravated bullying, and many of the things we just heard about were reported in the press. I went there several times with other MPs, and there was an investigation and a report.

Seemingly, the problems had been solved, because the Government at the time and the prison authorities put in more staff; overcrowding among 16 to 18-year-olds was greatly reduced and we were told that the problem had gone away. But it is clear from reports from the same institution and others that many of those problems are still with us in exactly the same form or are considerably worse. It is worth rehearsing some of the main findings from that time, many of which seem highly relevant today. I want to test the Minister’s institutional memory, to know whether he is even aware that we are going round the same cycle as before.

One of the first major conclusions was the neglect of mental health. We heard from the hon. Lady how the dissatisfaction of professionals and the Royal College of Psychiatrists is a problem, as it was then. A second problem was the complete lack, or very flimsy provision,
of education facilities, partly because prisoners were being constantly recycled through the prison estate—they had very short stays and there was no time to acquire qualifications. Those who were doing vocational training in workshops were denied access to equipment because of the fear of harm and self-harm. As a result, most young people were going out on to the streets functionally illiterate and without any practical qualifications, perpetuating their problems.

The third problem, which I think is exactly the same today, was a phase of extreme overcrowding. Professional staff were not there for a very long period and, as a consequence, young prisoners were “banged up” for 23 hours a day. They were also put together in very unsuitable pairings; I went into a cell where a young offender who was there because he had been found using cannabis during his first experience of it was put with a very violent rapist, and was clearly traumatised by the contact with his cellmate. It was patently obvious even to a visitor that it was inappropriate. It perpetuated the problem to have remand prisoners and sentenced prisoners mingling together and learning from each other in a bad way.

The situation then, which I think is now significantly worse, was that there was a disproportionate number of BAME prisoners—then overwhelmingly black, and now black and Asian in greater numbers. I think the Asian population has been affected by extreme religious tendencies that have got into the prison system. We have all those ills, which were supposed to have been cured but appear to be back again in force. The simple question I ask is: why have the lessons not been learned? Why do we not progress from one generation to another? As was very eloquently described, the young people concerned reoffend, and their children will in turn reoffend, unless we learn the lessons of the past.

2.48 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

On resuming—

3.3 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) on securing this debate.

As a member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, I am acutely aware of the issues the hon. Lady raised, as a result of our recent investigation into youth detention, solitary confinement and restraint. She also raised wider issues pertaining to the current provision of youth custody, including concerns about not only safety and the use of restraint and force, but segregation of children away from others, the lack of purposeful activity for children in custody, the lack of time out of their cells, the disproportionate number of black and minority ethnic children in custody—the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) referred to that—and the distance from home at which children are sometimes held.

Social work statistics in Scotland in 2017-18 showed an increase of 89% in the average number of residents from outwith Scotland in secure accommodation. That is a form of restriction of liberty, because placing children so far from their family reduces family contact and is clearly detrimental to their wellbeing. I very much endorse the call by the hon. Member for South Shields for children to be placed as close as possible to where they come from.

I have been assisted in preparing for this debate by a helpful briefing from the Howard League for Penal Reform, which historically has had a great deal of involvement in this matter. It was very useful to hear from the right hon. Member for Twickenham how far back these problems go, and how very often the attempts at reform have failed, so that we face the same problems today as we did 10, 20 or more years ago. The Howard League has highlighted the number of children from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds who have histories of care and high levels of health problems. We have children with disabilities held in the sorts of conditions that I have described, and it is simply not acceptable.

It is particularly depressing that the 2017 report by the Howard League has highlighted the number of children from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds who have histories of care and high levels of health problems. We have children with disabilities held in the sorts of conditions that I have described, and it is simply not acceptable.

As I said, the Joint Committee on Human Rights carried out an investigation into youth detention, solitary confinement and restraint. I will say a little bit about our findings in a moment, but most important for the purposes of this debate is our overall finding that the UK Government must increase its efforts to coordinate and reconfigure resources, to ensure that there are enough specialised placements...so that each child can be placed in the most appropriate setting and as near as possible to home.

We were really advocating for recognition of the fact that these offenders are children, and for a more holistic approach. That is what we have attempted in Scotland, as I will come on to in a moment, and with some success—although I will not pretend that some of the problems we are talking about today do not also occur within the Scottish system.

The focus of the report by the Joint Committee on Human Rights was on solitary confinement and restraint. I must confess that we were greatly assisted by evidence from the Minister responding to today’s debate, who was admirably frank about matters, but some serious questions remain to be answered. Our report found “substantial medical evidence” of the significant “physical and psychological impacts of restraint, particularly when used upon children.”

We were quite clear in our findings that restraint harms children, but it also harms the staff who are trained to inflict it; it undermines rehabilitation, which is the objective of detention; and it contributes to a vicious circle of problems that figure in continued offending by such children.

The Committee found that “rates of restraint of children...are unacceptable high,” and that those children’s rights were being routinely breached. We were very clear that the deliberate infliction of pain is “unacceptable under any circumstances under rights legislation”.

We also stated: “The use of restraint for maintaining ‘good order and discipline’ must be prohibited in all but the most exceptional of circumstances.”
We recognised that sometimes the behaviour even of children can be extremely challenging for staff, and we recognised the right of staff to act in self-defence when necessary, but we were quite clear that the deliberate infliction of pain on children was unacceptable.

In its report, the Joint Committee also looked at solitary confinement and made it clear that “the use of separation from human contact is harmful to children if used for more than a few hours at a time and, beyond that...” as the hon. Member for South Shields said—

“it can amount to inhuman or degrading treatment that is a breach of children’s rights.”

The evidence we heard showed that incidents of separation—separating a child out from other children where there has been trouble or difficulty—can “drift” so that they end up in what amounts to solitary confinement, which can, in practice, be prolonged.

We were using the term “solitary confinement” to refer to “isolation from normal human contact” exceeding 22 hours per day, and “prolonged solitary confinement” where it lasts for more than 15 days.

We noted that many commentators, including all the witnesses that gave us evidence on the issue, disagreed with the Government’s assertion that solitary confinement is not used for children. We agreed with the Government that the guidelines do not permit solitary confinement, but we stated that although Ministers should not allow children to be intentionally placed in solitary confinement, that was, in effect, what was happening: incidents of separating a child out can drift and become severe isolation amounting to solitary confinement. In fairness to the Government, we said that the breach of children’s rights was not a policy decision of the Government, but it was within the Government’s power to prevent it by having closer oversight.

We made various calls, of which the Minister is well aware, on the Government to take immediate steps to ensure that the separation of children from human contact never becomes solitary confinement, and that every decision or review of a decision to extend a period of separation beyond 72 hours should be reported to the Minister, who should lay such information before each House. That might seem an extreme recommendation, but it was in recognition of the fact that we are talking about children and the long-lasting damage that can be done if they are placed in solitary confinement.

Depriving a child of their liberty is one of the most serious actions that the state can take. It must always be used as a last resort, and for the shortest possible time. As I have said, my colleagues in the Scottish Government are committed to reducing the number of young people in custody, and they have had some success in doing so.

In Scotland, there has been progress on this issue over a long period of time. In the 1960s, after the Kilbrandon report, Scotland moved to a holistic system of justice for children, and the children’s hearing system was set up for all children under 16. The key difference was a move from an adversarial system to an inquisitorial approach, whereby children’s offending is dealt with by a lay panel, with the idea that we should look to the causes of children’s offending rather than subjecting them to the same criminal justice process as adults.

Many years later, the Taylor report made a recommendation for similar reforms to process in England and Wales. It recommended that all children who plead guilty should be diverted from court to a panel that would investigate

“the causes of the child’s behaviour, including any health, welfare and education issues, and put in place a rigorous Plan that will tackle the factors associated with the offending and give victims and communities assurance that the behaviour is being addressed.”

It is a matter of regret that that recommendation has not been taken up by the United Kingdom Government. Ministers in the Home Office and Ministry of Justice have frequently said that there are aspects of criminal justice policy in Scotland that are useful for the Government of England and Wales to look at in relation to good practice. If we go back to the process by which we deal with children who offend, it might be possible to reduce the number of children who need to be held in a secure setting and therefore reduce the sorts of problems that we are discussing. I ask the Minister to address that issue as well as the questions that have been specifically addressed to him by the hon. Member for South Shields.

Will the Minister explain to us why the Government are prepared to look at only some parts of the Taylor report, and why the UK Government are not looking at a system for England and Wales similar to Scotland’s children’s panel? I also want an assurance from the Minister that the Government—not just him—will take very seriously the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. I am sure, given his evidence to the Committee, that such an assurance will be forthcoming. The recommendations were agreed unanimously among Members of both Houses, across all parties, and focused on restraint and solitary confinement.

3.14 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) for securing this important debate. She is a passionate campaigner for the rights and fair treatment of children, and the serious and substantial work she does is a credit to her. She made a brilliant speech, and, along with the spokesperson for the Scottish National party, the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South (Joanna Cherry), covered most of the pertinent points, including on solitary confinement and segregation, which was the subject of a lengthy debate in this place not long ago. I will come to that later in my speech.

Another pertinent point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields and the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), covered most of the pertinent points, including on solitary confinement and segregation, which was the subject of a lengthy debate in this place not long ago. I will come to that later in my speech.

Another pertinent point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields and the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West was on the blurring of the lines. The Government are adamant that no child is subject to solitary confinement, but the line between segregation and solitary confinement is blurred. Although the Minister’s intentions are not to be doubted, we need further clarification. The other pertinent point made by all who have spoken was on the sheer disproportionality in BAME representation in our youth estate: more than 50% is the current figure, which is shocking and cause for concern.

It is widely recognised by innumerable studies, reports and testimonies that child and young offenders are some of the most troubled and challenged groups of people in our society. Although they face many of the
same issues that all young people do, they also face challenges and have needs of a far more extreme and pressing nature, and their experiences are far from typical of those faced by other children. When compared with the general population and their peers, children in custody are far more likely to experience mental health issues. Figures published by the prisons inspectorate and information collated by the MOJ both state that around 1 in 3 children in custody suffered from emotional or mental health issues. That is worrying enough on its own but, from what we know about mental health issues in the adult estate and wider society, the figure is expected to be much larger in reality. In many cases, mental health issues are aggravated by substance misuse, with nearly half of children assessed as having a substance misuse issue on entering custody— that figure too will no doubt be higher in reality.

Children who have spent time in care, with all the emotional distress, the huge disruptions to their lives and schooling, and likely prior abuse and trauma that life in care brings, are also much more likely to end up involved in criminal activity, and they are disproportionately represented to a significant degree in custody as a result. Less than one in every 100 children in England are in care, but they account for around two in every five children held in secure training centres and young offender institutions.

The Government’s review of youth custody—the Taylor review, to which hon. Members have referred—found that around nine in 10 children held in custody had been excluded from school at some point. Forty per cent. of the under-18s surveyed reported that they had not been to school since they were 14 years old. Many young people in custody are also further hampered by a range of additional mental health challenges that affect their education and learning, with 30% of 10 to 17-year-olds suffering from ADHD, more than 50% from dyslexia, and 20% from another learning disability. It is therefore no surprise that their educational attainment is much lower than the national average. The Taylor review further points out that half of 15 to 17-year-olds entering young offender institutions have the literacy or numeracy levels expected of a seven to 11-year-old.

Such a cocktail of challenges and disadvantages are at the core of the drivers of offending for many children and young people. However, despite the challenges, the youth custodial system is fit to neither hold them nor care for them. It is plagued by serious problems that the Opposition have repeatedly warned of, and it is incapable of both ensuring the safety of vulnerable young people and effectively rehabilitating them for life after their release.

We agree that all children should be safe, including those in custody, but on this Government’s watch we have witnessed a marked increase in violence. The Taylor review points out that the number of assaults each month per 100 young people in custody rose dramatically from nine in 2009-10 to 16.2 in 2014-15. Indeed, so bad is the level of violence that the chief inspector of prisons not only described worrying rates of violence and a staggering decline in safety in the youth custodial estate in his 2017 and 2018 annual reports, but was forced to declare that no young offender institution or secure training centre is safe to hold children and young people.

Just today the inspectorate published a report into Her Majesty’s Young Offender Institution Werrington that found that violence remains far too high. That follows a report into the notorious Feltham prison, referred to by a number of Members, which also saw a significant increase in violence. The Government like to praise the reduction in the number of children and young people in custody yet, as a result of their cuts to staff and budgets, those still imprisoned are in much greater danger. They have, like with the adult estate, pushed the youth custodial estate into a spiral of violence, where neither children nor staff are safe.

Children and young people imprisoned in the youth estate are also significantly more likely to carry out acts of self-harm as the vital support once available to vulnerable individuals is eroded and becomes yet another victim of cuts. Self-harm rates in youth custody have soared in a matter of just a few years, almost doubling from 5.1 incidents per 100 children in the year to March 2012 to nine incidents per 100 children in the year to March 2017.

Earlier this month, we saw that the rate of self-harm had doubled at Feltham, some cases of which were extremely serious and involved ligatures or significant cuts. The chief inspector of prisons warned that the “care for children in crisis was inconsistent” and that there was no action plan to address the rise in incidents. That is not helped by the fact that more than one in five children feel that it is easy to get illegal drugs into their young offender institution that are proven to aggravate mental health conditions and contribute to rates of self-harm. Nor is it helped by the excessive lock-up of children and young people inside their cells for much of the day—they are often allowed out for as little as 30 minutes for showers, telephone calls and exercise outside.

Thirteen years on from the independent Carlile inquiry into the use of restraint and solitary confinement, children and young people are still being subjected to those degrading and downright dangerous conditions. The internationally recognised Mandela rules state that solitary confinement—I make the point again that the Government call it segregation, and perhaps the Minister in responding could be clearer on what he sees as not the textbook differences but the practical differences between the two— has a devastating effect on physical and mental health, particularly among groups with mental health issues. Despite that, and even its acceptance in the Prison Service rules, in October last year the Children’s Commissioner found that the number of episodes of segregation in youth custody in England and Wales has increased in the past four years, even as the overall number of children detained has fallen.

Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons has also raised worrying concerns that the use of force in the youth estate remains too high, with disproportionate force employed against children. So widespread is the use of force and restraint that the UN Committee against Torture took the step of asking the Government to ban all forms of restraint that inflict deliberate pain on children. Perhaps the Minister could enlighten us on the Government’s response.

Finally, to a topical issue—the failures in the youth justice system and youth custodial estate are having a particular impact on BAME children. The failure to
tackle needs, the drivers of offending and deep mistrust of the justice system among young people—particularly BAME children—are entrenched disproportionality in the system. Two years ago, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) published his landmark review on the treatment and outcome of those from a BAME background in the justice system. He found that, within the youth justice system, the proportion of those from BAME backgrounds rose from 25% to 41% in the decade from 2006 to 2016. That is a worrying American level of disproportionality that, as he says, leaves the UK sitting at “the extreme end of the developed world in relation to disproportionality.”

We have heard today that the figure now is higher than 41%. That disproportionality should worry us all, particularly as a greater number of BAME children in the youth justice system live in poor housing, are disengaged from education and are more likely to suffer from mental health issues than their non-BAME counterparts.

The evidence we have heard is clear: the youth custodial estate is in dire crisis, the victim of years of underfunding and neglect by the Government. The Minister faces serious questions over the failure of the youth estate and the Ministry of Justice to keep children safe, treat them humanely, and properly prepare them for release. He must answer our questions and answer for the Government’s failure. He must also set out, as a matter of urgency, a plan to ensure that all children in the youth custodial estate are safe from violence and self-harm; a commitment to end the use of painful restraint techniques and solitary confinement; an explanation of the difference as he sees it between solitary confinement and segregation; and what the Government will do to reduce the unwarranted disproportionality of outcomes for BAME children.

We have heard much about that in the last two years, but we have seen little in practice.

3.26 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar):** I thank the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) for securing a debate on this important subject. I know of her commitment to pursuing the subject and ensuring that it continues to be spoken about in this House, and rightly so.

Depriving a child of their liberty is an action that should be undertaken only as a last resort. It is not a responsibility that any state ever takes lightly. All parties would accept their responsibility for our youth justice system and this area, having served in government. I draw a slight distinction for the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), although one place I hope to visit—I am always happy to learn from the Scottish experience where possible—is HM YOI Polmont, which would be interesting as a comparator for how the English and Welsh system operates.

I am deeply committed to improving outcomes for children who offend. As all speakers have set out, children who enter the youth justice system are some of the most vulnerable in our society and are disproportionately represented in other at-risk groups with multiple and complex needs. It will not surprise my shadow, the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), to know that I take issue with a number of his points, but I share his view. He set out eloquently the characteristics and context for that cohort of young people who end up in custody. For instance, of 555 children surveyed in YOIs in 2017-18, 16% considered themselves to have a disability, 30% reported emotional or mental health problems, and 45% had been, at some point, in local authority care. It is a key priority for me and this Government to ensure that such children receive the support and interventions they need to fulfill their potential and live a crime-free and constructive life.

The principal aim of our youth justice system, and indeed our justice system, must be to protect society. I argue that we do that most effectively by breaking the cycle of reoffending and enabling effective rehabilitation. To deliver a youth justice system that understands and addresses the underlying causes of offending—a range of bases and other factors, and past trauma buried somewhere in that young person, which the shadow Minister was right to allude to—must be key. We can then ensure that every child has the opportunity to turn their life around and move on from their previous offending behaviour.

I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable). It is always a pleasure to hear the leader of the Liberal Democrats speak in Westminster Hall, and although I am not sure that my institutional memory is as long as his, he rightly highlighted the context and stated where we have come from. Colleagues who are Members of the House for long enough so often see the same initiatives and ideas come round for a second time—I am not suggesting that the right hon. Gentleman has been here for that long, but he makes a valid point.

We have seen considerable successes in the youth justice system over the past decade and, as has been said, there has been a reduction of nearly 90% in children entering the system for the first time, from just under 100,000 in 2007-08 to around 14,400 in 2017-18. The total number of children receiving a caution or sentence has decreased by 82% from around 146,500 in 2007-08, to around 26,700 in 2017-18. Importantly, we have seen an unprecedented reduction in the number of children in custody, which has reduced by nearly 70% from a monthly average of around 2,900 in 2007-08, to just under 900—it is often lower—in 2017-18.

I will return to those statistics, but one issue raised by a number of right hon. and hon. Members was disproportionality. The justice system must uphold the principles of equality and fairness for all, and in 2017-18 BAME children made up 45% of the youth custody population on average. I am committed to reducing disproportionate outcomes for BAME children in the system, and I share the concerns voiced by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) in his 2017 report. Since my appointment almost exactly a year ago, I have worked closely with him. He has been constructive and has welcomed the significant progress in implementing his reforms. It will not surprise hon. Members, however, to hear that he is always clear that he thinks we need to do more and do it faster, but I put on record my gratitude to him for his engagement.

We recognise the need for systemic change, and the principle underpinning that approach is the “explain or change” system. On occasions, there may be a rational and reasonable explanation for something, and we can...
furnish that where appropriate. If we cannot explain, we should look to make changes that address disproportionate outcomes for BAME children in the justice system. The shadow Minister may be aware that I met his colleague, the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), to discuss that and the work being done on it, and I am grateful to her for the constructive nature of those discussions.

When a crime has been committed, we have a duty to consider the needs and background of the perpetrator, but also those of the victim and wider community. As such, it is right that courts have the powers they need to sentence children appropriately. With the exception of the hon. Member for South Shields, I note that no one called for the abolition of imprisonment in this context, and I will come on to speak about what should be defined as an appropriate custodial setting. As is her wont as Queen's Counsel, the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West chose her words exceptionally carefully when referring to custodial settings, and it is an important point.

Joanna Cherry: Does the Minister think that it would be beneficial for the system in England and Wales to follow the lead of Scotland in limiting and doing away with short-term sentences as far as possible? That has worked for adults across the system in Scotland, and reduced reoffending. I know it has been looked at by the Government, but does the Minister accept it is a good idea?

Edward Argar: The hon. and learned Lady gently tempts me. She will be aware of the clear statement that I, the Secretary of State and others have made about the effectiveness or otherwise of short sentences. I have often said that a short sentence can be long enough to disrupt family life, education, relationships and home, but too short for any meaningful attempt to grapple with the underlying problems and needs of an offender. There is a particular challenge for young people under 18, because there is already a significant presumption against custody, which must be a last resort.

The offences that attract a custodial sentence—I leave this as a reflection on the nature of the cohort of young people who are in prison—include the possession of an article with a blade or point, common assault and battery, possession of other weapons, robbery, burglary in a dwelling, assault, and actual bodily harm. Those offenders make up the bulk of those sentenced to custody, including with short sentences, and I think that many in this House and beyond would still consider such offences very serious. The hon. and learned Lady will be aware that the Secretary of State set out his intention to bring forward proposals for discussion and consultation on how we approach short sentences, and I suspect that if she is patient, she may see that develop further in the coming weeks.

Joanna Cherry: Is the Minister aware of the success of the violence reduction unit in Scotland, and the diversionary schemes that take a holistic approach to knife crime? Those have succeeded in hugely reducing knife crime in Scotland, particularly among young men, not by locking them away but by taking a holistic approach to the problem. Surely that approach should also be followed south of the border.

Edward Argar: I enjoy taking interventions from the hon. and learned Lady, and although I am always somewhat nervous about what may be coming in my direction, she was kind in that last intervention. She rightly highlights the experience in Scotland. We are aware of that, and I take a close interest in it. The debate on the efficacy and future of short sentences is alive, and I am sure that she and other hon. Members will participate in it.

The youth justice system offers courts and other decision makers a range of flexible sentences that can be used to address a child’s behaviour and offending. Those range from informal diversions to cautions, community sentences and custody for the most serious offences. The Government believe that there will always be some children for whom custody may be the appropriate and necessary sentence, but we are equally clear that it should always be a last resort, and for a period of time in line with the seriousness of the offence.

In 2018, 26 sentences were given to children for murder—by “children”, I mean those under 18 who fall into the care of the youth justice system, for which I am responsible—and 44 for wounding with intent to cause grievous bodily harm. In 2017-18, 32% of custodial sentences given to children were for violence against the person and possession of weapons—that goes back to the offences I mentioned earlier. Notwithstanding the point made by the hon. and learned Lady, we believe that those offences involve significant public protection concerns that must also be carefully considered in any future approach.

The age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is 10. Custodial sentences are available for children from that age, although their use is restricted, and the courts have a statutory duty to consider a child’s welfare during sentencing. Children under 12 will only ever receive a custodial sentence for the most serious offences where neither a community sentence or fine can be justified. Furthermore, we recognise that needs can differ among different age groups, and the sentencing guidelines reflect that. For example, detention and training orders are not available for under-12s, and can only be given to children aged 12 to 14 if they are considered to be persistent offenders. Returning to the definition of “child”, about 95% of those who receive a custodial sentence are 16 and 17-year-olds.\(^1\) That is still a small number. I take the underlying point that the hon. Member for South Shields is making, but we should be clear about the age that is predominantly reflected in those who receive custodial sentences.

It is also clear that custody is used sparingly. Although proportions of sentence types have remained stable, the overall numbers are much lower than they were 10 years ago. For example, in 2017-18, just under 1,600 immediate custodial sentences were given to children, in comparison with about 15,500 community sentences. The proportions were 7% and 68%. In 2007-08, there were nearly 5,800 immediate custodial sentences, but the proportions were 6% and 68%, so they have been relatively consistent.

I am clear that custody needs to be in the right environment to rehabilitate children, which goes to the shadow Minister’s point. I have never shied away from the fact that, as I said in my evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights, in many cases we are not delivering the best outcomes for children. That is why

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1.\(^1\) [Official Report, 11 July 2019, Vol. 663, c. 3MC.]
we are committed to reforming youth custody and ensuring it is a place of safety and learning that is able to rehabilitate the young people who need to be there.

As the hon. Lady and the shadow Minister said, HMIP inspections of YOIs have identified safety and purposeful activity as key areas for improvement. The shadow Minister referred to what the chief inspector of prisons said in 2017-18. He is a decent chap, and I know that he would want to be clear for the record that the Chief Inspector of Prisons subsequently moved away from that and does not maintain that there are no safe institutions. However, he was right to highlight what was said at the time. We have taken several steps to address these issues and in 2017, following that, we began a comprehensive reform programme to ensure that the services provided in custody are aligned with the increasing complex needs of the children in our care.

Since 2017, the number of operational frontline staff in the YCS has increased by almost 40%. We have recruited more psychologists, healthcare staff and frontline officers, who are being appropriately trained in mental health and trauma-informed approaches. Earlier this year, the YCS began implementing a new evidence-based behaviour management strategy and integrated care framework, and we have built two new enhanced support units for those with the most challenging needs. We are also working with education providers and devolving additional funding to commission more educational, vocational and enrichment activities.

The ability to work with children displaying complex needs requires a very specific, very important set of skills. We are therefore also investing to improve the quality of our staff training. We have introduced a new youth justice specialist role tied to a foundation degree in youth justice to teach the latest in effective practice in youth work and rehabilitation. More than 400 staff have enrolled so far, and we are aiming for every prison officer in the YCS to have undertaken that training by 2023.

There will always be a need for a degree of security and a form of custodial setting. Alongside improving the existing estate, we are changing the fundamental approach. Last year, we announced the creation of the country’s first secure school, to be developed in Medway in Kent, which the hon. Member for South Shields referred to. I have huge respect for her, but respectfully disagree. I believe that secure schools are the right way to proceed to ensure we move away from the concept of a prison with education to that of a school—an educational setting—with a degree of security. I believe that that strikes the right balance.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Does the Minister appreciate that that is what secure training centres were intended to be at their inception almost 20 years ago, and that it has not worked? The Government are going down the same track with the secure schools model.

Edward Argar: I would argue that secure schools are not a rerun of secure training centres. The Government recognise that there is a need for a secure custodial setting as part of the youth justice system, but we believe that education should be to the fore. The hon. Lady will have seen that, unlike for secure training centres, we are looking to education providers, rather than to established organisations dealing with custody and security, to run secure schools. We are very clear that, with the investment we are proposing, we can redesign and improve the Medway facility, achieving value for money for the taxpayer and adopting a different culture and approach in that setting.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I am conscious that the Minister is coming to the end of his comments. One of the key questions I asked was this: what is the timetable for phasing out YOIs and secure training centres, as the Government promised in 2016?

Edward Argar: We have made it clear that we will open Medway as the first secure school, with a second one to follow. However, we wish to assess at each stage how well the system is working, how effective it is, and whether any improvements are needed along the way, so it would be wrong to set a date for a full and complete replacement and roll-out. The hon. Lady would not expect me to do that without testing the new model to ensure it adapts to reflect the experience as it is completely different from the secure training centres. As I said earlier, all Governments must accept their share of responsibility for the system today. In a moment, I will address the questions that the shadow Minister asked.

We will give the leaders of secure schools freedom and autonomy, similar to the freedom enjoyed by headteachers, to create relationships, care and practice centred around the needs of the children. This new model of youth custody draws on the ethos and practice of schools, with the structure and support of the secure children’s home model. I look forward to announcing the provider of the first one at Medway very shortly.

Despite the successes, children leaving custody are the most likely to reoffend in the whole criminal justice system. Reoffending rates are far too high for children sentenced to custody for six months or less. That relates to the points made by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West. We believe that short periods in custody can have a negative impact on a child’s rehabilitation. It can disrupt family relationships which, as the second Farmer review showed, can be fundamental to supporting rehabilitation and reducing future offending.

The Secretary of State for Justice set out in oral questions earlier this month the persuasive evidence that short custodial sentences do not work, and that community sentences can be more effective in reducing reoffending and keeping the public safe. I know that Members of all parties share that view, and I hope we will continue to see progress.

Let me turn to some of the questions that hon. Members asked. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West talked about the need for young people entering custody to be placed as near to their home as possible. She is right that, occasionally, there are needs that mean that that cannot happen. In cases where there has been gang-related violence or serious youth violence, there may be a genuine need to separate some young people in the custodial estate. She is right that that goes to the heart of maintaining family and other relationships.

It is always a pleasure to be cross-examined by the hon. and learned Lady and, indeed, by the whole of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. I have read its
of Her Majesty’s Government very shortly. I can speak only for Her Majesty’s Government. I do not know whether I will still be a Minister in five weeks’ time, but I can speak as one today. We will be responding very shortly.

The hon. and learned Lady mentioned the Taylor review recommendation about children’s panels. That is certainly an interesting idea. The principles underpinning it—understanding and addressing the root causes of offending—are absolutely valid and the right ones to look at in the context of the youth justice system. However, to implement the idea exactly as suggested would, to my mind, represent a significant change to the approach in this country, which still puts a judge, or a sentencer, at the heart of sentencing. As she will have seen from our response, we did not accept that recommendation, because we recognised the broader impact it would have on how our justice system operates.

The shadow Minister, and possibly also the hon. Member for South Shields, mentioned doctors’ access to patients. Doctors can always access patients directly where there is a medical need and the doctor makes that medical judgment.

The hon. Lady and the shadow Minister mentioned restraint. The training around restraint is very clear: it points to de-escalation, and the non-use of restraint is the priority. The training is there to provide officers with the skills to use. On pain-inducing techniques and restraint more broadly, as both hon. Members alluded to, the Taylor review has been under way for a while. One hon. Member—I think it was the shadow Minister, but it may have been the hon. Lady—asked when we can expect that review to be published. I will not comment before it is published, but we have said that we anticipate it will be published by the summer. I look forward to being able to do that and respond in due course, if I am still in this post.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** The Minister is being generous with his time. He seemed to indicate that pain-inducing restraint was used only for de-escalation. He will have heard from my opening comments that there is testimony from children saying quite the opposite. This is causing children pain. Has he seen the MMPR? Is he confident that it is not causing children harm? Would he want it used on any of the children he knows?

**Edward Argar:** The point I was making—forgive me if I was unclear—is that the training given to officers emphasises de-escalation as the key and the first step to be taken. It is only when there is no alternative that there is escalating use of different techniques. However, the hon. Lady made her point very clearly. As I said, I will wait until I have seen the Taylor review and we are able to publish it. I suspect that this issue will return to the Chamber in some form at that point.

A number of right hon. and hon. Members, particularly the shadow Minister, raised removal from association. We are clear that that would not be defined as isolation, not least because there is meaningful human contact with officers, medical professionals and, indeed, education professionals, who throughout any period of removal from association bring learning activities to an individual’s cell and work with them. There is no removal of meaningful human contact for the entirety of that period. There is human contact, but the shadow Minister is right that there is a definitional point to be considered. We discussed legal definitions and their different interpretations at length in the Joint Committee on Human Rights. He understandably elevated his point by saying that although we can argue about definitions, he has concerns about numbers and the operation of removal from association.

The shadow Minister also mentioned the assault rate, the segregation rate and a whole range of other factors. I urge a degree of caution with respect to statistics expressed as numbers per 100. I mentioned in my testimony to the Joint Committee that, as the numbers go down, it is largely only those who have committed very serious, often violent offences who are sentenced to custody. They are a very concentrated cohort. As the shadow Minister alluded to, they are challenging and challenged individuals in terms of their backgrounds and experiences, but they are a much more concentrated group who are much more prone to violent offences than previously. That is a challenge. It does not necessarily negate his point, but I wanted to put a bit of context around the statistics and how they are interpreted.

The shadow Minister mentioned budgets and funding. He is a fair and decent man, so I know he would recognise the role played in the financial situation by the previous Labour Government’s mismanagement of the national finances.

This has been a very important debate. We need to think differently about how we deal with children who offend. We must ensure that we place at the heart of the system the need to break the cycle of reoffending before those young people become adults, and we must understand the trauma they have often experienced, which may well be a driving factor in their offending behaviour. The courts should have available to them a wide range of sentencing options for all those who are at the age of criminal responsibility, to ensure that we adequately address children’s offending behaviour. Sometimes, as a last resort, that may warrant a custodial sentence.

I am clear that the term “under 18” encompasses children at many different stages of development, so a different type of sentence, cognisant of the individual circumstances of the person, will be necessary in each case. However, I am also clear that custody should be available as a sentencing option in only the most serious cases. The youth secure estate requires real reform to ensure that custody, where it is used, is used effectively. I will bear very much in mind the comment by the right hon. Member for Twickenham about remembering my history and where we have been before in seeking to ensure that any future change is meaningful and achieves the results we would all wish for.

Let me conclude by thanking you, Mr Hosie, for your chairmanship. I thank all those who contributed, and I thank the hon. Member for South Shields for bringing this important debate to the Chamber.

3.57 pm

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who took part in the debate. In the early stages of the Minister’s response, he seemed to suggest that I did not feel there should be consequences for crimes committed. Let me clarify that that is not my position at all. He seemed either not to have heard me or to have misunderstood the points I was making. Just to clarify, I advocated abolishing child imprisonment...
and putting in its place secure children’s homes, because that option is in keeping with all the knowledge and understanding we now have about children’s development.

It is disappointing that the Minister’s views on restraint and solitary confinement differ so vastly and wildly from the testimonies of children themselves and of those who work in this environment day in, day out. It is safe to say that I am happy that this House has considered abolishing child imprisonment, but I am not happy that we are not moving forward with it. It is something I shall be revisiting with the Minister imminently.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered abolishing child imprisonment.

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Beer Duty Rates

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

3.58 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now move on to an important debate about differential rates of beer duty. Because of the suspension of the earlier debate for 15 minutes, this debate can run until 4.45 pm. I call Giles Watling to move the motion.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered differential rates of beer duty.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to raise, again, the importance of beer duty, and pleased to represent all the constituents who have contacted me to ask that we cut beer duty. It is a campaign I am delighted to support. Although I am certainly a keen supporter, I do not believe that an across-the-board cut in beer duty is the best option, as I shall argue in this speech. That is where a differential rate of beer duty is to be much desired. Simply put, it would differentiate between the duty rates for on-trade sales of beer in pubs and the rates for off-trade sales. I am keen for that proposal to be implemented, so I have written to the Chancellor to seek his support—as the Minister will know, having responded to my letter of 23 April. That was my second letter to the Treasury on the intriguing proposal, in which I carefully responded to the points that the Minister had raised in his reply to my first letter in November 2018.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):

I point out that my hon. Friend wrote to my predecessor, and it was my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), who responded to him, rather than the present incumbent of this illustrious slot.

Giles Watling: I thank the Minister for pointing that out. I am well aware that it was his predecessor; it was the Minister incumbent at the time.

I sent a long and detailed reply to the letter, but the response was almost word for word the same as the first. Four words at the start of one sentence had been removed, and one word and one number—the date—had been changed. I am sure that that was just an oversight in the machinery of the Government; I hope it is not an indication of how much the Treasury wants to debate the matter. We must do more to protect our pubs.

The Minister will tell me that the Government have supported pubs in many ways, notably through the beer duty freeze, which means that beer duty is 18% lower than it was in 2012—hurrah! No doubt that is an impressive achievement, but if we have done so much, why have 11,000 pubs closed in the last decade and why does one pub still close every 12 hours?

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a passionate speech. The Government have delivered not just a duty freeze for our pubs, but three duty cuts followed by a number of duty freezes. The Government have taken positive action to support our pubs.
Giles Watling: I celebrate that positive action; it is great that the duty is 18% lower than in 2012.

The Alcohol Health Alliance concludes that previous across-the-board cuts in beer duty have helped supermarkets to continue to undermine on-trade sales, while failing to slow the rate of pub closures. Despite the Government’s valiant efforts, therefore, the important contributions that our pubs make to the economy and to community life by providing a place to socialise and encouraging responsible drinking remain at risk.

Most concerning, analysis shows that it is small independent pubs that are disappearing as the big pub chains consolidate their businesses around larger bars, usually in town centres. Eventually, that will allow those big pub chains to monopolise the on-trade marketplace. That will give them a stranglehold over pricing and is unlikely to result in a cheaper pint for the consumer.

Moreover, the closure of any pub, especially a small community asset, endangers work on loneliness and social cohesion. Researchers have found that people who have a local pub are happier, have more friends and feel more engaged with their local communities, but closures are depriving some people of those benefits. That can be particularly acute in rural areas. The pub is a famous and traditional part of the British way of life. It is an essential part of the community. It deals with loneliness and is a form of social care. The traditional landlord knows his clientele. He knows who needs help, who is in trouble and what resources are available, and he is a friendly ear.

As a touring actor many years ago, I stayed in a small village on the outskirts of Stratford-upon-Avon that had a pub, a church and a community centre, and a pub landlord, a vicar and a policeman. Twenty years later, I went back and those three pillars of the community had gone, along with the pub. It was a sad reflection of that wonderful little community that I knew so well, where people talked over the garden fence, talked to one another in the pub, looked after each other and looked out for one another. Instead, the people of that little local community had disappeared into their silos. They went to the local town to work as commuters and came back to their houses to drink cheap supermarket booze in front of their widescreen televisions. The community had broken down. The loss of that community is a great shame, and I want to prevent that from happening elsewhere.

We must do all we can to prevent the closure of any pub.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I worked in the pub trade for 10 years. One of my first and most enjoyable jobs was working at the Windmill Tavern and the Gates Bar in my constituency. That was a long time ago, but those pubs survive. Sadly, I know a lot of landlords who knew then, and know now, that business rates and the price of a pint are far too high. We are losing places to socialise and we are losing communities. Communities need pubs, so I strongly support the hon. Gentleman.

Giles Watling: I ran a pub with my wife—the Kings Head on Kings Head Hill, Chingford—in one of those moments when my acting career was not going too well.

Pubs are also positive for our high streets. They attract visitors, so closures are counterproductive to the Government’s efforts to revitalise our urban centres. Let us not forget the general economic impact of the beer and pub industries, which contribute £23 billion to GDP every year and support more than 900,000 jobs. Crucially, 44% of those jobs are held by 16 to 24-year-olds.

All that is at risk, however, because of beer duty rates. Even after the Government’s reductions, we still have one of the highest rates in Europe and pay 40% of all beer duty in the EU while consuming only 12% of the beer—despite my best efforts. That has contributed to the fact that, according to the Campaign for Real Ale, 56% of drinkers believe that the price of a pint of beer in a pub has become unaffordable.

Drinkaware notes the shifting preference of the consumer, who now purchases alcohol in the off-trade marketplace to consume at home, as per my example of the little village near Stratford-upon-Avon. When people can buy a pint of beer for less than £1 in some supermarkets, it is hardly surprising that many choose that option, especially when pubs simply cannot get near those rock-bottom prices. I believe that the average pint of beer is between £3.50 and £4, which is three or four times the amount.

The data supports that shifting preference and demonstrates that while high rates of beer duty have been pricing people out of drinking in pubs, off-trade sales have been thriving. Figures from the British Beer and Pub Association show that since 2000, on-trade sales have been thriving. The Government’s across-the-board beer duty reductions have not addressed that disparity, given that they also benefit off-trade sales. Because pub closures largely derive from the surge in the sale of cheap alcohol, the disparity needs to be addressed.

An underlying potential public health concern could result from inaction, because people who drink at home without a responsible landlord to keep an eye on them are at risk of alcohol abuse. Today, the number of hospital admissions related to alcohol remains high at one million annually, and that places a strain on our precious resources. Most worryingly, the number of admissions has risen as a pint has become more expensive. Even if there is not a direct correlation, 73% of publicans think that increasing the price of off-trade alcohol is crucial to tackling alcohol problems.

We can do that with a differential rate of beer duty that skews the odds back in our pubs’ favour by cutting the on-trade beer duty rate to benefit those sales over off-trade sales. The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury said recently:

“I can see the strong argument for that, but it is unfortunately not possible under EU law. Duty is levied on production, not on the place of consumption. However, we might be able to turn to the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury to persuade him to do this.”

We are shortly going to get that flexibility, and there must be a technological mechanism that we can use to track the destination of beer products when they leave the producer, and then add the tax accordingly. Such an approach would mean cutting the on-trade duty rate, before adding a stipend for beer products destined for the off-trade marketplace. It would also mean that the cut for on-trade sales would offset the increase in off-trade duty. I accept that such a change could impact all off-trade retailers, and therefore any such adjustment...
[Giles Watling]

should be narrowed to large retailers only. For large retailers, sales of beer form only part of their turnover, whereas for small off-trade retailers, alcohol sales can be everything. That important point must be considered during any discussion of the proposal so that we do not damage our very valuable small businesses.

We must differentiate and cut beer duty for on-trade sales, because doing so will truly benefit our pubs. However, although I might be considered an expert on beer, I am not an expert on tax law. I hope that we can have a pledge from the Minister today that the Treasury will investigate this matter, so we can see whether such differential rates could hypothetically be used to support our pubs when we leave the EU. Moreover, when we investigate, we must find a way to ensure that producers pass on savings to the consumer. Many in the industry allege that previous savings have been retained by brewers, and that undermines efforts to save our pubs.

If I have convinced the Minister that there is still a strong argument for differential rates of beer duty—I am sure I have—I hope that one day he will join me for a drink in my local in Frinton to celebrate the introduction of this important change.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con) rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. Does the hon. Member for Burton have the permission both of the mover of the motion and of the Minister to contribute to the debate?

4.11 pm

Andrew Griffiths: Yes, I do. Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for allowing me to take part in this debate at the very last minute. I wholeheartedly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) on his tour de force in defence of the great British beer industry and on the importance of the British pint. I only wish there were more Members of Parliament who spoke with such passion about what is a great British industry. Although the Americans or the Germans or the Belgians might claim it, I have no doubt that we produce the best beer in the world here in Britain and we should support the industry.

I will reiterate a few of the points that my hon. Friend made so well. First, there are the costs incurred in the on-trade and the off-trade. It is more cost-effective and cost-efficient to sell trays of lager or six-packs of beer from a supermarket, for them to go down the aisle, be beeped through by the assistant in the supermarket of one’s choice and for someone to take them home. There is clearly a much higher cost involved in delivering a wonderful pint of British cask ale. For a start, there is a great deal more work in keeping it, and there is the customer service that is needed in its delivery. There is a lot more science and work in delivering great customer service and a great pint of beer than one may imagine, and that costs the publican. It also, of course, provides excellent jobs, with good training, in the pub industry, which we should support and encourage.

Giles Watling: My hon. Friend will appreciate that there is a great artisan skill in looking after beers, such as knowing how to tap and spile, when to leave the beer waiting, and serving it when it is just right.

Andrew Griffiths: My father said that there was no such thing as bad beer. My hon. Friend is articulating that there is—there is a skill; it is a profession. One of the things we have lost over many years is the landlord as a profession, but with the rise of cask ale, it is beginning to come back. The landlord was well respected in our communities. He was a pillar of the community. He knew his job and he knew his cellar. The more we can support the great British pub, the more those skills can be retained and will flourish.

Secondly, on public safety, we all suffer on our high streets occasionally from what we call preloading or binge drinking, particularly among younger people who might buy some alcohol from the supermarket, or who may get it from their parents or whatever, who then go and drink in the park or in the town centre. There is a cost involved for the police and the wider community in managing that, but there is no cost to the supermarket. However, publicans are required to keep their house in order. They are required to have door staff who treat people with respect and with care, and who make sure that the licensed premises is safe and that people who turn up who may have had too much to drink are refused so that everybody else in the establishment is kept safe. None of those costs are on a supermarket but they are on the British landlord. It is important to recognise that and to represent it in the taxation regime.

There is also the extra cost of delivering cask ale or draught ale. This may be one way in which the Minister can think about being creative when he looks at a replacement for EU duty on alcohol as we come out of the European Union. The duty is on production and it may be difficult to differentiate the duty on a bottle of beer sold from a supermarket and the beer sold in a pub, but we could differentiate a bottle of beer sold in a supermarket and a pint of draught ale, because it is in a different container and is served in a different way. That may be one clever way—I know the Minister is extremely clever—in which he can crack this nut of supporting our pubs, which offer an asset to the community, keep us safe and are the great introduction to responsible drinking. I am sure hon. Members remember when someone went down to the pub where the landlord would keep an eye on them; he knows the family; if someone gets into trouble, he says, “You’ve had a few too many—go home.” We risk losing that if we lose the great British pub.

Hugh Gaffney: I am a non-alcoholic. I do not drink. I have done the pub trade for 10 years and I have never drank. I enjoy the social side of going to a pub and meeting people. Where publicans are really struggling now is with business rates. Pubs are community hubs, and we really need to look at business rates.

Andrew Griffiths: I could not agree with the hon. Gentleman more. As the ex-chairman of the all-party parliamentary beer group, I decided to challenge myself to have 12 months off alcohol. That runs out in July. I have been alcohol-free for 12 months, but that does not mean that I do not continue to support the British brewing industry and the British pub. It is absolutely at the centre of our community. The hon. Gentleman is exactly right.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned business rates and it is absolutely right that pubs are treated in a unique way on business rates. I use an old phrase: we have an
It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I have one other matter to take up with the Minister, which I hope he will find interesting. One of the objectives behind all Government policy is responsible drinking. We want people to enjoy a pint of great British beer, but we want them to do it responsibly. A great thing we have seen because of responsible actions by brewers is a reduction in the alcohol by volume in drinks, and in beer in particular. Beer is a particularly good way for us to take units out of consumption, because of its high volume and relatively low strength.

The Government introduced a lower rate of duty on beer less than 2.8% ABV. Brewers have done a really good job and have tried to embrace that, but it is difficult for a brewer to produce a tasty beer at less than 2.8%. It is the alcohol that gives it the bite, but it is also the alcohol that helps to preserve it and keep it drinkable in the pipes for longer. With the best of intentions, landlords wanted to provide a lower-alcohol beer on cask, but they could not because it was not economically viable because the beer went off. It was 2.8% because of the EU directive, which prevented us from doing anything else. As we Brexit and come out of the European Union, we have the opportunity of a differential rate—maybe 3% or 3.5%—at which brewers could produce a great, tasty beer while taking units out of consumption. For those of us who enjoy a pint, but not a stronger pint, all those things would work well together.

I thank you very much for allowing me to take part in the debate, Mr Hollobone. In conclusion, I am absolutely heartened to hear that we have such beer champions. As the MP representing the heart of British brewing—Burton upon Trent, with its history and future in brewing—I hope the Minister will think about using Brexit to deliver cheaper beer for Britons across the country as we leave the European Union.

4.20 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. This is an important topic, as hon. Members from across the House have rightly said, which commands widespread interest across not merely the House but the country. In that context, if I may make a small but telling party political point, I wish that the Opposition had been able to field a spokesman to express their view on the matter.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The Opposition are not required to field a spokesman for a half-hour Westminster Hall debate.

Jesse Norman: On a point of order, Mr Hollobone. Does that also apply when a debate has been extended beyond half an hour to 45 minutes, as in this case?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): That is correct. The Minister is enjoying the benefit of 15 minutes injury time owing to the previous debate not having completed its full passage.

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the previous speakers for giving me that opportunity. I intend to take full advantage of it. I stand corrected on the point about the Opposition, for which I am grateful.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) not merely for his ingenuity and brilliance in securing the debate and raising this topic, but for the vigour and energy that he has shown in pressing this issue over the several years he has been in the House. In doing so, although he may not realise it, he takes up a beacon that was held for many years in this House by my great friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), who I am delighted had the chance to speak. I have no doubt that, in due course, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) will himself carry that beacon, or if not, will play an important role in making this argument, because it is an important one to advance. I thank all Members who have spoken for their contributions.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton rightly said, and as colleagues from across the House know, beer and breweries are an important part of our national life, and the same is of course true for that essential accompaniment, the great British pub. As a Herefordshire man, I ought to point out that pubs do not merely serve beer. In my constituency we have Bulmers, while in Herefordshire we have Westons, Tom Oliver and Denis Gwatkin; we have a host of fantastic cider producers. Tragically, they are not the subject of this discussion; our attention must focus exclusively on beer and the beer duty. However, they contribute to the important presence of pubs in our national life.

Giles Watling: Might it not be worth consulting and finding out whether some sort of reduction in cider duty might also help to preserve the pub in the future?

Jesse Norman: That will certainly be of great interest to my constituents, both as consumers and producers. As my hon. Friend knows, there has been a tremendous reinvigoration of the brewing industry over the last nine years. The number of brewers has this year risen dramatically to more than 2,200. The rise of craft beer has seen breweries grow and flourish in every part of this country, including microbreweries, and exports have reached more than £500 million a year.

Again, it would be wrong of me not to mention a personal interest in this context. Certainly, my county of Herefordshire is as amply endowed with fabulous breweries and pubs as any part of the country. It would be wrong not to mention Wye Valley Brewery, Golden Valley Brewery and Hereford Brewery—I have pulled a pint of its Hereford Best in the Strangers Bar. Notable pubs in Hereford are the Barrels, where I held an informal surgery last Friday afternoon for a considerable period; the Volunteer Inn, known as the Volly; the Lichfield Vaults, known as the Lich; the Grapes; and the Britannia. However, I also pay attention to the specialists that have come into the market in my constituency over the last few years, which picks out this wider process of economic and social change, including Beer in Hand and the Hereford Beer House—part of a panoply of pubs across the entire county, including the King’s Head Hotel, the Man of Ross, the Mill Race in Ross and many other fine houses.
It would also be wrong of me not to touch on the excellent work in the community of the local Campaign for Real Ale team, with my support, in saving, for the second time, the Broadleys pub in south Hereford from being turned into a Co-op. It sheds a very bad light on the Co-op, which is in many ways a fine institution that I otherwise rather admire, even if I did have the Christian Methodist in front of me at one point when I was on the Treasury Committee, if hon. Members remember him. It should not sponsor the closure of pubs in order to open new Co-ops merely a few hundred yards away from ones that already exist. I single it out personally, not as a matter of Government policy, for its misbehaviour in that regard.

Andrew Griffiths: I agree with my hon. Friend, because I have seen that in action. Does he agree that one great way to support the great British pub is by doing something on beer duty? Seven out of 10 alcoholic drinks purchased in a pub are beer, so if we want to help pubs, doing something specifically on beer is the way to do it.

Jesse Norman: I will come on to a point my hon. Friend will know, in 2013 the Government took the decision to end the beer duty escalator. Since then, they have cut or frozen beer duty several times, including at the last Budget, with the effect that a typical pint of beer is 14p cheaper than it would otherwise be. The Government will of course continue to look for ways to support the brewing industry, and I absolutely look forward to further engagement with my hon. Friends and Members from across the House.

However, it is important to try to strike a responsible and sustainable balance with wider public spending commitments. It is worth noting that the Exchequer has forgone more than £5.2 billion in revenue due to cuts and freezes to all alcohol duties since 2013. That is £5 billion that has to be made up by taxpayers by other means if we are to be able to spend as we would wish on our public services. [Interruption. ] Hon. Members who have recently arrived for the next debate will not be aware that we have a few more minutes, because of the kind courtesy of the Chair, and can run the debate until 4.45 pm.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton is absolutely right to emphasise the social importance of pubs, which are central places in the community. They are mixing places and meeting places for people from every walk of life. My hon. Friend the Member for Burton also made the point that pubs are a place of supervised, safe drinking, where publicans—male or female—know their customers, pulling pints and pulling people together in a social environment. That of course raises the stakes from a Government standpoint.

When considering whether to introduce differential beer duty, we and Governments before us have had to acknowledge that the UK is currently bound by EU laws that harmonise excise duties applicable to alcohol products. We can only introduce reliefs or different rates of duty for beer that are compatible with the EU directive on alcohol excise duty structures. My hon. Friend the Member for Burton made the point that, once the UK has left the EU, the Government and Parliament will no longer be bound by this directive, so there should be much greater opportunity to explore creative proposals to redress that balance. But until then, there are limits laid down in statute as to what can be introduced. However, even within that context—this point has been touched on—we have been able to make progress and exploit some existing differentials, which have benefited pubs and breweries. Those include the small brewers relief, which allows the smallest breweries to receive up to 50% off their duty bill in the start-up and growth phase. As hon. Members will know, the Treasury announced a review of this relief in the Budget. My officials are now working to take the results of the survey further to address the issues raised, and the Government hope to make further announcements in due course.

Of course, as I have said, we also recognise the importance of responsible drinking. That is why there are already differential rates of duty on lower-strength and alcohol-free beers. On beers of less than 1.2% ABV, no duty is paid at all, and on beers between 1.2% and 2.8%, the reduced rate is less than half the standard beer duty rate. My hon. Friend the Member for Burton is absolutely right. It is hard to produce a beer of, I would say, less than 2.3% that maintains its taste, but at between 2.3% and 2.8%, one can have a delicious pint and benefit from the duty differential. Conversely, higher-strength beers over 7.5% ABV pay a higher duty rate of roughly 30% more, in part to send a fiscal signal about the importance of responsible drinking.

Andrew Griffiths: The Minister is absolutely right in what he says about lower-strength beers and the potential that that has, but may I share with him what brewers across the country have said to me? If they got the opportunity, through the duty regime, to promote beers at 3% or up to 3.5%, they would do that wholeheartedly. That would not only create a new category, but help to take alcohol units out and therefore help responsible drinking at the same time.

Jesse Norman: I am grateful for that intervention. There may be scope to contemplate an uplift in relation to the higher level of lower-strength beer. It would be interesting to discuss that further.

Let me turn to some of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton raised. I intervened only to provide the point of information to him, because of course I did not see the correspondence that he had received and therefore could not respond to it in those terms. I apologise if he was disappointed by the response that was given. It is always the Treasury’s policy to try to give informative and full as well as, of course, accurate responses.

Let me pick up a couple of the points that were raised in my hon. Friend’s speech and that reiterate some of the wider issues. Of course, there are public health outcomes that need to be met. The closure of pubs potentially affects some of those, particularly in a world
that has seen, in this country at least, something of an epidemic of loneliness, so my hon. Friend was absolutely right to pick up on that. He is also right to say that there is evidence that responsible drinking and better public health outcomes can be due to differential rates of duty. I understand that point. It is important, though, to remind ourselves of the practical difficulties that need to be overcome. It is not merely the EU law issue. It is also important that whatever the regime may be, it is not subject to legal challenge for breaching state aid or competition rules. And we may wish to remain aligned with the EU even post Brexit, from a competition or state aid perspective, in part to prevent mercantilism from breaking out between EU businesses and our own.

Of course, there is an issue about enforcement. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs taxes beer at the point at which it moves into general distribution, rather than monitoring the wider beer supply chain. The concern is obviously about the potential to repackaged beer that had the lower rate of duty paid on it and then to sell it and trouser the difference.

Andrew Griffiths: I absolutely understand the point that the Minister makes about the grey market and the potential for fraud; the all-party parliamentary beer group did an investigation into that. I therefore point him back to my previous remarks on draught beer. It is very easy to understand draught beer. It cannot be repackaged; it cannot be put in a different container; it is draught beer. We could have a differential on draught beer that I think would solve my hon. Friend’s problem.

Jesse Norman: I am delighted to have taken that final point of information. It may be the case that when we come to reconsider it, the draught beer distinction that my hon. Friend gives us a workable legal and practical basis on which to proceed. My point is a much simpler one: it is important to bear in mind the potential grey market impacts, as well as the competition, state aid and legal points that I raised earlier. Having said that, I am enormously grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton for initiating the debate and for his own Kings Head where he was a publican, I very much hope to be able to join him in the future at some point.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered differential rates of beer duty.

Electromagnetic Fields: Health Effects

4.35 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the health-related effects of electromagnetic fields.

I am honoured to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. This Westminster Hall debate is timely. It comes on the back of an historic decision by Glastonbury Town Council to oppose the roll-out of 5G because of a severe lack of evidence about its effect on the health of those living and working around 5G sites. In the words of Martin Pall, emeritus professor of biochemistry at Washington State University:

“Putting in tens of millions of 5G antennae without a single biological test of safety has got to be about the stupidest idea anyone has had in the history of the world.”

We saw the roll-out of 5G postponed in Brussels when Céline Fremault, Environment and Energy Minister, identified that it was not compatible with Belgian radiation safety standards; and a planned upgrade to 5G in Geneva has been stopped, through application of the precautionary principle, until independent findings on possible health damage become available.

I was approached by an old friend who is now a constituent about how a sensitivity to electromagnetic fields seriously affects her health and the way she lives her life. Annelie lives in France for part of the year and has to return to Wales as her health deteriorates while working as a university lecturer. I was intrigued by the effects and wanted to know more, so I have been in contact with a number of people who either have concerns about the health-related effects or are suffering at first hand. Following discussions with others, I was keen to secure a debate on the subject, because the Government are sweeping the health concerns under the carpet and there appears to be an absolute refusal to acknowledge that the health-related effects even exist.

Initiating a conversation about electromagnetic sensitivity has had members of my own team and family telling me that it is all made up. That in itself motivated me to keep reading and to speak to as many people as I could in Wales and beyond who were suffering. What shocked me was the number of people who have ES but are too afraid to talk publicly about their illness, because they are really wary of being humiliated and ostracised.

Electrosensitivity is the symptomatic sensitivity to electric or magnetic fields of any frequency, including radio frequency transmissions. The condition was first described in 1932. It is when a person’s physiology is affected by external electromagnetic fields, giving rise to a spectrum of symptoms, which are often neurological. It is therefore an illness caused by environmental agents—essentially, an environmental toxic pollutant. The condition can arise because of continued exposure to an environment polluted by man-made EM and RF wireless signals at levels at orders of magnitude below those that produce heating effects, and it is well understood in many other countries. Symptoms include headaches, fatigue, disturbed sleep, tingling, pains in limbs, head or face, stabbing pains, brain fog and impaired cognitive function, dizziness, tinnitus, nosebleeds and palpitations. As we know, with chronic fatigue syndrome, however, there was disbelief about those presenting with symptoms of this condition. Indeed, it was construed by others, through a lack of
knowledge and difficulty in diagnosis, as a psychological illness. I believe that electrosensitivity will be recognised in years to come—sooner than that, I hope—and that the Government will have to own up to their part in it.

To be honest, this is not a subject that I ever thought I would stand here and talk about, even though as a mother, I have always been keen to charge my son’s phone outside his bedroom but have never applied the same rule to myself. Parents seem to care about this in relation to their children, and we hear that masts—one was recently fitted to a school in Haringey—are no longer being put up on primary schools. There is something in this.

I also worry about the impact of social media on mental health, and about the smartphones’ increasingly addictive nature, which is impacting on the lives of the youngest of children. There is some evidence about the effects of radio frequency signals on mental health and behaviour in children and young people, but those effects are not considered in current attempts to address the increase in mental health and behavioural problems in the UK. I ask the Minister to include the effects of wireless signals when considering solutions for such problems in children and young people. The recent advice from the UK chief medical officers on screen time and wellbeing in young people has ignored evidence for the adverse effects of wireless signals.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I want to ask about the wider environmental impact. My hon. Friend will know that 4G has the same carbon footprint as all of aviation, and 5G will be a lot more. What is more, we are now hearing that 5G will have a detrimental impact on insect life, which is decreasing globally at 2.5% per year. Given that insects are essential to humanity because they are required to pollinate all fruits and vegetables, does she agree that before hurling ahead for commercial reasons, we should apply the precautionary principle until we know precisely what the impact will be on insects and our carbon footprint?

Tonia Antoniazzi: We do need to take climate change and insect life into consideration when we discuss the impact of electromagnetic fields.

As MPs, we have a duty of care to our constituents. There is no escaping the fact that when MPs, schools, local authorities and others ask questions about the safety of new technologies, Government’s give a standard reply. People who question the health-related effects of electromagnetic fields come up against a brick wall, and today I want to break through that brick wall and ask the Minister several questions. I like to think that the smart way to move forward is to consider safety and sustainability when developing products.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Many years ago, the Trade and Industry Committee investigated the matter with all sorts of experts, but nobody could come to a conclusion. That is not to say that my hon. Friend is wrong, but it was looked at about 20 years ago. Is there any evidence that electromagnetic fields can affect the behaviour of animals?

Tonia Antoniazzi: There is evidence about the effects on animals. I cannot quote from it now, but I have read about it. We must remember that animals do not use screens, but there is evidence of the impact on them of electromagnetic fields from things such as smartphones and 5G. I would have to find that evidence and send it on to my hon. Friend.

Geraint Davies: On that point, there is clear evidence that with high-frequency 5G—there is some denial about the idea that the frequency may be so high—there will be an enormous loss of insect life. To get the necessary coverage we need to place masts every 150 metres. The coverage will be enormous, and there is an incredible risk of substantial damage. Surely we should apply the precautionary principle, even if all sorts of commercial threats are being made to the Government behind closed doors about what will happen if they do not go ahead.

Tonia Antoniazzi: We need to apply the precautionary principle when we look at anything. Many councils and the Government have embraced 5G, which has come up on us so quickly, as a solution to connectivity. To be honest, given the potential impact, I would rather see fibre broadband—fixed, wired broadband—in all the houses in my constituency and across Wales, rather than having masts put up everywhere just because that seems to be a cheaper solution.

I will not accept the response that electrosensitivity does not exist; studies show that it does. It has many effects that are not at all subjective, including effects on proteins and DNA, cell death, altered brain activity and effects in animals, as my hon. Friends have mentioned. Those effects can be measured, and they cannot be dismissed as being all in the mind.

We all know that decisions relating to technology can have unintended consequences. We are discussing one such consequence: the impact on our health. Similarly, it could be argued that the effects on our mental health are being caused by online contact or screen time, but in combination with studies about animals, we can see that the signals themselves have effects. Animals do not look at screens or use social media.

In the past, no matter what questions, evidence or concerns have been put to Public Health England or the Department of Health and Social Care, they have responded with their standard reply, which includes them saying that they have thoroughly assessed the evidence in the 2012 report by the independent Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation. The World Health Organisation International Agency for Research on Cancer classified all radio-frequency signals as possible human carcinogens in 2011, based on significant increased risks of gliomas and acoustic neuromas associated with mobile or cordless phone use in humans, as well as animal and mechanistic studies. Subsequent studies have strengthened the evidence in humans and provided clear evidence of tumours in animals. Some scientists are even calling for the classification to be upgraded to a definite carcinogen.

Why, then, has Public Health England removed all mention of the IARC classification of radio-frequency signals from its website? It informs people about other possible carcinogens. People cannot make informed decisions or protect those they are responsible for if the information is withheld. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that Public Health England informs people on its website and in leaflets, communications and presentations that all radio-frequency signals are a possible human carcinogen?
Following the publication of a paper on the AGNIR 2012 report in Reviews on Environment Health, the AGNIR was quietly disbanded. However, the inaccurate report is still on its website and is used to justify its advice to MPs and the public. When will the 2012 report be retracted because it is scientifically inaccurate and out of date?

The Department for Education in England and the Department of Education in Northern Ireland have said that it is the responsibility of schools to carry out risk assessments before technologies are introduced and used. However, schools cannot safeguard pupils or staff through a risk assessment if they have been given inaccurate information. Can schools be accurately informed about the risks, so that they can fulfil their responsibilities to safeguard children?

Schools and parents could have been informed that wireless signals are a possible human carcinogen; that there is evidence of damage to fertility; and that there are adverse effects on brain development. Schools could have been advised to use wired technologies to prevent possible harm to children's health and development. The EU has sent a cautionary message about wi-fi in relation to schoolchildren, but only France has removed wi-fi from its primary schools.

The Cyprus Government have produced short, practical videos warning teenagers and pregnant women about the risks of radio frequency signals and offering simple actions. When will children, young people, parents and pregnant women in the UK be offered similar advice so that they can take steps to stay safer?

By denying the existence of adverse effects and providing inaccurate information, Public Health England and the Department of Health and Social Care have prevented the UK public from living and working in safe environments. When will the Government listen to the warnings from scientists and doctors to help MPs to better protect their constituents?

If we are to develop safer technologies in the future, we need to be honest about the risks. We must not ignore the fact that people have ES; those people exist, and their lives are being ruined. Others without ES also ignore the fact that people have ES; those people exist, and their lives are being ruined.

I agree with Sarah. Her struggle is real, and so are the lives of many people who are largely ignored and belittled. Electromagnetic fields have had a dramatic impact on the life and health of my old classmate Annelie over the past 10 years. We can no longer hide and pretend that this is not happening. It cannot be swept under the carpet, especially in the light of the future impact of technological advances at the expense of people and our environment.

In conclusion, it is evident that the Government need to ensure that the research is independent. They need to recognise electromagnetic sensitivity as an occupational disease, as a French court did earlier this year, and put guidelines in place for employers to make reasonable adjustments so that their employees can continue to work in a healthy environment. I remember the days when we made plans to meet without mobile phones to say that we were running late or could not make it. Advances in technology have swept through our lives. Before I am accused of being a luddite, I stress that I think the technology is wonderful and offers a great many benefits to all, but we cannot continue to deny that there is an impact on some people's health and wellbeing. This is not about stopping progress; it is about making sure that there are no health concerns about the technology, and about doing what is best for our constituents.

4.52 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. My hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) has done an admirable job in at least raising the issue that the precautionary principle should be paramount before we take on any new technology. As someone who represents a semi-rural area, let me say at the outset: please give me 3G. I am not worried about 4G or 5G; I just want 3G, with all the consequences it brings. My constituency still has at least one market town that cannot even get that. That was just a little plug for getting the existing technology in place.

What my hon. Friend says is worthy of debate. It should be taken seriously by the Government and should help the public to understand that their representatives are listening. Stroud being Stroud, an active campaign is already under way on 5G. People are saying, “We don’t want it and we’ll do anything to stop it, so please listen to those who have already raised concerns.”

Like my hon. Friend, I have met people who are incredibly affected by electromagnetic sensitivity—to the extent that, when they moved into their house, they had to have the smart meter taken out, and even asked their neighbour to take out theirs. Once that happened, their health dramatically improved. People say that electromagnetic sensitivity is all psychosomatic, but I have seen the evidence of people’s sensitivity to electromagnetic waves. If we ignore it, there will certainly be health and biological consequences, and there may be many more problems. Since my hon. Friend has done a valuable job of explaining the possible health and biological impacts, I will say more about planning.
Dr David Drew:

It is only fair to ask the Government to at least respond to the growing evidence from the International Electromagnetic Field Scientist Appeal, PHIRE—the Physicians’ Health Initiative for Radiation and Environment—and other reputed scientists in the field, as well as from communities. Brussels has now stopped the roll-out, and so have a number of cities in California. There is growing concern, and it needs to be recognised and answered. It is a shame that we seem to be in complete ignorance of some of the effects of 5G. I have not seen proper medical studies that deal with people’s susceptibility to it. It would be right and proper for us to see those studies.

Geraint Davies: I apologise that I will have to leave before the end, Mr Hollobone.

Is my hon. Friend aware of the veracity of reports that 5G companies, which have enormous commercial power, have put pressure on the Government to move ahead quickly and are making threats similar to those made about the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership? It may be that we have signed up already, and if we pull back on the basis of the precautionary principle and risks to human and wildlife health, the Government may end up being sued by big commercial interests. We should resist that in the interests of the public.

Dr Drew: I agree. My hon. Friend’s work on air quality is very important. Politicians in general are at last beginning to take note of the threats. It seems lamentable that, now that we understand the threats to air quality through pollution from cars, incineration and other things, another technology is coming in that could be as damaging. Maybe we will not see its effects for years, but will in decades unless we understand what it can do to people. It may not affect everybody—it may be down to genetic susceptibility—but we ought to listen to what is happening to those people.

It would be useful for the Government to put the studies, and their responses to them, on the record. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gower says, one problem is that, now we are into 5G, there is a view that existing masts can be added to or that additional technology can be used. I put it to the Minister that the biggest worry is that there is a view, certainly in Stroud, that lamp posts will be seen as a perfectly acceptable substitute and that, instead of putting up new masts, the technology could be added to existing infrastructure.

It would be useful to know what powers exist, because I understand that the electronic communications code has granted virtually unlimited powers to companies to construct, maintain or develop the current infrastructure without any planning permission. It is all done under delegated responsibility, which means that the general public do not even know what is going on, because normally these things are not publicised. There is little recourse unless the public take court action to stop it, but the means of doing so are limited. Even a private landowner has little authority to stop it. The matter needs to be looked into and properly investigated.

I ask the Government to look at how they can consult the public, because the public are getting worried. The scare stories may not have the full scientific rigour that they should have, but the public know no more than what they have been told by various experts in the field, and there are always experts on either side of the argument. Our case is that, at the very least, there should be an open, honest and transparent investigation of the health and biological impact of the new technology.

Driving forward 5G is about financial interests. It is not being done for altruistic reasons, but because an awful lot of money stands to be made out of it in a very short period. We need to look at that. It exacerbates the digital divide. As I have said, I would be satisfied with 3G if my constituency.

Having listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Gower, I hope the Minister will be able to say what plans the Government have to investigate the impact on the ecosystem, which is as important as human beings. We need to keep our bugs, birds and other fauna in the state they are in, given that they are under enormous attack. We talked about that yesterday in relation to the climate change statutory instrument that we passed. We are not just talking about our own survival but the survival of other species. It would be a tragedy if we have done things to protect them and yet we let 5G come in. There are allegations that 5G has an impact on other species, particularly in rural areas where we see many living creatures.

My final point is that part of the problem is that the new technology is coming through without much questioning, or even recourse for people to question it. The biggest problem is the speed at which it is being introduced. There is no way that communities that are at best uncertain about the impact of that technology on their children, their schools and their wider community can do anything.

I ask the Government to look at this carefully, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gower said, so that we consider the implications both for individuals’ health and the wider ecosystem, and that we also take time and recognise that the precautionary principle is as important in this area as it is in general about air quality.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench spokespersons, the first of which will be from the Scottish National party.

5.1 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I thank the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for securing this debate and for the interesting comments she made about electrosensitivity, highlighting the issue of the 5G roll-out, in particular with relation to electromagnetic fields. As she pointed out, 5G operates on different frequencies and with much higher ranges than those we have seen before with previous roll-outs.

Of course, exposure to electromagnetic fields is not new, but due to technological advances it is now far more common for people to be exposed to man-made electromagnetic fields than it ever was in our parents’ or our grandparents’ time. In recent decades, we have seen the public becoming concerned about potential health issues involving numerous electromagnetic field sources, ranging from overhead power lines to computer or TV screens in the home, as well as from radars, microwave ovens and mobile phones, to name just a few other sources.
Of course there are some significant differences between these sources. With some of them, people can self-select to take a precautionary effect: we do not need to have a microwave in our home; we can limit our mobile use; and we do not need to have a TV screen in our bedroom. With other sources, such as overhead power lines or telephone masts, people are pretty much stuck with them if they are outside their home. It is different with those sources.

The evidence so far seems to show that electromagnetic fields do not have detrimental health impacts. However, more research is always being undertaken, which is especially important as the technology changes and the frequencies involved change—that point has been made by a number of hon. Members. There is current research on the effects of extremely low frequency fields. The World Health Organisation has said that, as yet:

“No obvious adverse effect of exposure to low level radiofrequency fields has been discovered.”

However, as has been pointed out, the frequencies of the new 5G technology are significantly higher than those used before, and therefore the research into that new technology is somewhat different than earlier research.

Over the years, the WHO has identified some “25,000 articles” on electromagnetic fields that “have been published over the past 30 years.”

The WHO says of that body of scientific knowledge—indeed, it is undoubtedly the case—that “scientific knowledge in this area is now more extensive than for most chemicals.”

However, the WHO also says that there are still “some gaps in knowledge about biological effects” and so there is a need for “further research”.

The European Union Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks published a lengthy report in 2015—that is not so long ago in terms of years, but in terms of technology it is almost a generation ago. That committee’s final opinion was:

“The results of current scientific research show that there are no evident adverse health effects if exposure remains below the levels recommended by the EU legislation. Overall, the epidemiological studies on radiofrequency EMF exposure do not show an increased risk of brain tumours. Furthermore, they do not indicate an increased risk for other cancers of the head and neck region.

Previous studies also suggested an association of EMF with an increased risk of Alzheimer’s disease. New studies on that subject did not confirm this link.

Epidemiological studies associate exposure to Extremely Low Frequency (ELF) fields, from long-term living in close proximity to power lines, to a higher rate of childhood leukaemia. No mechanisms have been identified and no support from experimental studies could explain these findings, which, together with shortcomings of the epidemiological studies, prevent a causal interpretation.

Concerning EMF hypersensitivity…research consistently shows that there is no causal link between self-reported symptoms and EMF exposure.”

The evidence is a little conflicted, but we would definitely benefit from having further evidence.

The role of the Government when it comes to the effects of electromagnetic fields is to ensure that policy is supported by the latest scientific research, so I do not envy the Government in considering the opposing research that has been published. According to the WHO, the heating effect of electromagnetic fields is the current focus of guidelines and regulation. The WHO has said that, to date, no adverse health effect from low-level, long-term exposure to radio frequency or power frequency fields has been confirmed. However, that is not to say that research into the effects of prolonged low-level exposure to these fields should not continue. We must always make sure that the policy is expertise-led.

With the seemingly exponential increase in the rate of technological innovation, the regulation and monitoring of the effects of these technologies on our health needs to continue. However, we must bear in mind not only the physiological impact of technology but the psychological impact of huge amounts of screen time, which can affect mood and sleep, which in turn can have an impact on mental health. This psychological impact must also continue to be monitored.

In conclusion, I concur with the hon. Member for Gower on the need for independent research into the 5G technology, because without public confidence in and understanding of that technology, we will all be faced with many people campaigning against it when it comes into their areas, and we need to know the answers now, before the technology is rolled out.

5.6 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Hollobone.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonya Antoniazzi) for securing this debate and for her excellent speech, which set the scene and informed us all about this issue. Earlier this year, I met her to discuss it, so I am pleased that she was able to secure the debate on it.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) and the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who spoke for the Scottish National party, for their thoughtful contributions to this debate. There were also excellent interventions by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies); I am pleased that he is still with us in Westminster Hall, as he had said that he had to leave early.

As we have heard, the World Health Organisation has concluded that current evidence does not confirm the existence of any health consequences from exposure to low-level electromagnetic fields. I know that the Government have followed a similar line, with the independent Advisory Group on Non-Ionising Radiation concluding that although a substantial amount of research has been conducted in this area, there is no convincing evidence that electromagnetic field exposures below guideline levels cause health effects in either adults or children. However, as we have heard, concerns exist about the long-term impact of electromagnetic fields, and although my hon. Friends did not go into great detail about individual cases, I have read of such cases and I am sure that all hon. Members have also read some of the details about them. As we become ever more reliant upon modern technology, such concerns will only increase.

On a more light-hearted note, those people who have Netflix might have seen the impact of electromagnetic fields being played out, almost in a fictional sense, in a programme called “Better Call Saul”, in which the brother of the main character is terribly affected—indeed, he is housebound—by EMF. It is often said with these
types of issues that Hollywood leads the way in bringing them to the public's attention, and this example is definitely a case in point.

International studies, such as the cohort study of mobile phone use and health, or COSMOS, and national studies, such as the study of cognition, adolescents and mobile phones, or SCAMP, exist to continue research into any possible impacts. It is important that such studies continue, so that the public can be aware of all the current advice about electromagnetic fields. As we have heard, as technology develops there will be concerns—new and old—about the impact that it could have on our health. What assessment has the Minister made of all those studies, specifically those that conclude that radio waves are carcinogenic? As we have heard, Cyprus and Austria advise children and teenagers how to limit their exposure to radio waves. Will the UK Government consider doing that, too?

Some of my constituents have written to me with concerns about the new 5G network, as also reported by other hon. Members, and I am grateful for the Minister's response on that. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Gower has had conversations with her constituents, who are concerned about the new technology being rolled out across the country. As she said, she would like white zones to be considered and protected. White zones give people who are sensitive to electromagnetic fields, or are concerned about their impact, somewhere to live without interference from radio waves, and that is why it is important that the matter is looked at cross-departmentally.

Geraint Davies: Is my hon. Friend aware of the concern that 5G cannot penetrate trees and that, as a result, we are looking at the destruction of thousands and thousands of trees? That destruction has already started around Swindon. How can we possibly be serious about our ambitions for zero carbon if we are destroying the trees and have this huge carbon footprint? It does not add up and is clearly environmentally ridiculous.

Mrs Hodgson: I was not aware of that, but my hon. Friend has put it out there on the record. I had heard, though, that 5G can go through us, where other things go around us, so it cannot go through trees but it can go through humans. There is a lot more we need to know about the technology.

As I was saying, anything that looks at this must be cross-departmental because of the impact on health, business, digital and the environment. Each of the Departments responsible for those areas should consider the health implications of electromagnetic fields, whether it is for a small minority of the population or the majority. Is that something the Minister has considered?

As we roll out digital technology, particularly in rural areas, the protection of white zones should be considered. We can be world leaders in digital, but that must not be at the expense of health and wellbeing. I therefore urge the Minister to ensure that all the information about the health and wellbeing impacts of electromagnetic fields is made available to the public, and kept under constant review as we find out more. I also urge her to work with her colleagues, across several Departments, to ensure that health and wellbeing is prioritised throughout the digital roll-out.
Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the Minister for allowing me to ask this question: is she able to point out where the recent evidence that the Government and Public Health England have is? Is it in the public domain?

Seema Kennedy: I think the hon. Lady talked about accurate information, and about honesty concerning the information put out by Public Health England. Public Health England conducts extremely rigorous research, all based on the best available international evidence and on monitoring assessments of expert reviews. Some of those things will, of course, be in the public domain, and others will not. I will happily write to the hon. Lady with all the evidence that is available in the public domain.

The Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment has a watching brief on non-ionising radiation. It assesses all the available data to give health advice. Many scientific studies have been done over several decades, and a wide range of health topics have been investigated, including cancer, reproduction, cognitive effects and electrical hypersensitivity.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Minister referred to the frequency range. It is true that we are talking about lower frequencies than the ionising radiation that would be beyond the visible spectrum. However, it is not true to say that all low frequencies are not harmful. Looking at microwave radiation, for example, if we get a high enough intensity of non-ionising radiation we can still cause harm. I would not want to be in a microwave oven and I am sure the Minister would not either. So it is not just about frequency; it is about the intensity of the radiation.

Seema Kennedy: The hon. Lady is talking about risks and hazards. [Interjection] Yes, we are talking about two different sorts of radio wave, but she said that I would not want to go in a microwave oven. I am not suggesting that I would put myself or anyone else in a microwave oven, so we are talking about hazards and risks. The best scientific evidence given to Government is that the radiation is safe, and I was going to go on to talk about the evidence that Government have used before addressing some of the points that the hon. Member for Gower raised. I apologise if I have not quite understood the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan); I will happily discuss it with her later.

Expert groups in the UK and around the world have examined the evidence and published many comprehensive reports. In the UK, the Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation produced reports in 2003 and 2012. The Government have played their role in the international effort to learn more about the health effects of radio-wave exposure. They supported the dedicated mobile telecommunications and health research programme that ran from 2001 to 2012 and they continue to fund research.

A challenge in understanding the evidence is that some studies report effects, while others do not. Sophisticated analyses are needed to draw studies together, considering their strengths and weaknesses and working out what they mean collectively, which is the role of expert groups. Simply counting or listing studies that have found effects is not an adequate way of assessing where the overall evidence lies.

An expert group reporting to the European Commission delivered a review in 2015, and the World Health Organisation is currently carrying out a major review on radio waves and health, which will include studies performed over the past 25 years. Overall, those expert groups have not found any clear evidence of adverse health effects occurring if the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection exposure guidelines are followed. The ICNIRP exposure restrictions have been incorporated into a 1999 European Council recommendation on limiting public exposures to electromagnetic fields. The United Kingdom and Public Health England support that recommendation.

Since 1996, the World Health Organisation has been running an international electromagnetic field project that provides a forum for countries to gather together, discuss and share knowledge on this topic. The WHO’s main conclusion is that electromagnetic field exposures below the limits recommended in the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection guidelines do not appear to have any known consequence for health. However, as the hon. Member for Gower and other Members have mentioned, that does not mean that people who have electrical hypersensitivity do not have symptoms. Those symptoms are real and can be very debilitating, and the Department’s guidance is that those people should seek medical advice, so that their personal situation can be taken into account and the best possible treatments found.

I will also address the points raised by many hon. Members about the effects of screen time on the mental health of children; as any parent can attest, there are some effects. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), referred to SCAMP, and the Government conduct research that looks at the effects of technologies on schoolchildren.

Exposure levels reduce very rapidly with increasing distance from transmitting antennae, which means that being in immediate proximity to the transmitting antenna of a mobile phone handset held next to the head is different from living near a base station. There is long-standing precautionary advice from Public Health England and the NHS for mobile phone users, and research is continuing. We are continually looking at the evidence and updating our advice.

Tonia Antoniazzi: What work has been undertaken by Public Health England to look for evidence of risk in mobile phone usage? Is it looking at what damage it is actually doing, rather than saying, “Well, it is not really hurting anybody”?

Seema Kennedy: Public Health England takes its role very seriously, and is always monitoring the evidence. Since perhaps 10 years ago, there has been a lot of research into having mobile phones next to one’s ear. Of course, the way we use our phones is changing, but Public Health England is always looking at this issue and reviewing the best available evidence.

There has been a general trend from 2G to 5G for transmitters to become smaller, to be mounted nearer to the ground, and to use less transmitted power. The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) raised a point about the electronic communications code, which I think is a matter for colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.
The hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) has left, but I do not think we are cutting down trees; in fact, I am sure that the Government have committed to planting more trees. I know that the Secretary of State is very keen on them, so I will write to him on that issue.

To answer the questions that were asked about radio frequency fields and cancer, a working group of the International Agency for Research on Cancer reviewed the health effects of exposure to RF fields and concluded that such exposures are possibly carcinogenic to humans—group 2B, based on IARC’s classification scheme. There was a minority opinion in the working group that current evidence for humans was inadequate, and therefore there was no conclusion about a causal association. In terms of the different classes of carcinogens, there is a statement on the PHE website that responds to the IARC classification. PHE has summary advice statements that it sends to inquirers with a full explanation of different carcinogens; there is a broad spectrum, including petrol engine exhausts, bracken fern and talc-based body powder.

Since 2001, the Office of Communications has been carrying out an audit of the emissions from mobile phone base stations. The Advisory Group on Non-Ionising Radiation’s 2012 report contained a summary of over 3,000 measurements made at over 500 sites by Ofcom. The maximum exposure found at any location was hundreds of times below the international guideline levels, and typical exposures were much lower still. Public Health England advises that there may be a small increase in overall exposure to radio waves when 5G is added to an existing network or a new area, but that is expected to remain low relative to guidelines.

I hope I have demonstrated that the Government take seriously the potential health effects of the introduction of 5G, and that Public Health England is well placed to identify and respond to any important new evidence that may emerge. I reiterate that the public’s levels of exposure to electromagnetic fields from telecommunications networks are currently very low in relation to the international guideline levels, and are expected to stay that way after the deployment of 5G.

5.26 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the Minister for her response and Members from all parties who have taken part in the debate.

I have concerns about the international guidelines, and I think that the effect of exposure to electromagnetic fields should not be underestimated. When my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) asked the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport a written question, a Minister replied that her belief was that the next-generation network would not endanger the public, and added that Public Health England had found no evidence of any significant risk and that the Government “anticipate no negative effects on public health.”

I am afraid that those statements are far from reassuring. Belief and anticipation are insufficient grounds for making such statements; we have to think about the precautionary principle. To state that there is no evidence of significant risk prompts the questions of what level of risk is acceptable, and at what stage an unknown risk moves from being acceptable to significant.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the health-related effects of electromagnetic fields.

5.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 26 June 2019

[NR. JAMES GRAY IN THE CHAIR]

NHS Pensions

9.30 am

SIR ROBERT SYMS (POOLE) (CON): I beg to move, That this House has considered NHS pensions, annual and lifetime allowances.

I begin by declaring an interest, because anybody who has been in the parliamentary pension scheme is affected by annual allowance and lifetime allowance. Therefore, some of the things I say may reflect on me and maybe other hon. Members, so I suggest they make a declaration as well—

JAMES GRAY (IN THE CHAIR): Order. The hon. Gentleman may be right to say that all hon. Members may be affected by that matter, but for each individual to have to make that declaration would, I think, be otiose.

SIR ROBERT SYMS: Thank you, Mr Gray. This is an important subject, and the more I learn about it, the more I realise its implications for the national health service. I had originally been told that the Treasury would respond to the debate, but I understand that the Department of Health and Social Care has manfully stepped up to the plate—the first example I have seen of a hospital pass to a Department.

The subject has devastating implications for the NHS, dental services and many other services in this country unless it is addressed by the Government. When the coalition Government came into office in 2010-11, they were quite right to reduce the amount of money that could be put into pension funds. At that time, someone could put £255,000 into a pension fund tax free; clearly, if they had such resources, it was unfair on the lower paid. The Government moved to reduce the tax leakage by reducing a number of the allowances.

The problem today is that the Government have drawn the allowances too tight, and in 2015-16 they also introduced a taper to the annual allowance. All that is having a pernicious effect on the NHS and creating what the British Medical Association has called a “perfect storm”. The lifetime allowance, which is just over £1,055,000, is such that most senior doctors and general practitioners get pulled into the system and threshold income above £110,000 per year, and total taxable income plus the real growth in value of pension rights over the year, and threshold income above £110,000 per year, which is essentially total taxable income, but net the value of any employee pension contributions.

Where an individual ticks both boxes, for every £2 of adjusted income that they receive above the £150,000 level, their annual allowance is reduced by £1. This means that those with an adjusted income of £210,000 have their annual allowance tapered down from £40,000 to £10,000, the lowest level to which tapering can reduce the annual allowance. That tapered allowance was introduced in 2016-17. The ability to carry forward unused allowances for years before the taper was enforced has so far helped to dampen down its impact, but in 2019-20, carry-forward will be from no earlier than 2016-17, when the taper came into force. That will reduce the number of people with significant amounts of underused annual allowance available, and as a result the taper will bite rather more than in earlier years.

If we look at the figures, we see the number of people who exceed annual allowance or hit the taper multiplying each year, pulling many more people into the system. Many senior doctors earn enough money from their core hours plus additional shifts to be potentially affected by the tapered annual allowance. In addition, because of the relative generosity of the NHS pension scheme, pension rights can be built up quite quickly, especially for those who have experienced a step-up in pension rights because of a promotion. Paradoxically, in most cases overtime shifts are not pensionable. That means that a doctor can find that, by working more, he or she has built up no extra pension but, because of the operation of the tapered annual allowance, has reduced the amount of pension that he or she can build up within the tax relief limits.

All that leads to more complexity within the system. It is extremely difficult for someone to work out whether they have an annual allowance issue; that is true for any high earner, but may be particularly true for those in the NHS, because they have rights under different sections of NHS pension schemes—for example, a final salary pension and a career average pension. Those rights are tested against annual allowance, but a negative accrual in one scheme cannot be set against a positive accrual in another scheme.

ALEX CHALK (CHALLENHAM) (CON): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on an area that is technical, but has enormous implications. I have been contacted by a consultant in emergency medicine at Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, who has indicated that because of the perverse incentives of this scheme, he will not be taking on an extra shift and out-of-hours work, which reduces that vital expertise. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must turn this around so that we have frontline medics doing what they should be doing—caring for our patients?

SIR ROBERT SYMS: Almost anybody I talk to in any hospital anywhere has an example of the impact of this additional tax on their working methods. I know my hon. Friend has tried to get a debate on a similar subject, because we are ultimately talking not about consultants, but about the patients and the impact this has on delivering services.

For defined benefit pension rights, the test against annual allowance is complex. The growth in rights over the year must be adjusted to strip out any increase that
[Sir Robert Syms]

simply keeps pace with inflation, and is then multiplied by 16 added to any additional lump sum accrual before being tested. Whether the tapered annual allowance applies depends not just on whether someone’s adjusted income is over £150,000, but on whether their threshold income is over £110,000. These two measures are quite different, and adjusted income in particular is calculated in a very complicated way.

That creates unpredictability. A tapered allowance works by using income from the current year to determine the size of the annual allowance for the current year. Many NHS doctors work extra NHS shifts and many do private work; they may have little idea what their income for the year will be until very late in the year. Sometimes, NHS trusts get additional money released at the end of the year, leading to more operations. Sometimes, NHS trusts pay at a rather slow rate, and they may pay in a different year from that in which an operation was undertaken. As a result, doctors who take on a lot of extra work late in the year can suddenly find they have an annual allowance issue.

There is also a cliff edge issue. Although the tapered annual allowance result is a gradual reduction in annual allowance for each £1 of adjusted income over £150,000 per year, the fact that the whole system switches on abruptly for threshold income above £110,000 can create a violent cliff edge effect. For example, those with threshold income that is 1p below £110,000 can effectively ignore the tapered annual allowance, but those with income that is 1p above it can find themselves caught with a rather large tax bill. For the latter group, not only does each extra £1 attract income tax at 40p and a loss of personal allowance equivalent to another 20p in the pound, but they can suddenly face a big drop in their annual allowance.

Some people can be worse off overall by working an extra shift. I have heard testimony to that effect from many doctors who say they have done additional work and ended up worse off.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I hope he will not mind my taking the opportunity to plug the event. I am hosting with the BMA next Wednesday between 4 pm and 6 pm, which will be a great opportunity for MPs to meet many consultants with stories such as this, and to find out more information about the problem. Does he agree that, because this matter is so complex, it is important for MPs to come along and speak to the BMA, and speak to their local senior consultants, to really understand the impact this is having on the ground?

Sir Robert Syms: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. This is an area that people start to get interested in only when they start thinking about retirement. Then they realise how complicated the retirement rules are. This issue is upsetting many people who work in the NHS because of the impact it is having.

A survey of GPs to which 46% replied—354—found that their average tax bill owing to the tapered allowance was £18,500, so we really are talking about considerable sums of money being levied on doctors, many of whom do not expect it and suddenly get into arrears. Dr George McInnes, radiologist at Poole Hospital, said to me that most of his radiologists are contracted for 10 sessions, with most working 11 or 12 as a matter of norm to keep the throughput going. However, as is the case in most hospitals, he now finds it terribly difficult to get them to do more than 10, and when people come to review their contracts, they ask to do less work, rather than more, because of the impact of the pension arrangements.

The real problem is that most of the people affected have done years of training and have years of experience—they are the super strikers of the NHS; the team leaders—and despite tax bills have a loyalty to their hospitals and teams and continue working. However, year on year, they find themselves penalised for working. As rational people, they decide to play golf or to spend more time with their families or with Netflix. That is logical, and the Treasury is deterring many people from doing what they have trained for their whole lives to do. The letters, emails and phone calls I get from doctors do not say that they want to work less. They actually want to work more, but they do not really feel that they should work more and be worse off as a result.

The Government have put additional resources into the NHS, and we can argue about whether it is enough or not. However, the key point from the Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care was the importance of productivity in the NHS, which we can get only if the people within the service are actually able to deal with patients and the issues before them. If, because of the tax issue, people work less, the only way around that—apart from locums, if they can be recruited—is to recruit more people to do fewer operations. That is not increased productivity; that is reduced productivity. If we want to use these people, we have to set a tax system that is proportionate and sensible.

It is not only the NHS. The British Dental Association says the same thing: people are retiring early and are more averse to taking on NHS patients. The consequence is the problem that we are now starting to see, which will get worse and worse. I know that the Department of Health and Social Care understands the issue; I have talked to the Secretary of State. I think the Treasury sort of understands that there is a problem, which is why I think it indicated that it might give additional resources to the NHS. However, the problem is that the only way out of this is to get rid of the taper, because its impact on the way people work is so detrimental to the NHS. Even if we take into account wider issues and other areas, I cannot see how any scheme can be brought in to ameliorate its impact.

We in this House want patients to get the best service, and sometimes we have to pay people to get the best service in the national health service. Most consultants or senior nurses have trained for years and are dedicated to their patients, and all they want to do is to turn up and work. The Government have put money into the NHS to allow operations to take place, but perversely our system of taxation on pensions, which was probably drawn up to stop city slickers avoiding tax, is impacting on a major, important public service and will lead to longer waiting lists, meaning people—who, if not in pain, will be very uncomfortable—waiting to be dealt with.

We all want people to be dealt with, doctors to be happy and the NHS to work properly. We need the Treasury to get out of the way on this one, because it is causing problems.
Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) for bringing this important debate to the Chamber. I did not intend to speak, but I feel obliged to do so now. I understand why this scheme was brought forward. It is not the scheme that I have problems with but its implementation and the unintended consequences, which have already been raised.

The situation in the NHS is complex. We have three NHS pension schemes, and it is really difficult to work out; I am part of two of them and I struggle to work out what I am supposed to be doing. We understand that it is difficult. The taper comes in at £110,000. The Chancellor told me in the Chamber that it is £150,000, but it is not. This is important, because although these wages seem a lot to some people, they are not that high compared with those of senior businesspeople. The taper will affect people such as consultants, GPs and medical academics. These are our leaders, and we need to ensure that there is succession planning. If these people leave abruptly because they realise the tax implications, there is no chance for succession planning.

Alex Chalk: The hon. Lady is making a good speech. It is true that senior consultants are often relatively well paid, but they cannot afford sometimes four, five or six-figure tax bills suddenly arriving on their doormats, which provide the most profound disincentive to their doing what they want to do: care for patients.

Ruth Jones: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, and much more eloquently than I could. These things are coming in at the end of people’s working lives, and it is difficult for people to budget for them when they do not know what will land on the doormat. When we enter working life and take on board pensions, we know what we are signing up to. These changes are being made in the latter stages of people’s working lives, so it is really difficult to budget and plan for them.

Several constituents who work at the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board in my constituency have written to me to say that they will finish work early or cut down on the number of sessions because of these punitive tax bills. Although obviously the health service in Wales is devolved, pensions are not, so it is important that we look at this issue in the round and across the UK. We need to make sure that we retain these doctors across the board.

I commend the hon. Member for Poole for introducing the debate. I ask the Government to look again at this situation.

I must say that the debate should be responded to by a Minister from Her Majesty’s Treasury. That is no criticism of the excellent hospitals and workforce Minister, who until very recently I was honoured to call a ministerial colleague in the Department of Health and Social Care. This is the first debate being responded to by a Minister from the Department of Health and Social Care that I have spoken in since I left office. However, seeing as we have a Health and Social Care Minister here, I will focus my remarks on patient care, which my hon. Friend the Member for Poole has discussed.

Over the past few weeks, I have spoken on a number of occasions to the chief executive of Hampshire Hospitals NHS Trust, Alex Whitfield, and I have spoken either through her or directly to numerous consultants and senior clinicians about this challenge. I am aware how serious it is, both for the individuals adversely affected—as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones)—and for patient care and wellbeing, because the NHS is about its people if it is anything.

When I first spoke to my local trust about this, the chief executive told me that

“the pension situation is having a significant impact on our people”
in Winchester and Basingstoke, and:

“The NHS scheme is particularly affected by changes to the pension tax system relating to the Annual Allowance and the Life Time Allowance.”

She is not wrong when she says:

“These changes are complicated and for individuals in the NHS defined benefit pension scheme the implications are not at all transparent.”

That point was well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Poole. She says:

“As a result, individuals are receiving unexpected tax bills of tens of thousands of pounds. It particularly impacts on consultant doctors, senior nurses and managers. Individuals are making different decisions as a result of these bills.”

I will pause on that point, about the senior NHS staff on whom this is having an impact.

I was privileged to be part of a Department that, under the previous Secretary of State, who is now the Foreign Secretary, and under the current Secretary of State, has delivered a record funding settlement for the NHS—£20.5 billion a year. I saw that play out in Winchester a few weeks ago, when I opened the new emergency department of the Royal Hampshire County Hospital in the heart of the city. That is excellent news. In my opinion, the challenge for the NHS will not be too little money, as a result of the settlement and the excellent long-term plan, but having the right people, who can spend that money in the right way to deliver the patient care outcomes that we want. If we are losing senior people, we have a serious problem.

As well as speaking to the leadership at my local trust, I wanted to find out more from the horse’s mouth, so I asked members of the local clinical community to come forward with their own stories and, if I may, I shall put a few of them on the record. One consultant set the scene very clearly. He told me that the issue is the annual allowance pension tax taper, which I will come back to, and the inflexibility of the NHS pension, which is landing consultants with huge tax bills for doing extra work on top of their contracted hours. The consultant
was clear—and I agree, not least as a former Health Minister—that that extra work keeps the NHS running in the face of ever increasing demand.

I was told that, in certain circumstances, the marginal tax rate on earnings for the extra work is greater than 100%, which means that senior doctors working in my local hospital are in effect having to pay to do extra work. They are some of the most committed individuals in public service in our country, and I have had the privilege of working closely with many of them, but that is taking things a bit too far. It is clearly not a sustainable situation and, now that the huge tax bills are landing on doorsteps, it is causing a huge change in the behaviour of consultants at all levels in my local trust.

Another consultant told me that she has been an NHS doctor for 19 years and has worked as a consultant in my local trust for the last seven. She is employed on a full-time contract, with additional out-of-hours cover. Moreover, she regularly covers additional lists and shifts that require cover, sometimes at very short notice. She could not have been clearer with me that she is happy to provide that cover in the interest of safe patient care, which is of course what this is all about, as everyone has said. However, she has now been hit with a £30,000 tax bill, and she tells me that the only way she can avoid regular large tax charges, which may be for tens of thousands of pounds a year and which of course are in addition to her not insignificant income tax payments, is seriously to reduce the hours that she works for the NHS and not to take on any additional duties. As has been said, that goes to the heart of the issue. The consultant fears, as does her MP, that that is the conclusion that many of her colleagues will be forced to accept.

Let me again give some facts from trust level. Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust recently ran a survey on the pension issue and received a healthy 2,500 responses. It is the case that 42% of all the respondents have reduced their work commitment; 20% have avoided promotion; and, critically, when the people were asked who might change working practices in the future, the figure goes up to 80%, including 33% considering early retirement and just over a quarter considering leaving the NHS altogether.

I have no doubt that the changes were introduced in good faith. They are aimed at top rate earners, as my hon. Friend the Member for Poole said, but in practice that is taking things a bit too far. It is clearly not a sustainable situation and, now that the huge tax bills are landing on doorsteps, it is causing a huge change in the behaviour of consultants at all levels in my local trust.

In addition, I ask the Minister whether it is worth providing a tax benefit to working for the public sector—one of the biggest employers in the world? That is food for thought.

Let me finish in the same way as I have tried to make the whole of my contribution this morning—with a real-life example from Hampshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust of what we are seeing at trust level. In Winchester, like everywhere else and as I have set out, the Royal Hampshire County Hospital, one of the three hospitals in the trust, relies on many doctors and other senior staff doing additional sessions over and above their timetabled work in order to fill gaps in the medical workforce. Locally, we have seen that especially in radiology, where the additional sessions are used for radiologists to review scans and write the reports about what they see. The reporting of scans is clearly required so that patients can be told what the scan shows and clinical staff can work with patients on the most appropriate treatment.

My good friend from the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), whom we will hear from shortly, and I spent many hours in this Chamber when I was the Minister with responsibility for cancer, and I was extremely proud to get the 75% stage 1 or 2 diagnosis ambition into the long-term plan, as announced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. That is critical: early diagnosis is cancer’s magic key, as has been said by me and others many times in this Chamber. If we are to get anywhere near realising that ambition, we have to have a functioning, improved and expanded radiology service. Any reduction in radiology and the diagnosis stage will have an adverse impact and make that ambition unattainable, in my opinion. I am reliably told by my local trust that it has seen the backlog of scans waiting to be reported growing each week over the last few months. That concerns me greatly. It is of course just one department—it is an area that I know a little about—but it is a sobering example and one that we simply cannot ignore.

I shall finish by saying that we must act. I have so much respect for this Minister, but we need the Treasury to take this issue seriously and we need the next Prime Minister to act. If we do not, it will only get worse. We need to grip it, and we need to grip it fast.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Gray, for your kindness in letting me participate in the debate. It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I apologise for my late arrival.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) on securing the debate, and the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) on also trying to press the Government on this matter. I have come to the debate because two consultants in my constituency came to me about this issue and I thought it important to communicate their views directly to the Minister. I hope that actions can be taken, because this is clearly a classic case of the law of unintended consequences.
One of those constituents, Dr Urquhart—the other was Dr Hepburn—wrote to me. Dr Urquhart has been a consultant in the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area for nine years and is employed on a 48-hours-per-week, full-time contract, which includes being on call. He says that, following this change, “I will have to drop the number of hours per week I work and also not take on any extra shifts which are paid...to cover rota gaps and waiting list initiatives which reduce the penalty to NHS GGC for waiting list breaches.”

In a sense, the change is penalising the efficiency of the NHS and introducing further costs to the health service that could be avoided. The consultant continues:

“Due to reduction in annual allowance for pension growth, the introduction of the tapering of the annual allowance coupled with the introduction of the 2015 NHS pension scheme, a growing number of doctors are facing four, five and six figure tax bills on top of their income tax and national insurance contributions. In my case this means that in the next year I expect a huge tax bill as in October 2018 I received a 10 year pay rise and will receive a large tax bill.”

He believes that it will impact on all consultants in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and beyond.

It appears that the only way in which Dr Urquhart can avoid these large regular tax charges, which may amount to tens of thousands of pounds a year in addition to his income tax payments, is to reduce the hours that he works for the national health service. He fears that many of his colleagues will be forced to accept the same conclusion. He and his colleagues often go above and beyond to ensure that services can continue running safely and effectively, but there are limits to what can be reasonably expected of even the most dedicated doctors.

As a result of the current pension and tax regime, Dr Urquhart is effectively paying to provide additional services to the national health service. He hopes that these separate changes to tax and pension arrangements were an unintended consequence that was not appreciated when they were first introduced, that the resultant negative effects on the NHS workforce were unintended, and that the Treasury will undertake to correct them. Like many services, his department relies on consultants working regular overtime through additional programmed activities.

Unless the Government take action, many doctors like Dr Urquhart will be left with no option but to reduce their working hours significantly. Other consultants in the national health service in Glasgow are being advised to take early retirement to avoid these taxes. That will exacerbate an already acute workforce crisis in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and seriously jeopardise the sustainability of the national health service. The impact on Glasgow’s Queen Elizabeth University Hospital—the largest medical facility in Europe—alone must not be understated. The topic is frequently discussed by his colleagues, many of whom feel the same.

I hope that the Minister will take cognisance of the issues raised by many consultants and the British Medical Association. Fundamental reform of the tax issue, particularly by scrapping the tapered annual allowance, is urgently required to prevent a workforce crisis. I hope that he will recognise the scale and immediacy of the risk to the national health service and that he will undertake to take our representations back to the Government and ensure that the problem is rectified as a matter of urgency.

10.1 am

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I declare an interest: I spent more than 30 years as a consultant in the NHS and am married to a GP, so naturally the issue affects us. However, it also affects many of our colleagues.

The first thing to hit was the lifetime tax allowance changes. In my husband’s practice, I saw GPs being driven out at the age of about 57 or 58. They had had no intention of retiring early, but they had been warned in their annual meeting with their accountant that, because of the taper, they would suddenly reach a high marginal tax rate of well over 50%, which naturally is not very attractive. The result, exactly as other hon. Members have laid out, is that we are losing the people with the most expertise—the people who train the new people.

It is important that we do not get carried away into thinking that the NHS is about machinery, buildings or gizmos and gadgets. Every one of those gizmos and gadgets is used by a person. It is people in the NHS who care for, treat and diagnose people. If we do not have the workforce, all the waiting times that we like to stand up and talk about will be completely shot. The workforce issues that all four UK nations face are being made worse by these problems.

Many people may think, “A £1 million pension pot allowance? What a great problem to have!” It is a great problem, but the difficulty is that in general practice, GPs reach a high salary quite early, unlike in a hospital where becoming a consultant takes 15 or 16 years, so people have taken out added years and bought extra service. Because we graduate late, it ends up being very difficult to work for 40 years and have a half-salary pension. We thought about buying added years—we looked at it twice, but we could never afford it.

It is the same issue that arose with the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign and with Hewlett Packard, Magnox and all the others: people are expected to commit to a pension in their early 20s, but when they get to the other end, the goalposts have moved. It hits them when they can do nothing about it but bail out—and that is what they are doing.

The lifetime tax allowance limit has already driven out consultants and GPs before the age of 60, but what makes the problem much more acute is the tapering annual tax allowance. As we have heard, it was introduced in 2010 at more than £250,000 to avert tax avoidance and gaming of the system. Senior medics in the NHS are probably the highest-paid people who do not run a business. They are on pay-as-you-earn, so they cannot play the game of writing off this, that and the other or play the game of writing off this, that and the other or paying themselves in weird ways; they just get their payslip, and the tax is taken. They are not in the tax avoidance game that was perhaps thought of when the taper was introduced. The commercial sector is defined contribution, not defined benefit; it is how the limits interact with the NHS, and probably other public service schemes, that causes the problem.

The annual allowance was reduced to £50,000 in 2011 and then to £40,000 in 2014. For those caught by the taper, the allowance can go right down to £10,000. The threshold is £110,000—not £150,000, which was the impression that the Chancellor gave at Treasury questions on 21 May.

People hit a cliff edge, as hon. Members have highlighted:
all of a sudden, they are caught in a system where they are taxed over and over on the same income. It particularly affects consultants, who are paid about £110,000 or more, and full-time GPs.

Those who have been caught out and hit by these bills are now talking to their colleagues. The result is that people are refusing promotion and refusing to take on the extra duties that are required in the NHS, such as becoming an education director, a manager of junior doctors or a clinical lead, because anything that could bring in extra income for extra work could suddenly push them over the threshold. Doctors cannot see in advance whether they will be hit, so they cannot manage things over the year.

Some of the bills that arrive have been absolutely horrendous. The average bill is £18,500, but many are getting towards £100,000. No one has that kind of amount lying around in their bank account, however much they are paid. Even trying to pay the bill has caused terrible problems. People are paying it either from already taxed income or by taking a loan on which they will have to pay interest—or they are using scheme pays, borrowing from their pension pot to pay off their bill and then having to pay the money back at non-commercial rates. That still reduces their final pension bill and then having to pay the money back at non-commercial rates. That still reduces their final pension pot, because the money has technically not been in it for the same length of time.

Sir Robert Syms: A BMA consultant told me that an actuary has done some modelling and found that the penalties are so severe that somebody who works 48 hours a week and has to borrow money from their pot at the end will have a lower pension than someone who works 24 hours a week.

Dr Whitford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate and for making that point. I have not seen that actuarial working, but it highlights how completely bonkers the scheme is. People are trying not to do anything extra; they are doing everything to stay below the threshold, because once they are over it, they get sucked into a Kafkaesque spiral that pulls them down to ridiculous levels.

Another problem for GPs in England is that they are not getting their pension statements because of issues with the system; I think Capita runs it at the moment, and we know how well it runs some of the other services. We know that at some point we will have a debate to which a Treasury Minister responds. The Minister for Health, who is here today, will have to gather our comments and take them to the Treasury, and we would rather communicate directly with the Treasury. This issue has to be sorted, or there will be an absolute workforce meltdown within the next two years.
affects those people whose pay is more than £110,000 a year, excluding pension benefits and employee pension contributions, and who see an increase in their pension benefits of more than £40,000 in a given year.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) said, and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) underlined, all that obviously amounts to a considerable number of changes in a very short time. So we have seen the tax treatment of pensions for all high-paid workers changing very substantially, indeed in a way that they probably could not have envisaged when they first joined their pension scheme.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire was right to indeed in a way that they probably could not have

short time. So we have seen the tax treatment of pensions

amounts to a considerable number of changes in a very

Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) underlined, all that obviously

threshold and the annual income, plus the taper—makes

changes—related to this combined test of both the

Member for Poole rightly said, the impact of these

outcomes is very difficult for individuals. As the hon.

West indicated how working out how these schemes

will just say to those in this Chamber that, as well as

talking about the problems for high-paid NHS staff, we

of course also need to look at the issues for low-paid

NHS staff. The pension situation is quite concerning for

them. The annual report on retirement by Scottish Widows

indicated that overall one in five young people are

saving nothing for their later life, and many of those

people who are working in our NHS on low pay have

opted out of pension schemes, because they feel that

they need the cash now to make sure that they can make
.ends meet.

A freedom of information inquiry in 2018 found that

more than 245,000 workers from across the NHS in

England had opted out of the NHS pension scheme in

the previous three years. A lot of those were low-paid

workers, so that is enormously concerning. Although I

agreed with much of what the hon. Member for Winchester

said, I do not agree with him that the levels of resource

currently being considered by his Government will be

adequate in the future.

Let us consider the current situation. We obviously

have the cumulative impact of the pay cap over many

years. The Government finally saw sense on that, but it

took them a long time to do so. There are also growing

waiting lists, extended waits for accident and emergency,

and the rationing of NHS services, with many procedures

no longer being offered by the NHS. Until we see a

change in that situation, it will be difficult for many of

us to argue that the NHS is heading in the right direction

resource-wise.

I know that the Government have made a commitment

to improve funding in the future, but the Opposition

continue to believe that that commitment is not sufficient.

Steve Brine: My point was that the NHS long-term

plan has been significantly funded, with record funding,

which, for the record—seeing as the hon. Lady has gone

there—is significantly more than was promised by the

Opposition. Yes, other resources will be required, around

public health for instance, and around the people plan,

but perhaps the hon. Lady can tell us what Labour’s fiscal

promise is to the NHS, and how it will be paid for.

Anneliese Dodds: Absolutely. I am grateful to the—

James Gray (in the Chair): Obviously, in the context

of the debate.

Anneliese Dodds: Great. I will keep it within the

context of the debate as much as possible, because in

fact this debate is around taxation—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady will

not keep it within the context of the debate “as much as

possible”; she will keep it within the context of the

debate.

Anneliese Dodds: I certainly will, Mr Gray. Thank you.

As I was saying, this debate is broadly around the

contours of the taxation system and how they affect

high-paid workers in particular. I am sure that the hon.

Member for Winchester is aware that Labour has a

different approach from that of the current Government

around progressive taxation. We set out our proposals

at the last general election: we indicated how, by increasing
the tax paid by the very best-paid workers, we would free up the resources that are necessary, I am sure that he has seen what Labour produced in that regard—in particular, we would not pay for the boost in spending that the NHS needs only through a short-term windfall, which in practice is what the Chancellor did, because all the commitments that the Government made to the NHS were as a result of lower than projected spending and higher than projected taxation receipts.

That is not a sustainable way to fund our NHS in the long run. Instead, we should look at the longer-term measures that are necessary, which is exactly what we have been doing.

We need to ensure that NHS workers on lower incomes can save properly for retirement, but we also need to look at the situation that has been the focus of today’s debate. We need to focus on the changes that were made in the 2015 pension scheme, and how they interact with the variety of alterations that have been made to tax release. It is especially important to do so in the context of staff retention, and I understand the comments that Members have made about that topic. We have a particular problem with NHS staff leaving their jobs early, which in my experience is not merely because of these issues, although of course they are important. When I talk to senior staff in the NHS, they also mention stress, a general lack of resource, having to deal with short-term changes such as operating theatres being closed because of a lack of staff, and so on. A whole variety of features is driving those retention problems.

Dr Whitford: I accept that there are many other issues, and obviously all four UK health systems are stretched because workforce is their No. 1 issue, but this problem comes on top of that. People who feel stretched—people who feel they have a terrible work-life balance, who are working late and so on—suddenly find that the extra sessions they do are costing them money. That is a final slap in the face.

Anneliese Dodds: I am aware of that; for many, this issue can be the straw that breaks the camel’s back, especially when it is not anticipated.

I hope that the Government will look carefully at the impact of threshold effects, particularly cliff edges that lead to radical changes in the amount of tax paid, which is a significant problem with the UK tax system generally. The situation for incurring VAT is analogous to this one: small businesses are deliberately staying below the threshold because as soon as they go over it, they have to start paying VAT—not necessarily at a very high rate, but with all the bureaucracy and so on that comes with it. This situation is very similar: there is that cliff edge, where tax treatment suddenly becomes very different from what it was before.

In the long run, Government should aspire to learn from the best of what happens in other countries that have a more granular approach; where income is more tightly tied—and sometimes entirely tied—to tax treatment, so that as one’s income goes up, tax liability goes up stepwise. That seems a very sensible approach, but of course, getting there is a long-term aspiration. In the short term, I hope that the Minister—who I know is an open-minded person—will ask his Treasury colleagues to sit down with the experts and representative organisations, and talk to them about how these problems arise because of the interaction of the complex pension system with the complex treatment of tax release, so that there can be some kind of short-term fix with a view to, in the long term, having a much more rational approach to tax release on pension contributions.

10.23 am

Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): As ever, Mr Gray, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair for this important debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) on securing it. It is a topic that the House has previously considered, when my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) introduced a debate on the matter.

Colleagues should be reassured that the Government have been listening carefully to senior doctors and their employers. We recognise the actions clinicians are taking in response to their concerns about, and experience of, the annual allowance tax charges and how they are affecting frontline services. My hon. Friend the Member for Poole is right: although we are talking about tax changes for consultants, clinicians and GPs, the reason why this is so serious is that ultimately, if we do not get it right, it impacts on the quality of patient care. We all share that ambition to get it right.

Mr Sweeney: The Minister says that the tax changes are likely to have an impact on patient care. They are already having an impact; my constituent has said that he is seeing anaesthetic cancellations on theatre lists at his hospital in Glasgow, which have never been seen before in the NHS. He has had to resign as a foundation programme director, supervising junior doctors, to reduce the number of paid hours he does.

Stephen Hammond: Let me make it clear that not only are the changes having an impact, they are likely to continue to have an impact. I recognise that; the hon. Gentleman will hear later in my remarks that we recognise that point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poole was right to talk about the long-term plan and the cash settlement that goes with it. He was also right, though, to mention that any plan will work only if it works: if we make sure the people delivering it can do so with the numbers and experience required. The hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), although she said she was not expecting to speak this morning, made a thoughtful speech and raised a number of issues from her direct experience that informed the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) represents the place where I was born and spent my childhood, so for that and other reasons, I always listen carefully to what he says. He was right to stress at the start of his speech that this is not about tax breaks for particular people, although that is the headline; the reality is that perverse disincentives are being created against providing the care that we need. I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), who has just intervened on me to reiterate the point he made in his speech about the experiences of some consultants, and I recognise that those experiences are not unique to Glasgow North East.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) always makes many informed remarks, given her experience. She made a point that perhaps has not been picked up,
but is important in informing the debate: this is not just about losing a number of potential outpatient appointments and clinicians to service them, but about the impact on training. In many of the places that I have had the honour to visit as Health Minister, it is clear that the mentoring and support provided by senior staff to more junior staff is an important contribution, not only to the wellbeing of those junior staff, but to their education and, therefore, to the benefit of patients. That is undoubtedly one of the consequences of what we are talking about today.

Dr Whitford: Obviously, senior clinicians are critical to clinical teaching, which is part of the work. However, as other Members have highlighted, consultants are refusing to take on the extra sessions involved in organising that teaching and running rotas for either junior doctors or medical students. Without that, it will just be chaos.

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady is right to make that point; as I said in my remarks about her speech, I recognise the impact on training. There is clearly concern that unless we address this matter, it will have a number of impacts, of which that is one.

The hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), speaking for the Opposition, rightly opened her remarks by pointing out the scale of the cost of tax release for pensions to the Treasury. She made valid points about doctors’ knowledge about that liability, and about the interaction of core tax principles with particular schemes. I was rather hoping that she would also welcome the interaction of core tax principles with particular schemes. I was rather hoping that she would also welcome the long-term plan and the cash settlement, but I suspect that element of unity was probably a step too far.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Poole may have mentioned at the beginning of his speech, we have fewer Members here and a lower number of contributions. However, those contributions, combined with some of the interventions, have meant that we have had a debate of high quality.

Needless to say, I have heard the representations from everyone in the Chamber. It will not surprise anyone that I have received, as has the Department, representations from NHS employers reporting exactly what we have been discussing—that consultants are increasingly no longer willing to work additional sessions. The lost capacity is clearly difficult to replace, especially in some clinical areas where there are already shortages, and it can be expensive, as employers can pay a premium for locums to fill the gap. It is obvious and right that where there is evidence of an impact on the delivery of services, the Government should be prepared to take action.

At the outset, I reiterate that the Secretary of State and I take seriously the concerns of doctors. That is why we have been involved in a number of discussions with the Treasury, which has resulted in the 50:50 flexibility and the consultation. I will come to that in a moment, but, as Members will hear as I develop my remarks, that will not be the end of our conversation with other Departments.

Looking at the case for pension flexibility, it is true that outside public service, employers in some cases have flexibility to adjust benefit packages to allow high-earning employees to target a lower level of pension saving and so reduce the potential for large regular annual allowance tax charges. That flexibility is not currently present in the NHS. The NHS pension scheme does not allow any flexibility over the level of pension growth. Staff who participate in the scheme must pension all regular earnings from their employment. The Government are right to take the view that it is important to ensure that staff have a good level of pension savings, but senior clinicians, particularly of consultants and GPs, have a unique degree of flexibility over their workloads and obviously can reduce their commitments. Consultants can reduce the number of additional sessions undertaken, and many GPs are self-employed. That can create incentives for clinicians to seek to control their income and pension growth by limiting or reducing their NHS work to avoid breaching their annual allowance. As a number of Members have discussed, that clearly has an impact on the delivery of patient care.

It is clear that retaining and maximising the contribution of our highly-skilled clinical workforce is crucial to the NHS and the long-term plan for the NHS. While any pension tax regime should seek to achieve the fiscal ambition of distributing pension saving incentives fairly, it has to be recognised that, in combination with the fixed structure of the NHS pension scheme, that could produce—listening to the evidence today and the evidence I have directly received—unintended consequences for service capacity and the delivery of patient care. The Government are prepared to change the rules to give clinicians more flexibility.

Alongside the publication of the “Interim NHS People Plan” earlier this month, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced our intention to consult on new flexibility for clinicians. The consultation will be published in the coming days—I hope very shortly—and will set out proposals for a 50:50-style option, offering 50% pension accrual and halved contributions. Earlier this year, as part of the new five-year GP contract, the BMA and NHS England asked the Government to consider introducing that option. While I recognise that the BMA has not been unequivocal in its support, it has welcomed the proposal as a step in the right direction.

The Government believe that a 50:50 option balances the benefit of flexibility with the fiscal impact to the Exchequer. The 50:50 option will allow clinicians to build up their pensions more slowly and at a lower cost. Clinicians will still need to make their own personal assessment as to whether their financial interests are best served by taking advantage of the 50:50 model or continuing with full-rate accrual, but I have heard—not necessarily in the debate today, but directly from a number of consultants—that the 50:50 option is not flexible enough and that other measures should be considered.

The new pension flexibility should be viewed as a positive development for clinicians. My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester mentioned that he has asked me about the consultation period on the Floor of the House and that he has spoken to consultants about it. The consultation will be an opportunity to listen to a range of views before any final proposition is agreed. I encourage all Members here today to encourage their local clinicians to take part in that consultation. Equally, I encourage anyone from the health system in its widest context to take note of the debate and take part in the consultation. We want not only to hear any suggestion that there is a generic case for tax changes, but to listen carefully to what clinicians say using their own personal examples to provide evidence for any change they seek.

Steve Brine: Is the consultation discussing the merits or otherwise of a 50:50 option, or is it genuinely open to discussion about whether that option in itself is a...
[Steve Brine]

Good idea? As I said in my speech, the initial responses I have seen have not broadly welcomed, to put it politely, the idea of 50:50.

Stephen Hammond: The consultation is both. I recognise, as I said a few moments ago, that the 50:50 option has not received unequivocal support from the BMA, but to its great credit, it has asked us to consider that. We have come forward with this proposal. The BMA has welcomed it, but has said that it would want to discuss further options for flexibility and other pension matters. We have said that the consultation will look at the merits of the 50:50 option—or question it—but we will rightly open it up to consultation and other suggestions. My hon. Friend will have just heard me say that I hope Members will encourage their local clinicians to use the consultation as a way of expressing their concerns about the 50:50, if they have any, and to express their views on other measures they would like to see introduced in terms of pension contributions. I stress that point again in response to his intervention. He will probably be interested in my next set of remarks, which are on flexibility.

Although the 50:50 option provides a new flexibility, we recognise that it does not provide unlimited flexibility for clinicians to target their own personalised level of pension growth and contributions. The financing model for the scheme means that any flexibility that reduces contribution income has an immediate fiscal impact on the Exchequer. The 50:50 option does not set aside the annual and lifetime allowance tax policies, but will give clinicians a new flexibility to manage their own pension growth.

Where 50% accrual reduces pension growth by more than they wish, clinicians can use the contribution savings from the 50:50 model to buy additional pension to customise their own pension growth incrementally. Additional pension can be purchased in units of £250. That clearly adds some flexibility to their ability to manage their own contributions. However, some clinicians may continue to experience annual allowance tax changes, even with accrual rates reduced to 50%. For that group, while 50:50 reduces the charge, it does not eliminate it. We recognise that a number of individuals may wish to target a lower level of pensions growth. We will listen carefully to that suggestion through the consultation.

Dr Whitford: Is the Minister suggesting that senior consultants in three pension schemes sit and manage whether they are going to use the 50:50 or add in top-ups? That creates a whole job for people who work often 50 to 60 hours a week doing the thing that they are actually meant to do; it would give them almost a side job to try to manage their pension. Could we not go back to something simpler, whereby they get their payslip with a fair amount of pension tax taken off, but not what is happening at the moment?

Stephen Hammond: I have listened carefully to what the hon. Lady has just said, and she will want to listen to my next remarks, but I think she will reflect on the fact that a system of annual and lifetime allowances has been in place for some time. They were first introduced by the previous Government, although there have been some changes. Whether or not she thinks it would be better to have an even simpler system, some people will have recognised over time that it is important to look at their own pension contributions. Although tax relief on pensions is one of the most expensive reliefs, and the NHS pension scheme is rightly one of the better schemes available, I absolutely recognise that annual allowances and negative tax rates have a huge impact on some clinicians and consequently on the services for patients.

Consultants have raised with me the issue of the tapered annual allowance that Members have spoken about. I have been asked why the taper threshold is currently set at £110,000, which cuts across, as many people have pointed out, the typical earnings of an NHS consultant, although some people might perceive £100,000 as a high level of income. Unsurprisingly, tax policy is not something that I can speak to, but I have asked the Treasury and it advises that the threshold income test is designed to ensure that only those on the highest incomes can be affected by the annual taper. In the Treasury’s opinion, the £110,000 threshold balances the desire to restrict the annual allowance taper to those on the highest incomes, while trying to minimise the reduction in the value of the individual’s annual allowance.

I have also been asked why the annual allowance taper calculation takes into account both pensionable and non-pensionable earnings. Again, with the obvious proviso that I cannot design tax policy, the Treasury advises that if non-pensionable pay is excluded from the annual allowance taper calculation, there is the possibility that an unscrupulous employer could reclassify some pay as non-pensionable. To ensure fairness, the Treasury includes all sources of income in the taper calculation. However, hon. Members will not be surprised to hear that I think the concern about unscrupulous employers is not one that applies to the NHS. I recognise the issues raised by hon. Members on behalf of their consultants with regard to the taper threshold, and I am grateful to the Treasury for the discussions we have had, which have resulted in the 50:50 flexibility, but I can assure hon. Members that that discussion has not concluded. We rightly recognise that other pension issues need to be resolved.

I am grateful that the Treasury continues to engage with concerns about the taper threshold and how it impacts upon the workforce. I am happy to assure hon. Members that the Department intends to continue having discussions so that the matter can have a resolution that we hope will sort the matter out in an equitable and fair way, and not only for tax principles. We want to ensure that the dedicated staff working in the NHS feel valued and understand that they will not be penalised through the creation of perverse incentives so that they do not do what we want them to do, which is to provide excellent patient care.

In closing, I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poole for raising this important issue. I hope that I have been able to do three things: first, show hon. Members that the Department and I as the Minister responsible for people in the health system recognise the concerns raised by hon. Members on behalf of their consultants. The issues have also been raised with me directly. Secondly, I hope people will recognise that the 50:50 option is an important first step in looking at issues associated with lifetime contributions. I urge hon. Members to encourage their consultants to use the consultation. Thirdly, I recognise there are still issues around the taper threshold and the annual allowance, and I give the Chamber a
commitment that the Department will continue to discuss with the Treasury ways in which we might be able to resolve those matters. I conclude by reiterating how important the debate has been this morning.

10.47 am

Sir Robert Syms: The lifetime allowance and the annual allowance have not created the crisis. The reduction in the limits has not created the crisis. If all we had at the moment was an annual allowance of £40,000, or a lifetime allowance of just over £1 million, the NHS would be living with that. What has caused the problem is the taper, and the taper’s impact on the way in which people do their business. Initially, it is changing behaviour. If it is not fixed, it will do real damage to the NHS. I know the Department of Health understands that and I hope the Minister will make representations to the Treasury. If he gets moved and promoted soon, perhaps he will leave a note to his successor and send a note to the Treasury saying that unless they fix it soon, the cost of fixing it for taxpayers and for patients will be far higher. I thank everyone for contributing.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered NHS pensions, annual and lifetime allowances.

10.47 am

Sitting suspended.

Heated Tobacco

11 am

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered Government policy on heated tobacco.

May I say how pleased I am to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray? I immediately declare my interest as an honorary life fellow of Cancer Research UK.

Smoking remains a terrible public health problem in the United Kingdom. The Government recently referred to it as the “continuing tobacco epidemic”. It is the country’s principal cause of cancer and single greatest cause of preventable illnesses and avoidable deaths. Some 7.4 million people in this country smoke, and smoking is the cause of around 100,000 deaths every year. There is a mistaken perception that the problem of smoking has largely been addressed, which might be because smoking, like many other societal ills, does not affect everyone equally. The smoking rate remains around 25% in many of the poorest areas of the country, whereas it is around 5% in more prosperous areas. In my constituency of Clwyd West, the rate is above the national average, at 17% to 18%.

The Government are to be commended for their achievements on smoking, and indeed for their ambitions for the future. Since 2010, Conservative-led Governments have brought the smoking rate down from 20.2% to 15.5%, which is a significant accomplishment. The Government are to be applauded for their ambition to lower smoking rates to 12% by 2020. Although they have not set yet a target date, the Government aim eventually to create a smoke-free generation, which they define as less than 5% of adults smoking. However, the challenge today is far greater than it was a decade ago, because smokers with a higher level of motivation to quit will have done so already. Those who remain have withstood years of public health campaigns and societal pressures, as well as the rise of e-cigarettes as an alternative to smoking.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on bringing this important matter to the House for consideration. Does he agree that advice must be provided first about smoking cessation, rather than about vaping or any other alternative method? Does he also agree that although there are no long-term indications of the effects of vaping, whether burned or heated, the chemicals that are used will not be neutral, and there will therefore always be an element of concern and a need for greater research?

Mr Jones: Clearly, the ideal is for people to give up smoking altogether, but there are ways of reducing it. I will go into that in my speech. The hon. Gentleman makes a point to which I shall also refer: there is a need for research on the effects of alternatives to combustible tobacco.

E-cigarettes have had a revolutionary effect on efforts to reduce smoking rates in this country, and credit must go to the Government for facilitating that. E-cigarettes have had a highly positive impact on helping smokers to quit. In 2010, a particularly enlightened member of the behavioural insights team, David Halpern, influenced the Government’s decision not only to resist banning e-cigarettes—other countries were poised to do so—but
to seek deliberately to make them more widely available. David Halpern advanced the principle of harm reduction: it is more effective to give somebody a reduced risk product than to insist unrealistically on immediate total abstinence. An expert in harm reduction, Professor Gerry Stimson of Imperial College, has supported that argument, pointing out that it is easier to persuade people to do something if that thing is enjoyable rather than a painful chore. He said:

“For those trying to stop smoking, e-cigarettes have profoundly changed the experience. For the first time quitting cigarettes is no longer associated with being a ‘patient’ and personal struggle.”

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for securing this important debate. As a non-smoker, I think there is nothing worse than sitting outside a cafe in London or Shropshire and having my lungs full of somebody else’s smoke, or indeed trying to walk to Parliament and taking in a street full of smokers’ smoke. Having said that, I am a libertarian—if people want to smoke, they should be free to do so. His substantive point on public health education is absolutely right: the campaign against smoking is not over. In my constituency of The Wrekin, 19,000 people still smoke. Does he agree that public health is important?

Mr Jones: I do indeed. I will also comment on my hon. Friend’s point about other people having to endure smokers’ smoke. One point that the Government make in their response to the Science and Technology Committee’s report is that heated cigarettes are far less offensive to other people than combustible cigarettes.

Consumers’ principal reason for using e-cigarettes is to give up smoking. According to Action on Smoking and Health, 62% of ex-smokers use e-cigarettes for that purpose, and the majority of users have successfully quit smoking. However, it might well be that we have now passed the apogee of the e-cigarette effect. According to the Office for National Statistics, the number of new e-cigarette users peaked at 800,000 in 2013-14. Since then, the number has approximately halved every year, down to 100,000 in 2016-17. It is not the case that the remaining smokers do not want to quit; the ONS reports that nearly 60% do. For some, however, the experience of using e-cigarettes does not come sufficiently close to that of smoking to be an adequate substitute. In this context, I urge the Government to consider the alternatives.

In Japan, heated tobacco is proving very successful in helping smokers to quit. Evidence there shows that 70% of heated tobacco users give up smoking altogether. That is a better conversion rate than for any other alternative nicotine-containing product on the market.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I have been a smoke-free person for 15 years, but it took me 12 years to get there. I had various failed attempts to give up smoking because it was a choice between smoking and chewing gum, which really was not a successful pathway—it took me 12 years before I could finally give up. Any method that helps the process has to be a good idea.

Mr Jones: I am very pleased to hear that. Of course, it is debatable whether chewing gum is more or less antisocial than smoking—particularly in its effect on pavements.
independent research on the efficacy of heated tobacco in bringing down smoking rates and its impact on public health? It may be suggested that the lack of funding is an issue, but I urge the Government to consider requiring tobacco companies to pay for the research to be carried out, thereby circumventing the need to apportion departmental budgets to it.

The reduction of harm from smoking must remain a top priority for this and any other Government. I therefore hope that the Minister will respond positively to my suggestion.

11.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) for raising the important issue of heated tobacco products and their contribution to reducing harm from smoking, and for his lifelong service as a fellow of Cancer Research UK. He put it very well: smoking is still prevalent in certain communities in our country, and still causes over 78,000 deaths a year in England. It is one of the leading causes of preventable illness and premature death. We have made great progress, particularly over the past 10 years. Adult smoking prevalence is now 14.9%—the lowest ever recorded level—but, as he pointed out, we have much further to go, particularly among certain groups and in certain parts of the country.

In the 2017 tobacco control plan, we set out our ambition to reduce smoking and ensure a smoke-free future. Part of that strategy is about helping people to stop smoking by adopting the use of less harmful nicotine products. They may, for example, take up chewing gum. I have never seen my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) spit out his gum on the pavement. Mr Charles Walker: I quit 15 years ago, but it took me 12 years because the only choice besides smoking was nicotine gum, and it was simply revolting. I would have quit a lot earlier if we had some of these modern products around 15 years ago.

Seema Kennedy: I hear what my hon. Friend is saying. For a lot of people, nicotine substitutes are a good transition to giving up smoking or other things completely. We have seen a dramatic rise in the use of e-cigarettes from 1.6 million users in 2014 to about 2.5 million in 2017. Encouragingly, about half of them in England have quit smoking completely. E-cigarettes are not risk-free, however. The evidence is increasingly clear that they are significantly less harmful to health than smoking tobacco. They can help smokers to quit, particularly when combined with stop smoking services. Recent studies have shown they can be twice as effective as nicotine replacement therapy in helping people quit smoking. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West pointed out, the sales of e-cigarettes are plateauing, and we are coming to the stubborn 5% of people who are still smoking.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): The Minister will know that expenditure on smoking cessation programmes has fallen rapidly in the past few years. I promoted a ten-minute rule Bill to put a levy on tobacco companies to fund smoking cessation programmes and research into less harmful products. The greatest problem we have had for many years—this is anecdotal at the moment—is that products such as patches and gums cannot get heavy smokers to quit. There is some evidence, although it is not firm, that heated products are a way of getting to people who have a real problem with addiction.

Seema Kennedy: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Those of us who represent seats in the north and the devolved nations know that in some communities a very high proportion of people—particularly older men—are still smoking. Smoking cessation services are obviously part of the conversation about public health that the Department will be taking forward to the spending review.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West has argued that it would be timely for the Government to commission independent research into heated tobacco products’ potential for harm reduction. Obviously, if the tobacco companies were paying for it, it would not be independent. The right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) has set me an interesting challenge on tobacco levies. The new levy is being introduced in a few days, and I will definitely keep that under review.

The primary focus of our research at the moment is e-cigarettes, because heated tobacco is still very new on the market in this country. We will keep it under review and we will monitor the evidence through Public Heath England’s reviews. I agree entirely that it is important to look carefully at the evidence of harm reduction. I assure the House that we are, and will continue to be, led by that evidence.

Heated tobacco products are regulated under the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016 as novel tobacco, in accordance with the EU’s tobacco products directive. We know far more about e-cigarettes than we do about heated tobacco products. The research and evidence base is still in its infancy, and is mainly conducted by the tobacco industry. We asked the Committee on Toxicity to research the toxicological risks of heated tobacco products and compare them with those attributed to conventional cigarettes. It reported in December 2017, and the evidence suggests that heated tobacco products still pose a risk to users. There is likely to be a reduction in risk for cigarette smokers who switch to heated tobacco products, but quitting tobacco entirely is the most beneficial thing that anybody can do.

We have asked Public Health England to update the evidence base on e-cigarettes and other novel nicotine delivery systems annually. The PHE 2018 evidence review also had a comprehensive chapter on heated tobacco. It concluded the same as the Committee on Toxicity. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West said, it stated that e-cigarettes are less harmful than heated tobacco. The latest PHE evidence review in February 2019 did not cover heated tobacco products, essentially because there was insufficient new evidence since the previous review in 2018.

My right hon. Friend pointed to the experience of other countries. I agree that we must look beyond our shores and learn lessons, but we must also acknowledge that there are different contexts in which heated tobacco products are used. For example, Japan has banned e-cigarettes, but it has introduced heated tobacco products, which have made an impact there. The Food and Drug
Administration in the United States has permitted the sale of heated tobacco products, but is yet to pronounce on whether Philip Morris International may make claims of reduced risk for its IQOS product. I believe, therefore, that we need to be cautious about assuming that heated tobacco products are likely to find a large market in the UK.

I recognise that more independent research on heated tobacco products would be helpful for understanding their relative risks. The Department and its arms’ length bodies will consider research proposals in this field, but at present none has been forthcoming. I need to be clear that such proposals would need to demonstrate good use of public money. We will continue to monitor the international evidence and develop our policy as such evidence develops.

Mr David Jones: I have listened carefully to what the Minister has to say. It seems that the Government’s position now is identical to their position six months ago, when they published their response to the report of the Science and Technology Committee. Is that right? Has nothing moved?

Seema Kennedy: There is a definite need for more research to be done on heated tobacco products. Only through proper, independent research can we draw different conclusions. However, my right hon. Friend has raised a very important issue about these products, which are helping certain people in this country and other jurisdictions to quit smoking. He has set me a challenge and I will certainly ask my officials to look closely at the issue. It is important to remember that heated tobacco products are tobacco products, and we must apply suitable caution. Although switching from traditional cigarettes is likely to reduce risk, the best approach is to quit entirely. The Government remain committed to helping people quit smoking and promoting reduced-risk products where it makes sense for smokers. We will continue to be driven by the evidence.

Question put and agreed to.

11.22 am
Sitting suspended.

EU Structural Funds:
Least Developed Regions

Paul Blomfield: I agree. The European Union has demonstrated itself to be a very effective redistributive mechanism, taking from richer areas and redistributing to poorer ones. In my area of South Yorkshire, I imagine that we are a net beneficiary of that, although the UK as a whole is a net contributor.

Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly and west Wales and the valleys both already receive funding for that category.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: I beg to move.

That this House has considered replacement of EU structural funds for least developed regions.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I am grateful that this issue has been selected for debate. I thank colleagues across parties and regions for supporting the application, particularly the hon. Member for Torro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), who is not currently in her place, and my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley).

The application for this debate followed a report by the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions that crystallised concern that our regions should not lose out as a result of the decision made in the 2016 referendum. I intend to speak relatively briefly because I want to give plenty of opportunity to colleagues from across the regions to make their points. I have only one question for the Minister, but I will come to it at the end.

The CPMR report estimated that if the UK had remained in the European Union, we would have been entitled to €13 billion, or £11 billion, of support from EU structural funds—primarily the European regional development fund and the European social fund—during the next period, from 2021 to 2027. However, five regions would be set to receive a bigger share of that funding based on our position as having some of the poorest areas in Europe. Those areas are defined as “least developed regions” because our GDP falls below 75% of the European average. Clearly, that is not something that we should be proud of and it needs to be addressed.

Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, and west Wales and the valleys both already receive funding for that category.
said that, if anything, the CPMR report underestimated the position because it had not taken account of southern Scotland, which would have been eligible, and added that “the ‘Outer London – East and North East’ region is also on the borderline” for classification for support. The amount of funding for which UK regions could have been eligible may have been even higher than in the CPMR analysis.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I will raise a point about the CPMR analysis that I was going to make during my speech, because it is hugely important to the hon. Gentleman’s argument. I saw a copy of the House of Commons Library briefing, which confirmed that the analysis said that some areas could see funding rise by 22%, but, as I am sure he knows, the European Union has said that it does not want funding to go up by more than 8% in relevant areas. I do not think that the Library covered that. That would be worth expanding on as the hon. Gentleman develops his argument.

Paul Blomfield: I will mention the 22% increase specifically as I proceed.

I am delighted that Members from across the regions that would have benefited are in the Chamber. Everybody will want to focus on the impact in their own areas but, as the Minister indicated, the projections indicate that the UK would be entitled to an increase of 22% in funding. I am sure that if we were a participating member, we would be arguing strongly to ensure that that assessment was matched in reality and that the funding came through.

The funding estimate is up from the €0.6 billion that we received from 2014 to 2020 to approximately €13 billion. Part of the reason that the CPMR estimates that increase is that we would now have five less developed regions, compared with two during the current funding period. The analysis states: “All five of these regions would stand to receive EU support in excess of 500 euros per capita for the seven-year period.”

On current figures, that would result in £605 million for South Yorkshire to support economic growth.

There is a sense of déja vu, because South Yorkshire has been here before. When the Thatcher Government decimated our coal and steel industries, and our whole economic base with them, we became one of the poorest regions in Europe. The EU stepped in with funding that was critical to rebuilding our economy, funding projects decided by local politicians and delivered by local bodies.

We received £820 million of objective 1 funding—levering in matched funding—which was channelled into more than 250 organisations and 650 projects. That encouraged investment, stimulated the development of new growth and high-technology sectors, helped businesses to modernise and become more competitive, supported innovation, helped with the commercialisation of research, developed skills and provided infrastructure in the region. We saw real transformation in a variety of ways.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. In his calculations, has he taken into account any potential and likely changes towards the end of the seven-year period? With yet more additions to the EU of companies that would be net beneficiaries, the funding structure would change for the UK and other countries that happened to be part of the EU at the time.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but that is not part of the CPMR analysis, nor has the House of Commons Library suggested that it is a factor that should be taken into account.

In South Yorkshire, we saw real transformation. The advanced manufacturing park at Waverley—a partnership led by University of Sheffield with Boeing and Rolls-Royce—was held up by the Government as a flagship of growth through innovation. It was dependent on that funding and would not have got off the ground without it. That is just one example of the work in developing clusters, alongside advanced manufacturing and metals, investment in bioscience, creative and digital industries and environmental and energy technologies.

The funding was involved in the remodelling of the primary gateway to Sheffield in my constituency, by developing the station and the main pedestrian route into the heart of the city, and played a key role in making the city a more attractive place in which to invest. There was improved access to finance for small and medium-sized enterprises, which supported start-ups, scale-ups and incubator units such as the Quadrant Business Centre. Community projects in my constituency, such as Matrec and Zest, were funded for programmes to build the skills needed in a changing work environment.

Across South Yorkshire, there was investment in new roads and transport infrastructure.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): In Blaenau Gwent, the structural funds have made a big difference, particularly for transport, with the dualling of the heads of the valleys road. However, there is still bags to do, such as improving the Ebbw Vale train line to get more services to Cardiff. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister needs to confirm how much funding will be available and by when, particularly in advance of the spending review, so that we can get not only better trains but more funding to the local economies of our regions?

Paul Blomfield: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, in particular about investment in transport infrastructure. Without that, the wider area of my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) would have seen none of the road network in the Dearne valley that facilitated growth, with a whole series of new companies and the new jobs to go with them. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) is also right—he pre-empted my final question—to say that we need exactly that assurance from the Minister.

In South Yorkshire, the objective 1 funding worked: our economy grew by 8.5%. However, regional inequality has soared again since 2010. We are back in the same situation, qualifying as a least developed region and eligible for the highest level of EU funding had we been continuing as a member.

I know that the regional disparities concern both sides of the Chamber. Inner London is, unsurprisingly, our richest region, with GDP at 614% of the EU average—though I recognise that in London, too, there are pockets of deep poverty—but that figure falls to 69% for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. London is obviously represented overwhelmingly by colleagues from...
my party, but Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly by the Conservative party—this debate is about a fair deal for all our regions and about rebalancing our economy.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Given those regional imbalances and the question of how funding should be spent, is it not completely outrageous and unacceptable that we were promised a consultation on the shape of the shared prosperity fund, which should have started in late 2018, but have still not had one? My colleagues and I on the all-party parliamentary group for post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas are sensing that there will not be a consultation before the comprehensive spending review. Does he share my view that that is completely unacceptable? Will he ask the Minister to confirm that he too thinks it is completely unacceptable?

Paul Blomfield: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. A feature of the wider debate on Brexit is that so many critical issues that will shape the outcome—structural funds, immigration and others—are just being kicked down the road. I hope that the Minister will respond directly to my hon. Friend’s point.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): In Wales, our wages are 70% of the UK average and we receive something like £440 per person in structural funding. Is my hon. Friend aware that with a new plan, we will lose some of that, and that in the case of a new deal, we will have no money at all? Only today, I was talking to representatives of the Swansea universities who said that they were shedding hundreds of jobs. The background to that is the doubling in size of Swansea University thanks to EU money. We are in a critical place in Wales, with closures at Bridgend, Tata and Airbus because of Brexit, so the structural funding is imperative.

Paul Blomfield: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the impact on all our areas if there is not adequate investment in economic development.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): On the shared prosperity fund, a recent report by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee called for consultations to begin before the end of April. The Government response simply stated that “the Government will consult widely on the Fund and final decisions are due to be made following the Spending Review”, and that “the Government continues to review our approach to consulting on the Fund accordingly.” That is not very definite. At some point, we will also need to ask the Minister what, if there were no spending review—which there probably will not be, or at least not a four-year one—that would do to consultations on sorting out the shared prosperity fund.

Paul Blomfield: That intervention clearly comes with the great knowledge and experience that my hon. Friend brings as Chair of the Select Committee. I hope that the Minister will pay attention to his concerns in the closing remarks.

I do not necessarily have a lot of confidence in that. I wrote to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government back in February, bringing the CPMR report to his attention and reminding him of the Government’s commitment that regions should not lose out as a result of Brexit. I called on him to commit to providing the equivalent funding to what we would have received had we remained members of the EU. The Minister responded on the Secretary of State’s behalf, but did not make that commitment. I asked the Minister that same question again in May during the Westminster Hall debate on the shared prosperity fund led by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central. The Minister again did not make that commitment.

Our experience is that where the Government have the opportunity, they shift funding from areas in need to other parts of the country. We have seen that markedly with local government. I therefore simply do not have the confidence that the Government will do the right thing by areas such as ours. In conclusion, I will ask the Minister again, the simple and central question of the entire debate. We were told that there would be no losers as a result of leaving the European Union. Indeed, I pressed that with David Cameron at Prime Minister’s questions in the week after the referendum result. Had we remained a member, South Yorkshire would have received £605 million between 2021 and 2027; other regions would have received comparable amounts. Therefore, will the Government commit to providing, from whatever source, regional development funding at least equivalent to the money that we would have received from the European Union?

Several hon. Members rose—

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. All Members can see that there is an awful lot of interest in the debate. I understand that it is important to lots of Members’ constituencies, so I ask you to work with me, and I apologise for imposing a limit of four minutes on each speech so that we ensure that everyone may speak on behalf of their constituents.

2.46 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I will refer to the Select Committee report which looked at a number of issues to do with local government and Brexit. I have a particular constituency interest as well, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), with the advanced manufacturing park and research centre, which has done so much to reinvigorate and stimulate high-tech engineering and steel in the Sheffield city region. Yes, that is down to the University of Sheffield, Professor Keith Ridgway and my former colleague Richard Caborn, but it would not have happened without EU funding. We need to be conscious of that.

The Select Committee report was clear. It said to the Government that we need to get on and to consult now about the shared prosperity fund, what it should look like and how the money might be distributed. I understand that the Chancellor may not want to commit to an absolute total of money until after the spending review, or what passes for it—I am sure that the Minister, when he responds, will update us on whether we are to have a spending review—but why can we not have a consultation on the fund details? What is holding the Government up?
The Government have known about this for a long time, and they promised a consultation before the end of last year. A simple matter of at least talking to local government about how the fund will be distributed and what the criteria will be would be a start. People might then have some understanding and a conviction that the fund would happen. Why can that not be done? Why do we have to wait until later? The Government response to the Committee’s report includes no real explanation but simply states that they “will consult widely” on the shared prosperity fund and that “final decisions” will be made “following the Spending Review”, as I quoted earlier.

Why can the consultation not begin now? It is not sufficient for the Government to say that they are reviewing their approach on consulting. Why have we only got that far? It is in no way sufficient. Ministers should tell us what is holding the consultation up. We know that the Department has a big tray of things to do—the social care Green Paper, the social housing Green Paper, fracking, and the devolution framework which we have not yet seen—so Ministers are obviously busy thinking about doing things in the future, but why can we not get on and at least start to do something? That consultation would be an extremely good start. That is an important point, which needed to be made.

Another important issue we need further clarity on sometimes gets overlooked: we will no longer be a member of the European Investment Bank, which has provided funding for many important infrastructure projects. Again, the Government say that they want to explore options for future relationships with the EIB and for the arrangements to be put in place for local authority funding of future infrastructure projects. Why can those discussions with local authorities not begin now? Why do we have to wait? That is a simple ask. It may seem a long way away, but local authorities that are looking to start long-term infrastructure projects in 2021 need to start planning now. That is why the Government need to start consulting about how those projects will be funded.

2.50 pm

**Derek Thomas** (St Ives) (Con): I am glad to have the opportunity to speak in this interesting and important debate. The six Cornish MPs went to the Treasury some time ago to set out why it was so important to address the issue properly. It is absolutely right that when we get the consultation, we use the expertise available to make sure it is done correctly.

I want to be clear that in Cornwall and on Scilly we are looking not for a handout, but for a hand up. The aim of European funding is to reduce inequalities between communities and reduce disparities in regional levels of development, with particular regard to those that have increased deprivation, rural and island areas, areas affected by industrial transition and regions that suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps.

Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly fit perfectly with those aims. There is no reason not to see ourselves as benefiting from funding.

The seven least developed areas have set some priorities. The most sensible one, I think, is for an ambitious regional policy for England and Wales that recognises the need for a specific mechanism for the regions that are furthest behind. We want a protected allocation of funds to such regions that will allow a genuine rebalancing of the UK economy. I have heard nothing from the Treasury or the Minister to suggest that is not their intention.

**Sarah Newton** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. The modern industrial strategy clearly commits to making sure that regions can play their full part, so no region is left behind. The allocated funding would not only improve the lives of people in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, but enable the region to contribute to national well-being.

**Derek Thomas**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I say, we have heard nothing yet to suggest that the economy in Cornwall and on Scilly could not thrive. It is really important to MPs in Cornwall that we are part of the solution, not the problem. In July last year I set up a group that works with local business, Cornwall Council and people who already work with the most deprived and left behind in our communities. The group looks at the skills that a shared prosperity fund should deliver to enable people to get the well-paid, skilled jobs they want. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), attended the first meeting and set out a Government commitment and invitation for us to engage in the process and help them to understand what was needed.

Outside this building today there are thousands of people demanding that we take urgent action on climate change, clean up our air and make our society healthier and fairer. Through the shared prosperity fund we can achieve exactly that, particularly in places such as Cornwall. The Committee on Climate Change recommendations set out the need for massive upskilling to give people the skills needed for research and innovation, so that we can decarbonise our environment and our economy and ensure that people are healthier, live in healthier homes and have better opportunities. Now is the right time to have this debate and create a vibrant, low-carbon economy with better health, better skills and better pay.

In our jobs and growth group we have looked at skills. Even with European funding, the real problem in Cornwall is that many communities and young people never feel they have the opportunity or the learning that they need.

**Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has talked about young people, and I am sure he will share my anxiety about the future of the youth employment initiative, which is EU-funded. It helps to provide opportunities to young people who are not in employment, education or training. The Tees valley is one area that benefits from it at the moment. Does he share my anxiety about the fact that there is no clarity from the Government about the future of that funding?

**Derek Thomas**: I welcome that intervention, but I will continue with my point about the real problem for us in west Cornwall. Quite often, there are two options in Cornwall. One is to go away to university, which is much easier now because we have a university in Cornwall in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton). However, the vast majority of our young people leave Cornwall, in what we describe as a brain drain. The opportunities for
those who are left behind are very limited. There is a real need to look at apprenticeships and how further education can be properly funded for the skills and jobs that we need for the future. I believe that Cornwall has a real opportunity to share in that, exploit it and thrive, and I believe that shared prosperity is the solution.

Our group has looked at the role of high streets, and Cornwall Council is running an inquiry into how to make high streets work. They are no longer just about shops; they are about an experience, and where people live. They are places to get support and advice, and they even include workplaces other than shops. Lots of work is being done in communities in all our constituencies in Cornwall on understanding high streets. That is not just so that we can say, “Government, give us money so we can spend it,” but because we want support to make local economies low carbon. We have great talent; now, we need great opportunity.

2.56 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this important and timely debate on the future of regional development spending.

I speak on behalf of my region, the Tees valley, which has been a net beneficiary of Britain’s EU membership. In fact, it has often been the case that EU regional development funding has better supported my region than our own Governments have done. In the current spending period, 2014 to 2020, the Tees Valley has been allocated £198.1 million of EU regional funding. Those funds have provided vital investment, including in research and development and innovation, boosting small and medium-sized businesses, helping to retrain and upskill the local workforce, and supporting our area’s transition to a low-carbon economy.

There has been funding for the youth employment initiative to help to tackle our youth unemployment, which is two and a half times the national average. However, that investment has simply not been enough to offset the damage wrought by the UK Government’s austerity agenda. According to analysis by Institute for Public Policy Research, £6.3 billion of public spending has been taken from the north under austerity, while the south has gained £3.2 billion. That austerity has caused the public sector workforce in the north-east to fall by almost a quarter, with a huge knock-on effect to local economies.

We still have pacer trains running on yet-to-be electrified lines, despite the promise of better upgrades, while billions of pounds are poured into London’s Crossrail. Many communities are no longer served by bus routes, as subsidies have been slashed. Meanwhile, the crisis at British Steel threatens to put another great British industry, deeply rooted in the north, out of action because Whitehall has failed to create the level playing field that the steel industry so desperately needs.

Our region would now be classed as a lesser developed region. The Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions estimates that the region of Tees valley and Durham would be classified as a less developed region by the EU post 2020, putting us among the poorest regions in Europe and therefore entitling us to more money. That is absolutely shocking and demonstrates how regional inequality has skyrocketed under this Government.

At this crucial time when we need a greater share of regional development funding to give our area a boost, we do not yet know how the Government intend to allocate regional funding when EU policy no longer applies. The UK Government’s proposed UK shared prosperity fund is very light on detail. If their record is anything to go by — allocating money to the areas with the highest economic return, which typically are the areas that are already the wealthiest — my area could massively lose out again. If we were to remain EU members, the CPMR estimates that, based on current population numbers, the Tees valley would be entitled to more than £270 million between 2021 and 2027. That is money that we desperately need. That share of the pot reflects the huge regional inequalities across our country, and it would make a massive difference to growth in my region.

Alex Cunningham: The SSI site in my hon. Friend’s constituency is yet to see any real progress in development. That is all the more reason why we need a commitment to greater funding if we are to create jobs for people there and in my constituency, which is just across the Tees valley.

Anna Turley: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for that important intervention. He is right; there has still not been a single new job created at the SSI site in my constituency, which lost 3,000 jobs overnight in 2015. We have a plan for 20,000 jobs, but we need every bit of support and encouragement we can get to achieve that. It is not going to happen without looking more widely afield. My concern is that it will be local people that end up paying the cost of cleaning up that site.

Our share of the pot reflects the huge regional inequalities across our country and would make a massive difference to growth in my region. Ministers have indicated that regions should not lose out from the decision to leave the EU but, if current policy is anything to go by, yet again the Tees valley will be deprived of vital support.

Recently we saw the launch of the Power Up The North campaign, led by our regional media and supported by politicians, businesses and people across our communities. I congratulate them on this great campaign. It is extremely powerful and is pushing back against the old idea that success in London and the City will automatically lead to a wave of wealth, spreading out across the country, and lift up areas like Teesside on a rising tide. We know that is not the case.

We have just had the fifth anniversary of the northern powerhouse, which was launched to great fanfare. I hoped it might be a turning point in relations and inequality in this country, but five years on it is clear that the concept has been a damp squib, achieving more as a political campaign rather than delivering real power to our region.

On Teesside we have proved that when we are given power and control we can do great things, such as supporting our people to retrain after the SSI closure through our local taskforce, and developing a local industrial masterplan for the South Tees Development Corporation. We have big ambitions for carbon capture, hydrogen power, and other clean industries, but the reality is that too often we are reliant on going cap in
hand to the Government for funding. Now we are at risk of being in an even worse situation. Without better investment in the EU, the northern powerhouse will only ever be a soundbite that failed to deliver.

3.1 pm

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this debate, which builds on the excellent debate about the shared prosperity fund led by the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis).

All of us here would like to be evidence-based policy makers. There is inconclusive data about how successful the European funding programmes have been; the London School of Economics study and the excellent House of Commons studies all show that. It is important that we learn the lessons about how that money has been invested. From my own constituency, and Cornwall more widely, I can see that this money has been absolutely essential, but we need to draw the right conclusions from previous programmes so that the Government’s commitment to regional growth funding is done right and builds on the success we have seen.

Stephen Kinnock: How does the hon. Lady propose that the lessons be learned and things be improved if there is no consultation exercise?

Sarah Newton: I will come to that in a moment. At the last debate, the Minister invited us to put forward our suggestions. We do not need to wait for a formal consultation; my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) has demonstrated that. There have been consultation meetings with local enterprise partnerships and with the business community all over the country. It is up to us; we are leaders in our own communities. We should be making the most of these opportunities—today is one opportunity—so I will make some suggestions to the Minister, as he has invited suggestions about how we should go about allocating the funding.

First, we want to have designated funding for our regions. The EU funding that has been used so successfully is seldom the only source of funding. As other Members mentioned, it is often an opportunity to leverage additional funding. I want to get across the message that the huge investment in rail and buses in my constituency, where we have two universities, was enabled by European funding, but it was brought about by leveraging and working in partnership.

The way that the Treasury allocates funding and looks at gross added value often disadvantages areas with populations that are dispersed over large geographical areas. In the last five years, investment in cities and city regions has been successful, but those of us without cities—or even towns that meet the Government’s criteria of a population of 135,000—are disadvantaged. That geographical designation is really important for us to meet the opportunities of our local economy to grow, through the regional industrial strategies that feed into the national industrial strategies.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Because of the processes that the Government and the EU structural fund have followed, Northern Ireland has been able to access the fund. The simple reason is that we have lower wages and higher energy costs, and therefore a higher cost of living. It has proven to be the case that Northern Ireland needs the structural fund, and it has been a success. If the Government were able to ensure that something happens in the future along the same lines, it would be positive.

Sarah Newton: I agree that it is important that the Government honour their commitment to provide regions with the same sort of money as they would have got had we remained in the European Union. That was a clear commitment made by our party at the last general election. We will be working hard to make sure that whoever leads our party honours that commitment.

We should have opportunities to make decisions about how that money is spent, and I want those decisions to be made locally. The great city regions—I know the hon. Member for Barnsley Central is doing a good job as the Mayor of the Sheffield city region—must work in partnership. When I was a Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions, I saw the opportunity for central Government Departments to work in partnership with the metro mayors to innovate in their regions; that is something Government should be proud of and advancing.

It is not only regions or metropolitan areas with mayors that can work with Government in that way. Single-tier authorities, such as Cornwall Council and the Council of the Isles of Scilly, in partnership with our local enterprise partnership, can work on greater devolution and have far more say about how the money should be spent in our region.

In my remaining time, I want to touch on the European social fund. Debates are usually about roads, bricks and mortar rather than about the ESF’s work helping people who have been out of work, and far from the labour market, into work. There has been a huge amount of innovation under this Government, particularly led by the Department for Work and Pensions, working with metro mayors. The hon. Member for Barnsley Central has been pivotal to that work, and there has been a great deal of learning.

I would like the big, national work programmes contracted by the DWP to stop at the end of this round, and I would like that money to be spent by devolving it into partnerships in regions. We have an excellent local enterprise partnership in Cornwall, with a good skills committee, which is addressing the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives articulated so well: the need to develop skills and get people into work for the economy of the future. The best approach would be to enable regions to commission employment services that meet the needs of their communities.

Obviously, we have to be mindful of the market. We have to have a thriving market in people who provide those services, but that could be done at the same time as enabling greater local partnership. Then we would see the real progress in our economy that we want to see, in Cornwall and in every part of our community, and closing the unacceptable gaps in people’s life chances.

3.8 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairpersonship, Ms McDonagh. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for securing the debate.
It has been three years and three days since the EU referendum. During that time, the Government have failed to negotiate a decent Brexit deal, and that has resulted in uncertainty in our economy, for my constituents and throughout the country. My constituents voted to leave the European Union but they did not vote for their rights to be watered down, for their jobs to be at risk or for a less prosperous future for their children.

South Yorkshire has had its challenges and its triumphs. I am proud of our region’s strong manufacturing base, which has remained resilient despite the devastation of the 1980s under the Thatcher Government. European structural funds, particularly from the European regional development fund—the ERDF—for infrastructure and the European social fund for employment, have been important elements in rebuilding our regional economy since those days. I have seen how the funds have had huge impacts in my constituency of Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough. We have fantastic facilities such as SOAR Works, which is a managed workspace at Parson Cross funded through the ERDF, and Building Better Opportunities—a great scheme to get disabled people in Sheffield into employment that has received £2 million from the European social fund.

Sadly, the Government’s record on supporting the north has been a travesty and has held back the economy in our area. Everyone in Sheffield remembers that one of the very first actions of the coalition Government was to cancel a crucial £80 million loan to Sheffield Forgemasters—a clear sign that investing in the north was not a priority. The Government still talk of a northern powerhouse in slogans, but warm words will not cut it. The north needs investment to turbocharge our economy and to give communities the jobs, skills and opportunities that they deserve.

Under the EU system we would be entitled to a higher level of investment. As the report notes, South Yorkshire would be entitled to more than £500 a head in the next six-year period, which could amount to around £30 million for my constituency alone: a massive amount of money. We have seen food bank use rocket, particularly after the roll-out of universal credit. If the Government fail to invest in areas such as South Yorkshire, we will see more people struggle and rely on food banks to survive.

The 2017 Conservative manifesto stated:

“We will use the structural fund money that comes back to the UK following Brexit to create a United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Fund”.

The fund is to be targeted, flexible and devolved, and it is intended to promote inclusive growth. But although they constantly refer to it as the means by which they will “tackle inequalities between communities...especially in those parts of our country whose economies are furthest behind”;

government have yet to offer any clarity on how it will work or the mechanisms by which it will be distributed.

As we know, the Government said they would consult on the proposals, but here we are in June 2019 and the consultation is still not forthcoming. Will the Minister take this opportunity to assure my constituents in Brightside and Hillsborough that the Government will cover any shortfall that results from leaving the EU? Furthermore, the Minister will be aware that the framework for distribution of the ERDF in the period from 2021 to 2027 has the funding of low-carbon schemes at its heart. Will the Minister commit to a similar focus in the shared prosperity fund in response to the climate emergency?

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I am sorry, but Members must go down to three-minute speeches, so will everybody be circumspect about making interventions?

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this debate, which is important to my constituency of South East Cornwall as we prepare to leave the EU and seize the growth and trade opportunities that Brexit offers. I am grateful for the opportunity to make a brief contribution and am pleased to see that my hon. Friend the Minister will respond.

Cornwall may be a beautiful county of beaches, moorland and communities, but it lags behind the UK on many economic indicators. Its rurality is a blessing, but it puts a brake on growth and prosperity. We are closing the gap with other regions and nations, but we need to maintain that progress. European structural and investment funds have undoubtedly helped to boost the Cornish economy, creating jobs and boosting skills, higher education and inclusion. Better connectivity has also been a benefit. Just over 90% of my constituency now has access to superfast broadband, which is excellent news, but there is still work to be done for the remaining 10%. Local transport links, such as the A38, about which I had an Adjournment debate last week, need to be prioritised. Cornwall’s economic future is a positive one, from the development of the space sector to the growth of creative industries, tourism and high-quality food and drink production. I want to maintain the momentum after we leave the EU.

Brexit provides us with an opportunity to reassess how money is allocated and to make sure it is spent wisely and without the wasteful spending of EU bureaucracy. Will my hon. Friend the Minister give an indication as to when we can expect the consultation on the shared prosperity fund? It has been promised and it would be good to know when it will happen. A refreshed approach to regional policy that is strategic and devolved will help to ensure that funding is targeted in the right areas, better reflecting the needs of my constituents. All hon. Members are fully aware that we contribute more to the EU budget than we get back each year. I ask the Minister to ensure that we receive a fair share of the Brexit dividend that reflects Cornwall’s unique economic and social challenges.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this important debate. I am pleased to see Members here from all parties and from every corner of the United Kingdom, especially from communities in our least developed regions, such as those in South Yorkshire, where I am proud to serve as Mayor and MP. Such communities are...
among the hardest hit by austerity, by stalled economic growth, and by the failure of successive Governments to address widening regional inequalities.

The stark truth is that, from 2020 onwards, funding allocated to regions by the EU will come to an end, and 2021 marks the end of the Government’s local growth fund programme. Taken together, these funds have been the glue holding together many of our communities. What replaces those funds must replace them on the basis of what would have been received had the referendum result been different. The creation of a shared prosperity fund provides a vital opportunity to do things differently.

To heal the divisions in our country and to turn the dial in those least developed regions, we must think and do differently.

The UK has one of the most centralised political systems in the world, with the inevitable consequence that some of the decisions taken by Westminster and Whitehall, however well-intentioned, do not reflect the needs or opportunities of local areas. Those living in the UK’s least developed regions are feeling the impact of the equality gap, which grows ever wider. I am hugely positive about our collective ability in the north of England to make real progress, provided that we have the right powers underpinned by the right resources.

England to make real progress, provided that we have the right powers underpinned by the right resources. The right powers are clear: the right to fully devolve to the areas that have in multiple years, beyond the vagaries of spending reviews and parliamentary cycles.

If we want to create a country that works for everybody, let us take the opportunity to be bold, and let us make sure that the shared prosperity fund does what it says on the tin and enables all of our communities to share and prosper in our country’s economic growth.

3.18 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The lack of clarity and detail over the potential loss of funding three years after Brexit is a cause for general alarm. Those critical funds are extremely important in my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran, where they fund employability initiatives and measures to tackle poverty and the promotion of social inclusion. Three years later, we still have no idea how much cash the replacement shared prosperity fund will have to distribute. We do not know what charities and voluntary organisations will be eligible for funding. We do not know how the funding will be administered and which programmes that currently benefit from the fund will be left staring a black hole in the face. I urge the Minister to give much-needed and much sought after clarification on this issue. Will we have equivalent like-for-like replacement funding post-Brexit, and can he guarantee it whether or not the UK leaves the EU with or without a deal? A yes or no would be interesting.

We need answers, we need honesty and of course we need an unequivocal commitment from the Government that the communities who need the fund and who benefit from it will not be sacrificed, abandoned and forgotten as the Government drag us off the Brexit cliff-edge. I remind the Minister that the Government must respect the devolution settlement, and that it is imperative that the UK Government work with all the devolved Administrations to reach agreement on future funding arrangements that make sense for all parts of the UK. I look forward to hearing what he has to say about that. My constituency and country must not be short-changed.

3.20 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is good to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing the debate. If we have learned anything from the past few years, it is that people feel ignored by politicians and powerless to influence decisions about the most important things in their lives, such as whether a local hospital is kept open, whether their child’s education is properly funded, whether bus services continue so that they can get to work, or even whether they can afford to buy or rent a decent home to live in. They are told that the economy is growing, but everywhere they look services are being cut. Nowhere is that more true than in the north of England. The north has a population of 15 million people, which is roughly twice that of London. It has five major cities, 265 towns—including mine—and more than 1,000 villages and small communities. Our economy is more than twice the size of Scotland’s, and if the north were a country it would be the ninth largest in the EU. We have eight major ports, 29 universities and four national parks. We produce a third of the UK’s renewable energy and are leaders in the manufacturing, scientific and high-tech sectors. That is a pretty impressive CV.

Despite that, however, and despite the introduction of the northern powerhouse five years ago, regional inequality has grown since 2010. The north has borne the brunt of the Government’s austerity drive with a £3.6 billion cut in public spending, whereas the south-east and the south-west had £4.7 billion extra in real terms. There are now 200,000 more children living in poverty in the north than there were five years ago. That is a scandal. The economy has been growing consistently during that period, it is ample evidence that the economy does not now work for everyone.

Why, in 2019, does London still hold all the power and the resources? The sooner we realise that business as usual is not going to cut it and that further Westminster handouts on Westminster terms will not be enough, the better. We do not need more crumbs from the table. It has been clear for a long time that people are fed up to
Jackson Maders]
their back teeth with the current approach. Is it any wonder, when the system clearly does not work for them, that they feel ignored, isolated and held back?

Our country will be undergoing massive changes in the next 10 or 20 years. People feel they need to see a change. The central aim of the shared prosperity fund is to reduce inequality and enable all our communities to share in the country's economic growth. So let us really enable our communities to do that. Let us give them the responsibility, power and resources to shape their future, in line with local priorities and local need, using a bottom-up model in which decision making and accountability are at local government level, and which delivers real change whose benefits they can see.

I hope the Minister will be able to provide more detail about how the fund will be designed, and how it will work and be administered. I hope that he will also provide the guarantee that we all seek, that communities will be left no worse off. Finally, I urge him to get on and publish the consultation, so that we can address the systemic inequalities between our regions and ensure that all our communities share in the prosperity of one of the most prosperous nations in the world.

3.23 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for introducing the debate so well. Colleagues representing Cornwall constituencies have made a good case for the argument that the far south-west does not get its fair share, and they are right—we do not. We have not had our fair share under the Governments of the past nine years, and we risk getting an even worse deal if we do not get post-Brexit funding right. I worry that we are getting it wrong politically in Parliament at the moment, and that the Government are getting it wrong—what must happen. I worry because there is the risk of no deal on 31 October and the new system is not in place. People do not know what will happen to the funding streams that they currently enjoy. They do not know what forms they will have to fill in, what deadlines they will have to meet, or what happens to existing funded programmes. I worry that that is causing concern.

I remember the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), now a Tory leadership contender, starting the referendum campaign in Cornwall—in the constituency, I believe, of the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth—and grasping a pastry. I think he called it the pastry of independence. We now know that the geographical indicators that protect Cornish pasties might not be there with a no-deal Brexit. In fact, it looks as if they probably will not. So we need to make sure in the far south-west that we protect not only our funding streams, but our fantastic products. That is really at the heart of the issue. We need to make sure that whatever system replaces the European funding if Brexit does happen, distribution will be fair. I worry at the moment that the poor deal for the south-west will continue unless there is a consultation that clearly brings about change, to give such regions a better deal.

3.26 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing the debate and on the case that he outlined.

For the past 20 years or so, Wales has been a net beneficiary of the European regional development fund and that funding has allowed the transformation of towns and villages across south Wales. There has been hugely significant investment in Merthyr Tydfil town centre, which has helped to regenerate the whole town centre—a new college development, and the creation of a new square that has become the focal point for a calendar of cultural events. The A465, which my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) mentioned, and which has had a history of collisions over many years, has vastly improved because of a continuing project to create a dual carriageway. There is one more phase to complete, linking my constituency to west Wales and, to the east, through to the M50, M5 and midlands. That has all been possible with the support of regional development funding from the EU.

In communities across my constituency, such as New Tredegar, Treharris, Bedlinog and Rhymney, there have been transport schemes, flood alleviation works and town and village centre regeneration, all supported through regional development funding, which has proved essential in beginning the process of regenerating communities across the south Wales valleys.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central, the Thatcher Government ripped the heart out of our communities, threw countless people's jobs on the scrapheap and decimated towns and villages across south Wales, without having any plan to replace the jobs that were lost. The economic decline of the '80s and '90s can still be felt today, despite the investment that the valleys have had, which stemmed from the work of the Labour Government. I have tried to outline the history of the communities that I represent, and to highlight why economic deprivation exists. We benefited
from regional development funding quite simply because we needed it, which is why it is essential that we now have clarity from the Government about the future for the shared prosperity fund. The Government have not been clear about their proposal for the fund. We were promised, as we have heard, that consultation would take place before the end of 2018, and we are now halfway through 2019. There is no sign of the consultation.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) has said, that is completely unacceptable. A few weeks ago in Welsh questions I asked the Secretary of State to provide clarity on the fund and how it would work, what areas of the country would benefit, and how much the fund would be—and there was no answer from the Secretary of State. I hope that today the Minister will provide some of the clarity that is needed. The people of Wales, and people across the UK, were told by the leave campaign that we would not lose a penny if we left the EU. As things stand, we are due to leave the EU later this year and we are still unclear about the many millions of pounds that Wales currently receives as part of the EU, and how that money will be replaced by the Government. There is a need for certainty, so I have two questions for the Minister: Will the new fund be based on need, and will the Government respect devolution in their allocation of the new funding?

3.29 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this debate on an issue that is close to my heart, given the effect of European funding on the highlands and islands over the years. He cited CPMR figures of £13 billion and £11 billion, and as he rightly said, those numbers have been backed up by the House of Commons Library, and may even be an underestimate of the funding available had we remained in the EU. Indeed, if the Government had decided to take a sensible approach, we would still be beneficiaries of that funding.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the least developed regions, which get a bigger share of that money because they have greater need, and about the EU stepping in where Westminster had not. My constituency contains some big, iconic signals of that. Predating devolution, the Kessock bridge crosses from Inverness to Ross-shire, and it would not have been delivered without intervention from the EU. It has been transformational. Similarly, the University of the Highlands and Islands is now a physical entity, and it has helped hugely with some of the issues described by Members today. There is no town, village or community in the highlands and islands that does not show a wee EU sign to explain how it has benefited from that funding over the years. The hon. Gentleman went on to talk about a range of positive social and economic benefits of European funding, and we share that view.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) asked a question that many of us have asked: why is there no consultation? What is holding up the Government? He raised the important point that we will no longer be a member of the European Investment Bank, and the deficit that that holds. The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) said that people are looking not for a handout but for a hand up, and he listed the criteria. That is where the EU has stepped in in the past. He spoke about a protected allocation of funds, and said there is no reason to believe that that is not what is intended. Let us see the evidence for that: let us see the delivery. There is no detail and, as we have heard, not even a consultation.

The hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) spoke about investment and innovation, business and work skills, youth employment in the Tees valley, and about how essential those things are given this UK Government, and the times of Tory austerity we have been living through. She said that people have no knowledge about what is coming, and with her customary niceness she said that plans are “very light on detail”—I would have used stronger terms, but she is absolutely right. The hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) said that the way the Treasury looks at funding overlooks rural areas, and that she will be working hard to ensure her party honours that commitment. We need to hear the Minister say that the funding will be fully replaced, and whether it will be included in the spending review.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) talked about the three years of uncertainty that the communities and recipients of that spending have lived through, and she wondered where we will go next. Importantly, she mentioned the positive impact of the funding on disabled people, because often the best of it goes to those who are left behind in the thoughts of Westminster. She spoke about there being slogans from the Tory Government rather than investment, and today the Minister has an opportunity to put some meat on the bones and give the guarantees that everybody is asking for.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the importance of such funding in the shadow of universal credit, and as an MP for a constituency that has seen UC over six years, from pilot to full roll-out, I know that money from the EU is vital to address some of the deficits caused by that programme. Indeed, we share a rise in food bank reliance as a result. She said that funding should be targeted, focused and devolved, but we are still waiting for a consultation.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) talked about how regional equality has dropped, and there are now extra children living in poverty. He asked why in 2019—I agree with this—Westminster still holds all the power. He said that people are fed up to the back teeth with Westminster’s approach, and that we need bottom-up decision making. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) spoke about below-average spending from Westminster. He said that EU funds are fairer, and that there is a better recognition of the issues by the EU. He rightly spoke about the risks of a no-deal scenario.

In the short time that she took to make her speech, my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) spoke succinctly, and rightly, about the real living alarm over the lack of detail about what is coming. Who will be eligible? How will it work? What will it be worth? Will there be—this has been mooted but not explained in any detail—like-for-like funding? Will that guarantee guidance or no, regardless of a deal or the catastrophe of a no-deal hard Brexit? She pointed out, as have nearly all the contributors today, that the funding formula must respect the devolution
settlement, and she said that neither she, her constituency, nor her country should be short-changed. We call on the Minister to give those guarantees.

I am grateful to the all-party group for post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas for its reports. It backed up a lot of the comments made around this room. It had lots of submissions, including from the Welsh Government, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, EHRC, and many educational and voluntary bodies, which all said that budget funding should be “no less in real terms than the EU and UK funding streams it replaces.”

It pointed out that shares for the devolved nations should not be reduced, and that as we have heard, it should be a devolved matter.

The hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) rightly asked when we will see action, even just the consultation—that is a pro-Brexit Member asking for that guarantee. The hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) spoke about the failure of successive UK Governments to address regional disparity, and he mentioned the most centralised political system in the world here at Westminster. I think his four principles are absolutely right: the budget should be no less than it currently is, there should be no competitive bidding, it should be fully devolved, and it must be beyond spending reviews and political cycles.

We have had a promise from the Tory Government, but then delay after delay in getting any information. Evidence from the House of Commons Library shows that we are approaching nearly 300 parliamentary questions, without an answer on any detail of this funding.

**Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con):**

The hon. Gentleman makes a point about European funding being replaced by UK funding. If funding does come from the UK rather than the EU in future, will he commit to all projects being branded as co-Scottish Government and UK Government?

**Drew Hendry:** It would be much easier to respond to that kind of comment if the UK Government had given any details about how this will go forward. While the hon. Gentleman worries about slogans and branding, I worry about getting the detail to explain what communities across our constituencies, including my own, will get from this programme in future. When will we know the detail about what will be spent, who will be eligible, and what will it be used for? Once the Minister has answered those questions, we can go back to talking about flags and slogans.

Communities and charities have waited years to find out what will be available post-Brexit. The devolution settlement must be respected. As we have said, since Brexit is distracting the UK Government from doing anything worthwhile at the moment, let us revoke article 50 and get on with doing things properly, which would clear things up right away. Brexit will cost Scottish communities millions, and this particular issue must not add to that burden.

3.38 pm

**Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab):**

What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship again, Ms McDonagh, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for securing this debate, and for all the work he has undertaken in Parliament to champion the issue of EU replacement funding and what to do about those regions in greatest need.

This debate has shown Parliament at its best. We have colleagues from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the north-east, and Cornwall, but I think the star must go to Yorkshire, which is out in force this afternoon. There has been near unanimity across the Chamber, and we heard a number of powerful, well-argued speeches on the need for more information about the prosperity fund, to find out when it will be sorted out and how it will be disbursed, and what the Government will do about the regions in greatest need. I hope the Minister takes on board that it is a cross-party argument and that he listens, rather than simply chuntering from a sedentary position.

This is a timely debate. I am not sure we could be in a more uncertain time on Brexit, and the whole issue of how the prosperity fund will operate and replace EU funding has not been resolved, which is creating uncertainty for many regions. Even at this late stage, we are not entirely sure what the prosperity fund will cover. Will the Minister confirm that it will include all the European structural investment funds—the regional development fund, the social fund, the cohesion fund, the maritime and fisheries fund and the agricultural fund for rural development—as well as funding for youth unemployment and European territorial co-operation? It would be helpful to know exactly what it will encompass and how much money will be attached to it.

The second issue, which is at the crux of the debate, is what the Government will do about the recent research from the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions that shows that regional allocations from the EU would increase in the period from 2021-27 and affect positively at least five regions—Tees Valley and Durham; South Yorkshire; Lincolnshire; west Wales and the valleys; and Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly—and indeed up to seven regions. Over that period, it is estimated they would receive an additional £13 billion in funding, up 22%. We need to hear whether the Minister accepts that research and what the Government will do about it.

We have heard from hon. Members that such an increase is necessary because of a worsening of the relative position of the UK regions, with many areas falling behind the EU average for regional prosperity. Research cited in the House of Commons Library document as well as Eurostat data show that regional inequalities in the UK are growing. That is a terrible indictment of the Government’s policies; we need to know what they will do about it.

The Minister will know that the UK’s less developed regions have called for an ambitious new UK regional policy to recognise and address that need. My own council in County Durham got together with leaders from the other affected regions to ask the Minister for a long-term, urgent approach to tackle widening regional inequalities. They argue that particular attention must be paid to the regions furthest behind in terms of economic activity, areas with increased deprivation, rural and island areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions that suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic challenges.
The leaders wrote to the Minister asking the Government to make five commitments: an ambitious regional policy for the UK that recognises the need for a specific mechanism for those regions furthest behind; the UK shared prosperity fund should be adequately funded and at least match the €13 billion that UK regions would have received under the next EU programme, which is in addition to existing national local growth funding that under current EU programmes is often used as match funding; the UK SPF should be appropriately devolved; the UK SPF should reduce the administrative burden for applicants; and a guarantee that UK regions will not be worse off in funding available for regional development beyond 2020 because of our leaving the EU. In fact, they are asking the Government to make some of the commitments about Brexit we heard before, during and—not so often but sometimes—since the referendum.

I must say that the Minister’s response to the council leaders was very weak; he said what we already know. They were asking about those five points, wanting lots of commitment and detail from the Government, because they are anxious and want to know what will happen about future funding in their areas, which is so important. They got a letter back saying basically that we have an extension until 31 October before we leave the EU—this was in May, by the way—and that the Government are considering all options and will consult on how to carry forward the prosperity fund.

We are all saying to the Minister that that really is not good enough. We need, at this very late point, some detail from him about how the fund will operate and under what criteria. What sort of money are we talking about? Will it be disbursed in the same way as it has been under the EU? Will the Government take need into account and focus in particular on the regions with the greatest need?

Like all hon. Members in the Chamber, I feel strongly about this issue because our constituencies are in regions that need to be supported to reach their full potential. This is not just pleading and bleating. These are amazing regions with huge skills and talents among the population, and they all need development in digital and higher level skills. They need to use our universities and colleges to drive up skills development. There is need for investment in renewable energy in the north-east, and in pharmaceuticals. We also need to upgrade the transport system and ensure that everyone in those regions can reach their potential and contribute to the future prosperity we all want to see. I hope the Minister will tell us something about how we can ensure that prosperity can be achieved by everyone.

3.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on proposing and securing the debate. I put him on notice that I intend to finish early to give him the customary ability to say that he disagrees with most of what I say. I will let him think about that while I am talking—he may surprise himself.

Many hon. Members have spoken in the debate, and I was most encouraged by the heartfelt speeches by the Opposition spokespeople, the hon. Members for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) and for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), about the importance of this issue. It really demonstrated to me the passion there is across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to achieve and drive a local community. As a proud Unionist, I was reminded of the awesome foursome of our United Kingdom, which we should hold precious in our hearts. When the UK shared prosperity fund comes forward, I hope it will demonstrate our commitment to create growth in every single part of the UK, wherever it may be.

We have had a wide-ranging debate. As well as talking about the shared prosperity fund, the hon. Member for Sheffield Central, the proposer of the debate, took the opportunity to make his fundamental point that the Government have not supported the regions. I fundamentally disagree. This is the Government who created the northern powerhouse, and we are investing hundreds of millions—in fact, billions—of pounds directly into the northern economy. We did not see that under the last Labour Government. If the hon. Gentleman wants proof that the northern powerhouse is real, he has only to look to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), the proud Mayor of the Sheffield city region, who is sitting a few seats down from him, and to his four mayoral colleagues across the north of England.

We heard from many hon. Members about our being such a centralised country. For the first time in a generation in England, this Government have taken power, money and influence away from London and returned it to our regions. Surely that is a good thing. I am sure it is widely supported by Members across the Chamber. Those of us who want to see all areas of our country thrive should welcome that decentralisation and return of powers to mayors and regions.

Mr Betts: I am sure the Minister agrees that this is not just Government actions but the impact of those actions. Will he confirm that, despite what the Government have done, or think they have done, since 2010, the difference in gross value added between the south-east and the north has not changed?

Jake Berry: The hon. Gentleman will have to send me the figures he refers to. Across the north of England, unemployment is lower than it has been for a generation. Picking up on the comments of the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), £450 million has been committed to a devolution deal for the Tees valley and £120 million has been invested in the SSI site.

Frankly, if the Labour local authorities in the Sheffield city region could get their act together and agree what powers they should hand to the Mayor of South Yorkshire—I know he is already doing an excellent job, but I want him to be given those powers so he can continue to drive the hopes and dreams of the people of South Yorkshire—the Sheffield city region could receive nearly £1 billion as part of its devolution deal. It is shameful that Labour councils are blocking this Government’s giving nearly £1 billion to the Sheffield city region. The councils should hang their heads in shame. We are debating European structural funds, but all this is connected; we cannot consider Europe on its own.
Let me set out some truths. There was reference to a report that mentioned growth of up to 22% in money for less developed areas. That report does not take into account the points made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, about European countries that may join the European Union during the spending period; it does not take into account the cap that the European Union itself has said it would like to see on spending increases; and it is an estimate. That estimate would go into the European Union and be negotiated.

Paul Blomfield: Will the Minister give way?

Jake Berry: Will the Minister give way?

Once the negotiation had taken place in Europe, the British Government would bring that figure into the comprehensive spending review and negotiate how it was distributed—which parts should go to European structural funds, to the Department for Work and Pensions and to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Only after that would any of the bodies have certainty about how much they were going to receive.

In fact, if we accept that the quantum of the UK shared prosperity fund should be negotiated through the comprehensive spending review, people will find themselves with exactly the same certainty under that fund as they would have had if we had continued with European structural funds. There is of course certainty until January 2021, when the current spending period ends, and the Government have been clear that the UK shared prosperity fund will start in 2021, so there will be no gap.

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister give way?

Jake Berry: I have to give way first to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central, who opened the debate.

People talked about crashing out of the European Union with no deal. Frankly, I do not expect that to happen. Nor do I accept that, even if it did happen, it would look like a crash out of the European Union. In fact, if we accept that the quantum of the UK shared prosperity fund should be negotiated through the comprehensive spending review, people will find themselves with exactly the same certainty under that fund as they would have had if we had continued with European structural funds. There is of course certainty until January 2021, when the current spending period ends, and the Government have been clear that the UK shared prosperity fund will start in 2021, so there will be no gap.

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I know that, in many cases, the people who spoke about the benefit of European funds know they are not perfect. The SNP spokesman said he sees a wee European flag on many projects. One of my jobs in Government is to take back the money from projects that forgot to put that wee European flag on them, because it is one of the requirements of the hugely complicated and bureaucratic EU structural funds that if someone does not put that wee European flag on their project, the money, in many cases, has to be recovered. We are consulting on a UK shared prosperity fund to ensure that funding is simplified. We will be consulting shortly, and the quantum of the fund will be set during the comprehensive spending review, in the same way that EU structural funds would have been.

3.59 pm

Paul Blomfield: I am sorry that the Minister deliberately misrepresented my intervention. That was a comfortable way of dodging the question before us, which is: will our regions lose out as a result of our departing the European Union? As the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth highlighted, the Government have given a commitment that they should not. As the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) highlighted, we are asking not for a handout but for a hand up—strategic investment in our economies—to ensure that we do not lose out. At the third time of asking, in debates and correspondence, the Minister has not answered the question. We will keep pressing.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
where patients feel more supported and are encouraged to feel more in control of their condition. There is time for people to care.

The service has transformed countless lives in my constituency and has been nominated for a national award. As I saw first hand when I visited the clinic earlier this month, it is an exemplar of the sort of collaborative provision that the new adult community services contract could and should expand on. Such collaborative provision that the new adult community services contract could and should expand on. Such collaborative provision that the new adult community services contract could and should expand on.

The people who are providing the service, however, do not know for how long they will be able to continue, because the CCG will not tell them. The patients do not know for how long they will be able to access that life-changing service, because the CCG will not tell them. As the local MP, I cannot lobby, engage or reassure people, despite asking repeatedly for a peek behind the self-imposed reprocurement iron curtain, because—I won. Members will have guessed it—the CCG will not tell me.

Interestingly, another consequence of the process, which I do not have time to really go into, is the destabilising impact on the voluntary sector. Age UK will have to wait, cap in hand, to see which successful bidder secures the primary contract and how it then decides to sub-contract the provision. The same goes for all voluntary organisations involved in this sort of service provision. It would be bad enough if the Healthy Together clinic were a one-off—the only service caught up in a closed-shop procurement mess—but it is not. In truth, every adult community service is in the same position, which is simply not good enough.

Despite a year of making speeches in this place, asking questions of Ministers, doing time-consuming research and making countless phone calls to offices, neither the CCG locally nor NHS Improvement nationally will engage with me beyond continually asserting that they had no choice but to go down this route. That is a prime example of what the Health and Social Care Committee referred to in its recent report, which said that the “problems stem not only from the procurement rules themselves, but also from people’s interpretation of these rules and their difficulty in understanding what is permissible within the rules.”

In place of answers, I am forced to restate the litany of my constituents’ questions and concerns that have essentially gone unanswered. First, there is a fundamental lack of clarity surrounding the reprocurement and an abject failure to link it to any broader NHS strategies. I am not the only one who is concerned about the process. I have been spoken to privately by many consultants, nurses, and other staff throughout the healthcare system; I am grateful to them for contacting me.

At no point has the CCG properly defined a needs assessment in the request for proposals. Moreover, at no point has it made the business case for change—the most basic starting point for any such process. Staggeringly, there is no service baseline, so we do not know what services exist. By extension, there are no defined outcomes, so bidders are being asked to make proposals. That is not what commissioning is meant to be about.

Although Ministers continue to trumpet the importance of the sustainability and transformation plans, there is no sense of alignment with those plans, the NHS long-term plan or the emerging integrated care systems. Similarly absent is any indication of integration with local councils on social care or public health, which we all acknowledge are the key issues facing our constituents.

Secondly, there are concerns about the chosen procurement process, because any number of much less onerous and costly approaches were possible. As ever, however, accurately assessing the process is near impossible because of the vice-like secrecy that the CCG has used throughout. What is certain is that we do not know how much it is costing the CCG or the bidders, which include the current not-for-profit community service providers. That means that we do not know how much it is costing us, the taxpayers.

I worked in the national health service for many years, and I have some experience of procurement in the organisation, but I have struggled to understand properly the process through which the procurement has been undertaken. To illustrate, the CCG’s description of the chosen process, in its own words from its own document—bear with me, Mr Gapes, because I did not write it—says:

“The procurement is being undertaken using a process developed by the CCG which has similarities to a competitive process with negotiation. For the avoidance of doubt, the CCG is not running the process strictly in accordance with any specific procedure set out in the Regulations so reserves the right to depart from that form of procedure at any point. This Request for Proposals sets out the procurement process the CCG plans to use for this particular Contract. The inclusion of particular stages, the use of terminology and any other indication shall not be taken to mean that the CCG intends to hold itself bound by the full scope of the Regulations.”

What does that mean? I think it means that the process is as clear as mud, carried out behind a wall of secrecy, but with a disclaimer that enables the CCG to do what it wants without our knowledge. Although we cannot access the process details, what we know does not bode well.

There are myriad loose ends and errors throughout the process. Taken together, they form a significant body of concerning issues. Of course, I would never have known about them—most people do not—if I had not scoured 300 pages of detail and 100 clarification questions asked by bidders. In fairness, I doubt the CCG was expecting anybody outside the process, including the local MP, to do so, but I read them all because I like detail and I think it is important to know what is going on. A lot of the gaps and oversights concerned me.

There seem to have been incorrect working assessments about bed numbers at South Bristol Community Hospital; gaps relating to workforce numbers and staff who have been TUPE-ed; and a number of misunderstandings and examples of where the CCG lacked knowledge about current contracts, rental payments and void space. There is also missing information about assets, and the bidders were apparently expected to carry out the due diligence. That not only places a huge burden on providers, but runs the risk that the entire process will collapse if it is not carried out correctly, as has happened elsewhere. It is worth highlighting that the National Audit Office investigation into the collapse of the UnitingCare Partnership contract in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough found that bidders “faced significant difficulties in pricing their bids accurately due to limitations in the available data.”

The evidence I have seen in the documentation suggests that that is now happening.
We should all be very worried about that, because failed procurements in Staffordshire for cancer services and end-of-life care, and in Cambridge and Peterborough, had similar procurement processes to the one chosen by Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire CCG. In each case, there was a secretive process, a complex procurement methodology and a failure to engage. Together, they cost taxpayers millions, and they all failed. Instead of learning lessons, NHS Improvement and the CCG seem intent on repeating the mistakes.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does she agree that the complexity of the procurement process and the difficulty that she—an expert in this area—is experiencing means that patients who rely on these services and workers in not-for-profit organisations, who deserve to know what the process means and what the outcomes will be for them, find it impossible to take part as important stakeholders?

Karin Smyth: Absolutely—I completely agree. That is why I will continue to speak up on behalf of my constituents; I know I have my hon. Friend’s support.

Predictably, I would like to finish where I began, on the issue of secrecy and a lack of transparency. As I have highlighted, this absurd behind-closed-doors approach has bedevilled the reprocurement from the off. If this is such a great change to community services, why are we not trumpeting it? Reprocurement was first referred to in governing body papers in May 2018, but other than that there has been virtually nothing. There was no official announcement, no media blitz, no news stories or television news clips, no leaflets in local GP surgeries or South Bristol Community Hospital to enable local people to have their say on the plans—nothing. Although there has been talk of consultation, it seems that only 20 people from south Bristol took part. In fairness, there were some nods to engagement, and surveys were completed by 196 people. There was an engagement planning workshop with patients, carers and the voluntary sector, but because it is a contracting process, they were asked to sign a confidentiality agreement.

There is no evidence that even that limited feedback has been listened to or acted on. The workshop was merely an illustration to bidders of what stakeholders might want to identify when community services are planned and delivered. Tellingly, in documents from January, the CCG stipulated:

“Formal public consultation is not required as part of the procurement as no ‘significant variation’ to services is planned at this stage”.

Why is it being done if there is no significant variation to services?

All the documentation—approximately 300 pages in total—is hidden behind a portal, including more confidentiality agreements. The whole process appears so desperate to avoid the merest hint of engagement that it screams, “We’ve got something to hide!” It is utterly self-defeating, and serves no one well—not patients, bidders, the CCG or the community at large.

The CCG says that it is seeking a consistent service across all three areas and both acute trusts. Two of the CCGs and one of the trusts have been in deficit for years, and at various times in the past few years they have been on NHS Improvement’s naughty step. The deficits are now being shared across the whole community.

The jam is being spread more thinly and differently from how it was spread before. The process is being embarked on to help spread the already struggling and inadequate level of service more thinly. Those service providers are spending money that should be spent on services on a process that I believe will inevitably reduce community services in Bristol.

I have great respect for the Minister, but I have no confidence that the Government will be able to make any difference to the local position. I hope that she takes note of the variability in how the rules are interpreted locally, as the Health and Social Care Committee noted in its response to the legislative proposals for the NHS long-term plan. Other commentators are saying the same. I hope the Minister will reflect on this local example. Will she explain directly or through her officials why, when I wrote to the Secretary of State about this originally, I got a reply from NHS Improvement? NHS Improvement is the provider regulator; this is a commissioning issue.

I believe that the Government should rapidly respond to the proposals to remove the requirement for competition under the section 75 regulations. There is no reason to wait; they need to get on with it. This saga shows that the lack of investment in NHS services remains a problem. Why not just build capacity rather than go through these expensive tendering processes with providers outside the NHS? I actually support the place-based approach to service provision in the NHS plan, but I object to the fact that this reprocurement goes counter to that plan.

At the very least, on behalf of local people, I would like the Minister to support my calls to see the proposals before contracts are signed for the next 10 years. We need a local plan and collaboration with the local authority that meets our health and social needs. I want a guarantee that people in south Bristol will not be worse off. Currently, no one can give me that.

4.17 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): It is a great pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Gapes. I thank the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) for securing this debate. She spoke passionately on behalf of her constituents. It is right to bring such concerns to this forum. She asked the questions that any good MP should ask, and she has the right concerns. She spoke strongly about valued local services that no one wants to see lost, such as her Healthier Together service, and said that she fears for their future. I hope that some of the things I shall say will allay her fears, but if I do not cover anything she mentioned, we shall write to her to give her as comprehensive a response as possible.

Community services play a vital role, but we have perhaps not emphasised them as much as we should have done in recent years and decades, so we must put that right. Effective community services mean that patients are treated where they are most comfortable—often their own home—and supported to manage their conditions and live independently. More widely, they are key to improving the patient experience. They provide preventative care and prevent people’s illnesses and ailments from getting worse. Crucially, they prevent reliance on the big acute hospitals.

The NHS long-term plan sets out our vision for community services. It highlights the need to move away from small, narrowly defined and often poorly
co-ordinated community services to those which are more joined-up and operate over a larger footprint. It also encourages much longer commissioning times, to enable us to build the relationships that we want to continue to establish. Importantly, it will make it easier for patients to navigate the system without having to repeat their story multiple times, and will ensure that their care is delivered in a smoother, more timely manner. To help to deliver on that vision, as part of the extra investment in the NHS long-term plan, an extra £4.5 billion per year will be spent on primary medical and community health services by 2023-24.

That is why ideas such as this, from local areas such as Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire, which embed community services as a central component of their plan in a way that mirrors the vision of the NHS long-term plan, appear very attractive. By awarding all its adult community services in a single contract, we can see that the CCG is aiming to promote a cohesive, integrated approach, which will improve consistency and efficiency across its entire geography.

The CCG’s 10-year funding approach also reflects the NHS long-term plan and will enable transformative change, through the kind of long-term relationships we need, based around strong, collaborative partnerships across not only the health and care system, but also the third sector, which the hon. Lady mentioned and which plays such a crucial part in the delivery of some of our most vital community services. We think that the length of the contract will allow the local area to design its services not only for the current need, but to address the future needs of its population, while also giving greater certainty to the workforce.

Additionally, the plans contain key commitments on community services set out in the NHS long-term plan. These include delivering care through multidisciplinary teams, the deployment of rapid response teams and providing services in central hubs located in people’s communities, where they can get the holistic support that will enable them to stay healthy and well.

We think that all those things will ensure that patients receive timely, integrated and holistic care in their community, with a greater focus on treating the whole person rather than merely their condition. This approach will join everything together, so that people no longer slip through the gaps or get pushed from pillar to post or from A to B, and it will provide a one-stop shop where people have a named contact and a real integration of community, mental health and adult social care services and the third sector.

The hon. Lady spoke with great passion and knowledge about the importance of transparency and engagement when deciding service provision, something that of course I entirely agree with. At the same time, it is right that these decisions are made by local areas, such as CCGs, local authorities, sustainability and transformation partnerships or integrated care systems, because those people decide how services should be configured to meet the needs of their local area. When they do so, we have clear expectations of them: they must involve patients, carers and the public in decisions about the services they commission, and be clear and transparent about their decisions.

That could be where we appear to have a difference of opinion between how the hon. Lady feels that her CCG has communicated and the way the CCG feels that it has. I have spoken at length to the director of commissioning and the chief executive, who say that in this particular case they have made considerable efforts to meet those expectations. They report that they engaged with 500 local people, including health and care professionals and representatives from the third sector, and that patients and carers have been supported to engage with the process through a public reference group, which I know she mentioned.

Additionally, the CCG says that it has engaged with a range of organisations and partners from across the local system, including hospital and mental health trusts as well as local authorities, to better inform the contract process. Those organisations have met bidders for the contract to discuss service provision. The CCG says that that collaborative process will help the contract holders to build relationships and allow patients to receive integrated services, which is what we all want.

The CCG also says that it has taken steps to ensure a transparent process, including press releases, letters to stakeholders, engagement events and making key information available online. Additionally, the CCG reports that the procurement is being overseen by a programme board that includes patient and carer representatives.

The hon. Lady made the point that it might be premature to go out for tender while the NHS long-term plan’s proposals for amending procurement requirements are being considered. That is a very good point, but unfortunately considerations around legislative changes do not change the CCG’s duty to comply with current procurement law, nor do they change its duty to use its resources as efficiently and effectively as it can.

The CCG has agreed that if the legislation changes during the procurement process it will review and evaluate that process, but more widely, by law it must ensure that there is no gap in access to services. Its contracts for adult community services will expire in the coming years, and by law cannot be extended. The CCG has informed me that if the procurement was halted, it would create the risk that when the current contracts expired, local people would be left without vital community services, which the hon. Lady knows they rely on. Of course, that simply cannot happen.

The hon. Lady also rightly noted that we must ensure that contracts are given the necessary external support and scrutiny. To that end, NHS England’s and NHS Improvement’s integrated support and assurance process— for which we use another of those attractive acronyms, ISAP—provides a co-ordinated, consistent approach to reviewing complex contracts, which is intended to ensure that complex contracts are cost-effective, robust and in the interests of patients.

On 17 October, NHS England and NHS Improvement held an early engagement meeting with the CCG, where they discussed this contract under ISAP. Following that meeting, NHS England and NHS Improvement were assured of the need to have a single contract that runs for 10 years. A full ISAP process is triggered when a procurement is found to be sufficiently novel and complex. NHS England and NHS Improvement found that in this case these requirements were not met, meaning that the full ISAP process was not required. Instead, NHS
England and NHS Improvement regional teams will provide assurance that is informed by ISAP principles, which will include ensuring that the contract provides value for money, that it is centred around patient care and, crucially, that some of the key parts of patient care that the hon. Lady spoke about are not lost. The regional teams must also jointly ensure that the correct processes are followed, and that any chosen provider has the capacity and capability to deliver the services set out in the contract. Importantly, the regional teams must then give further formal, joint approval before the CCG can award a contract.

With that in mind, scrutiny of how we award contracts for delivery of health services is clearly vital. We must be assured that due care is taken so that patient outcomes are absolutely first and foremost, and that services are organised and delivered with prudent financial planning. To that end, NHS England and NHS Improvement will continue to closely monitor this contracting process. I welcome the close attention that the hon. Lady has paid to this contract; I know she has looked at it very thoroughly and I am grateful that she has raised her concerns. We believe that the CCG’s approach in this case is right, but we will continue to engage in every way possible with all parties to help ensure its successful delivery.

Question put and agreed to.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered puffin habitats.

It is a pleasure and an honour to be able to discuss the wonderful puffin here in Parliament. I have been trying to secure this debate for many months, as I have the great honour of being the MP who represents the largest proportion of the puffins who come to our shores every year along my exceptional, environmentally spectacular Northumbrian coast. Along those 64 miles of coast, within the boundaries of my constituency, can be found world-renowned habitats, which some of our planet’s rarest, funniest, cutest and most determined birdlife choose to make home for their families every year. From Lindisfarne to the 28 Farne islands and down to Coquet island, my constituency welcomes kittiwakes, shags, guillemots, black-headed gulls, arctic, little and roseate terns—in fact, 95% of the UK population of roseates are found on Coquet island—and the majestic and unique puffin.

The puffin is only a little bird, about the same height as a long ruler, with a wingspan of two rulers. That is the measurement used by schoolchildren at one of my schools in Amble, the fishing port that hosts the Amble Puffin Festival every spring bank holiday. The puffin seems to wear a black coat and has a bright white chest, with spectacularly orange feet to match its large bill. Puffins look somewhat ungainly on the ground; they are a little bit awkward and shy. However, when they take off for flight, we see just why the Atlantic puffin—Fratercula arctica, or the friar of the Arctic, so named because of its monkish black hood—is to be respected. The puffin flies like a fighter jet, setting its beak at the front of a streamlined body with powerful wings, enabling it to head out from its cliff-top base to plunge up to 60 metres into the sea to source sand eels or sprats to feed their young.

In Northumberland, we use the puffin’s arrival to the Farne islands and Coquet island as the harbinger of spring. The smallest of the world’s four puffin species, our Arctic puffins, arrive en masse to breed on our most remote, unpeopled and predator-free islands. They come to land only for breeding, and they arrive at our Northumbrian coastline from across the vast northern seas where they live a solitary, invisible life on the wing following the previous breeding season.

Spring is carnival time for puffins. They get to the safe cliff tops on Inner Farne and some of the other 27 islands and turn from solitary birds to wildly social courting birds intent on finding a mate and creating the next generation of puffins. If they can meet up with their mate from the previous year, they often do. Once they have found a mate, their outsized beak and big, webbed feet set to work digging a burrow in the soft earth. The female lays just one egg, and the couple take turns incubating it under their wings in the burrow, out of sight of other birds.

Predators might be rats or cats, so the management of islands where puffins choose to breed, and where human activity has brought threats onshore, is vital to puffins’ safety. The Farne islands are now managed by the National Trust and a team of rangers based on the
In 2015, it was announced that the puffin is now classified and we invest in looking after their unique habitats, as well as a local one, remains a challenge.

Water mark and drowned some 300 of our puffins and high tide and stormy sea came over the normal high such as my dear friend the eider duck—that a recent after the Farne islands puffins and other nesting birds, our National Trust rangers, Gwen Potter—who looks since that weird year.

Again in the years that followed, back up to the colony young. Nature’s wildlife has a way of regulating itself knowing that there was not enough food for their that year, and so the puffins simply did not breed, best known to the sea, there was a dearth of sand eels it was all over for the puffin.

Locally, a sense of panic set in that there just seemed to be fewer puffins. The breeding success rate was low. Locally, a sense of panic set in that it was all over for the puffin.

Thankfully, that was not the case. Rather, for reasons best known to the sea, there was a dearth of sand eels that year, and so the puffins simply did not breed, knowing that there was not enough food for their young. Nature’s wildlife has a way of regulating itself for its own survival. Reassuringly, the numbers grew again in the years that followed, back up to the colony size we see now, as food supplies have remained abundant since that weird year.

The other direct threat to our puffins each year is stormy seas. I have been updated just today by one of our National Trust rangers, Gwen Potter—who looks after the Farne islands puffins and other nesting birds, such as my dear friend the eider duck—that a recent high tide and stormy sea came over the normal high water mark and drowned some 300 of our puffins and their baby pufflings just a few days ago. Some might say that that is just nature, and sometimes she is brutal, but how we manage our environment on a global scale, as well as a local one, remains a challenge.

While our UK puffin population is in rude health and we invest in looking after their unique habitats, around the world the Arctic puffin is not doing so well. In 2015, it was announced that the puffin is now classified as “vulnerable to extinction”; Fratercula arctica is now on the red list. The Northumbrian monks of old, who communed with nature on Lindisfarne and the Farne islands—perhaps most famously St Cuthbert, who died on Inner Farne in 687 AD—would be horrified that we have failed to live in better harmony with nature in recent centuries.

Different breeding grounds, even around the UK, are in different states of health. Tagging and monitoring tells us that, from some breeding sites, puffins have to travel up to 400 km to find food for their young. Whether from overfishing, weather impacts altering water temperature and stormy sea levels, or food sources being much further away, we have trouble ahead. If the fish that puffins find are smaller because the temperature of the North sea shifts the sources of plankton that supply sand eels, more effort expended for less outcome can only have a detrimental impact.

I appreciate that the Minister cannot single-handedly restore our oceans and seas to balance and good health, and nor can he control the weather—I do not think—but we can, as a country and as a Government, ensure that we support those who manage puffin colonies with vermin control and good data monitoring, so that we can have an early and thorough understanding of causes of change or decline. I challenge the Minister to discuss the falling numbers of puffins in Norway and Iceland and whether it is acceptable anymore to eat puffins, since they are taken from breeding grounds.

While millions of birds sounds like a large number, it takes only a few years of poor breeding—the puffins have now been nine years in Norway—for there to be a sudden and irreversible drop in numbers. The challenge of shipwrecks and oil spill impacts for food sources for many years is also a concern, and I ask the Minister to speak with his Department for Transport colleagues, who work globally to improve the safety of shipping activity.

As well as the opportunity to share the wonderfulness of another species centred in my beautiful constituency—hon. Members will recall our discussion on the eider duck, and I give many thanks to Ministers for including her in the list of protected birds in our new marine conservation zone—I hope this debate provides a good opportunity to highlight not only concerns that can be alleviated, at least in part, by local and national co-operation and forward planning, but some of the global risk factors, on which we must advocate, as a nation who lives by her word, as we move to a way of life that considers in the round the impacts we have on our wildlife.

4.37 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) for securing the debate.

Puffins are perhaps the most remarkably odd-looking birds to call the UK home. They look to have been drawn by a 1930s cartoonist, with a black-and-white body resembling a gent’s evening attire that is augmented in the summer breeding season by a vibrantly coloured bill. Puffins are often referred to as sea parrots on account of those bright bills, and we in the UK benefit from more than 500,000 breeding pairs—roughly 10% of the world’s population—although, as has been said, they are at risk. It is sad to note that, according to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, puffins are on
the red list, in need of urgent action to conserve them for future generations and to avoid the potential global extinction that has befallen other members of their extended family.

One of their habitats is off the beautiful Ayrshire coast in my constituency, on an island formed from a volcanic plug known as Ailsa Craig—a landmark famous for not only its birdlife but the blue granite used for the curling stones used throughout the world. These curling stones are manufactured in Mauchline in Ayrshire, albeit not in my constituency. When drivers head from Glasgow to Ayr on the A77, the island dramatically dominates the horizon for a moment and appears to travel with them on the coast road to Culzean castle.

On Ailsa Craig, puffins may nest either in sandy burrows vacated by rabbits or in crevices on the cliff-like ledges. Their ability to fly—rather clumsily at times—is outshone by their superb swimming and diving skills. Years ago, homeowners and tenants on the now uninhabited island had the right to take the island’s birds for food and feathers. However, according to author and photographer Charles Kirk, who spent some time on the island, it took approximately 1,152 puffin feathers to make a bed—I have no idea who counted said feathers. Thankfully, the puffins are now protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

Undoubtedly, the population has—excuse the pun—ebbed and flowed somewhat. Puffins start at a disadvantage, producing only one chick per breeding season, and although a puffin may live for 20 years or more, it does not breed for the first five years of its life. A lot of work was undertaken on Ailsa Craig to rid it of diseased rabbits and predatory rats, to encourage the puffin colony to multiply. Those animals, brought over on visiting boats and vessels, meant that, by the 1930s, puffin numbers had seriously declined. A concerted effort began, and I am pleased to note that, by 1991, the island was once again rat free, and puffins were returning in greater numbers to breed. We need to ensure that such predators do not again secure a foothold on the island and threaten its puffin colony.

Puffins are currently the subject of the RSPB’s—this is hard to say—Puffarazzi project, a request for the public to submit photographs of feeding puffins. There has been a very positive response from the public. It is clear that these little and sometimes comical birds captivate us and are a huge draw for tourists. Indeed, the last ocean-going paddle steamer, the Waverley, used to offer trips around Ailsa Craig and out to Staffa for the public to view the puffin colonies and colonies of other seabirds. In the absence, for the moment, of the Waverley, Mr McCrindle, with his small vessel the MV Glorious, offers wonderful trips from Girvan to Ailsa Craig—a magical trip that I have experienced many times.

Only at the end of last week, puffins were again in the news. The item referred to water temperatures rising with climate change, threatening the puffins’ continued existence. Their mainstay diet of small fish such as herrings and eels are themselves not exempt from environmental changes and human intervention, in addition to the ongoing problem of plastics polluting our seas.

I hope my right hon. Friend the Minister will be able to give us an assurance that when the Government address climate change and marine pollution, they will not forget not so much the flight of the puffin as the plight of the puffin.
[Stephen Crabb]
damage is being done to some of the burrows. It is unintentional. I do not think anybody would have a day trip out to Skomer with anything other than a desire to be a benign influence and not cause any harm, but incidental negative impacts do happen, so we have had a warning recently that photographers need to take care on the island. My hon. Friend mentioned the RSPB’s Puffarazzi campaign, whereby it is encouraging people to go out and take photographs of puffins, especially puffins that are feeding, because although this bird has been watched and observed for years and years by so many people, there is so much that we do not know about the species. The RSPB is trying to learn more about the puffin’s feeding habits and other behaviours, so it is encouraging members of the public to go and take pictures. But I would urge caution: photographers, both amateurs and professionals, need to take care.

We had a slight disruption to the overall growth in the puffin population locally in 2014, when we had a winter of very bad storms down in west Wales. Because of the weather patterns and the sea being churned up, puffins were literally starving. My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) said that nature has a wonderful way of self-regulating, and it is true. We have seen growth in the puffin numbers on Skomer island in Pembrokeshire. It is one of those places that is being observed more and more in order to understand why colonies can be so healthy and grow so much. In fact, the growth on Skomer has created challenges, because the puffins are now almost invading the space of the Manx shearwaters. Hon. Members may be able to imagine the tussle between those species, both of which we want to protect; we want them to flourish. All these things are being observed and watched, and where there is a need for human intervention, the wildlife trust does that very well.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed for securing the debate. It provides us with a useful opportunity to say some things that I hope will be constructive about this wonderful little species that enriches our lives and our nation in its own little way. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s thoughts and ideas on what more can be done to ensure this species continues to grow in our country.

4.47 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I thank the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) for securing the debate. She represents an exceedingly beautiful constituency, and it is an absolute pleasure to pass through it by train on the way home. Many people admire the view of the area from the bridge; it always takes people aback.

The Atlantic puffin is widely distributed on islands around Scotland’s north and west coasts, and to anyone wishing to have a great day at the seaside, I recommend the Firth of Forth, just off the coast at North Berwick, as a particularly interesting viewing point, where anyone can watch—the boat trip out to the Bass Rock may be just a wee bit better than the one at Ailsa Craig—the puffins, gannets and peregrine falcons, among many other birds, and seals feeding and going about their business. It is not too far from my Falkirk constituency, so it is worth the day trip.

Elsewhere in the UK, puffins can be found in northern England, in south-west England and in Wales, as has been said. The UK population is estimated to be about 500,000 birds, or perhaps more, and although the population is not under threat globally, some populations have suffered marked declines in recent years. With half the UK population nesting at only a few sites, it is sadly, as others have stated, an amber or a red list species in the UK.

Puffins spend most of their lives at sea, coming ashore only to breed; in Scotland, that takes place from late April until mid-August. Although the breeding birds have been well studied, much less is known about the birds’ lives at sea in the winter. Population decline has been linked to changes in the numbers and distribution of their fish prey, probably caused by rising sea temperatures and the general mismanagement of the marine environment, and similar trends have been recorded in other UK seabirds.

Scotland’s vital position at the edge of the north-west European continental shelf has a huge influence on our coast and seas. The Scottish Government are, of course, committed to the protection of that environment. The Scottish Government have added some 42 marine protected areas to their network since 2012 and have developed a new strategic plan for the marine environment that will provide continuity of development to that MPA network.

It is striking that, as is nearly always the case, the greatest threats to puffins are man-made. As we are aware, our marine environment has been shaped by wind, water and ice over thousands of years, creating productive and abundant marine life. The meeting and mixing of nutrient-rich waters provides the perfect home for sea life to thrive. Scotland is of international importance for its marine biodiversity, providing the ideal environment for our spectacular birds, marine mammals and fish, as well as for the habitats that are hidden on the sea bed.

A staggering 45% of Europe’s breeding seabirds live in Scotland—around 5 million seabirds. Special protection areas are classified under the EU birds directive, which requires the member states of the European community to identify and classify the most suitable territories, in size and number, for certain rare or vulnerable species. SPAs are intended to safeguard the habitats of the species for which they are selected and to protect birds from significant disturbance. Many of these areas are important for their contribution to sea bird conservation, but the Scottish MPA network has changed considerably in recent years and now reflects the variety of life found in our seas.

In order to complete the Scottish MPA network, nature conservation proposals are being progressed for sea
birds, including the very interesting development of a deep sea marine reserve to safeguard marine life that is under threat in deeper waters across the north-east Atlantic. In order to ensure that the MPA network is well managed, work is also ongoing to ensure that public authorities get clear advice to inform their decision making when an MPA may be affected.

When innovative approaches to MPA management planning are being trialled, it is extremely important to work with local communities and other stakeholders to develop them. The examples I have just given show excellent partnership and collaborative working practices. Marine Scotland is also leading a research programme that focuses on Scotland’s seas. It includes work that the Scottish Government are funding to better understand the potential environmental impacts of marine renewable energy.

Puffins are an indicator species. While they are at risk from birds of prey, the biggest threats to their population are man-made. Pollution, overfishing and, perhaps most significantly, climate change are all reducing the population. I was struck by the comment made on the excellent BBC “Landward” programme by an RSPB warden in the Northern Isles at the weekend. Commenting on the distance that puffins have to travel for their food, she likened it to having to travel for Glasgow for her tea and then back again. That is not sustainable, and numbers will suffer.

To protect puffin habitats, we should remember that the world is given to us to till and nurture, not to own and plunder. That is a stark reminder of the responsibility of Governments around the world to protect the marine environment for the benefit of the wildlife for which it is home.

4.54 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my friend, the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan). We largely co-operate on defence matters, but we can now add puffins to our areas of co-operation. I suspect we will both be speaking in the combat air strategy debate tomorrow; I like her analogy of puffins as fighter jets and I look forward to hearing her mention puffins in the debate on the Tempest programme tomorrow.

It is true that every bird matters, but as we have heard, every puffin matters, too. Before I get into the detail, I would like to share my favourite puffin story. As we have heard, we all have our favourite. Mine relates to the puffins on the Skellig islands, off the west coast of Ireland. Sci-fi nerds may already know what I am about to talk about. The Skellig islands were used as a filming location for “Star Wars: The Last Jedi”. There were so many puffins as they were trying to film Luke Skywalker’s last hangout that they could not airbrush the puffins out of the movie, so they decided to turn them into their very own Star Wars species and the porgs were born. Watching “Star Wars: The Last Jedi”, Members will see plenty of porgs around Luke Skywalker’s coastal hut—and they are indeed puffins. That is a bit of bedtime watching for the hon. Lady.

It is true, as we have heard, that human activity is affecting the habitats of many of our planet’s valuable wildlife species. Through irreversible climate change, habitat destruction and biodiversity loss, we are making the survival of species that we love and appreciate increasingly difficult. In a debate last month, we heard about the cruel practice of the netting of bird nesting sites, preventing sea birds from nesting on some cliff faces. In that debate I made it clear that we must not keep squeezing nature into smaller and smaller spaces. Given what we have heard about puffin habitats, they are already in very small spaces geographically.

Britain is home to around 10% of the world’s puffin population, with nearly 600,000 breeding pairs, often found in clusters around the coastline of the British Isles. It is brilliant to hear of the experiences of various hon. Members with the puffin populations in their own part of the world. The right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) spoke about Skomer island. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) spoke about the west coast of Scotland. In the area that I represent, the south-west, we have puffin populations on Lundy island off the north coast and on the Isles of Scilly.

On Lundy we have had a similar experience to that mentioned by the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed in relation to tackling invasive species. On Lundy we are beginning to have a puffin comeback. After many years of puffins being on the brink of eradication, a programme to deal with the accidental introduction of rats from visiting boats has started showing good results. Thanks to the Lundy seabird recovery project, puffin numbers are now increasing. This is a great example of how targeted action can bring great results, correcting the damage that humans have done to these vital habitats.

Puffins are found in small clusters, which leaves them more susceptible to changes in local fish populations, as we heard from the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally). Puffins are on the RSPB’s red list of conservation importance, which means that urgent action is needed to prevent their decline. In the Isles of Scilly, we have witnessed the success of the seabird recovery project—the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) is not present today, but he asked me to mention that on his behalf. That EU-funded project has done some great work in removing items of rubbish and in eradicating invasive species on the islands, leading to the fast recovery of the populations of the Manx shearwater and the puffin. Will the Minister, in his remarks, set out what plans the Government have to replace specific EU-funded schemes, such as that one, which deal with rare bird habitat protection?

The RSPB describes the main threat to puffins as a change in the distribution and numbers of small fish. Drastic changes in the numbers of small fish in the local area around puffin habitats can occur if there is increased pollution, as we have heard in the debate, whether from plastic or other pollutants such as oil. Overfishing in those areas also poses a threat, with sustainable fishing paramount for the survival of seabird species.

The Minister will be aware that his Conservative colleague the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) has tabled an amendment to the Fisheries Bill to ban sand eel fishing. As the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed noted, sand eels are a key part of a puffin’s diet. I would be grateful if the Minister set out the Government’s position on sand eel fishing and on that amendment.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend have any thoughts about the additional assistance
that inshore fishermen could provide in making the environment for puffins free from pollution, and in supporting their habitats?

Luke Pollard: Yes. Fishers have several important roles to play, one of which is dealing with ghost gear. Although puffins are small birds, they are susceptible to eating plastic. Dealing with ghost gear—discarded fishing gear—is an important part of addressing that problem; I know that fishers in my hon. Friend’s constituency and mine are taking steps to deal with it. Not only is it an expensive cost to the business, but it presents a real risk to wildlife and bird habitats. I urge my hon. Friend to keep encouraging fishers in her constituency to tackle plastic pollution, as I know she does already.

On the subject of plastic pollution, I must mention nurdles. Several hon. Members have noted incredibly worrying issues with puffins’ diet and their ability to survive in the long term. As well as eating sand eels and other fish, puffins also eat plastic. A variety of studies of dead puffins washed up on the beach have found that, when cut open, their stomachs prove to be full of nurdles. Nurdles are small pieces of plastic that can be melted together to make larger items, but they are also a consequence of macroplastics being broken down. Puffins’ stomachs, like those of other seabirds, are full of plastics, which prevent them from getting the necessary nutritional value from their food.

Just as we have a limited understanding of what puffins get up to at sea, we lack scientific knowledge about the effect of plastics on certain bird populations, of which puffins are a good example. I know that there has been much research in Scotland about seabirds and plastics, but I would be grateful if the Minister set out his vision for dealing with the scientific evidence base. If we had a true understanding of the effect of plastics on puffins and other seabirds, it would make it easier for the public to get behind action.

Seabirds are protected by a network of marine special protection areas, and I am pleased to hear that the Government have granted the application for such an area in the constituency of the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed. It is also good that the eider duck has been included among the protected bird species; I have heard the hon. Lady speak several times about its importance, and it should not be left out.

I would like a network of national marine parks to be created around the UK, which would provide an opportunity to put our complex system of protected marine areas into plain English. We already have a network of marine conservation zones, designated European marine sites and sites of special scientific interest—the list goes on. However, there are so many forms and designations of marine protection that it makes it harder for the public to access those sites. The Government’s review of national parks gives us a real opportunity for the development of national marine parks. The Minister will know that Plymouth City Council is leading work, which enjoys cross-party support at a local level, to establish the first national marine park in Plymouth Sound. Protecting more marine areas would contribute to greater understanding and public awareness—the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire mentioned the Puffaraazi project—and would underline the importance of taking care when visiting puffin habitats.

I am very pleased that the House recently agreed to Labour’s motion to declare a climate emergency, after an important debate that showed that this place is taking climate change seriously, I know that hon. Members from all parties will have visited climate change protesters at the Time Is Now climate protest today. Although we need to decarbonise our economy, we must not think of climate change as being only about carbon; we need to think equally about how to protect and conserve coastal habitats, bird nesting sites and feed, as we have heard today.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed for giving us a chance to tell our favourite puffin stories; I hope that more people will be able to do so over the weeks and months ahead. I know that the Minister has a full to-do list at his Department, but I hope that he will take seriously the concerns that have been voiced about our wonderful, brilliant, comical puffins, and take note that their decline is a sign of humanity’s intervention regarding our wildlife. We need to do more to protect puffins, which will also save and protect other important habitats and seabird populations.

5.4 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) on finally securing this debate. I thank all hon. Members who have contributed.

The UK is particularly blessed with seabirds. Indeed, it hosts over half the seabirds in the European Union during the breeding season, with approximately 3.5 million pairs across 26 species. The debate has given us an opportunity to celebrate that rich diversity, from Ayrshire to Berwickshire to Pembrokeshire. I suggest that the best place to view puffins is probably at Bempton Cliffs, which hon. Members will not be surprised to hear is in Yorkshire.

The Atlantic puffin is one of the UK’s most instantly recognisable and well-known seabirds. As our puffin champion, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), will attest, it is a creature close to our hearts. Its endearing features have been used as the symbol of children’s books and to illustrate many stamps, and it was even one of the 10 shortlisted birds in the vote to find Britain’s national bird—a contest that was eventually won by the robin.

I am species champion for the sand eel, so I am always nervous around my hon. Friend, given the proclivity of puffins to consume sand eels in large quantities. The sand eel is a species close to my heart, not least because of the work I did and the knowledge I gained in the European Parliament, looking at issues on the Dogger Bank, marine dredging and other forms of exploitation of sand eels that can have an effect on the environment if they are not done sustainably.

Puffins typically nest underground in burrows dug in the soil of offshore islands. They often mate for life, and pairs return to the same burrow year after year, if possible. The typical lifespan of a puffin is 18 years, but some have been known to live to 35. Sadly, the puffin is now listed as vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and its global population is in decline.

The puffin is doing well in the United Kingdom, however—particularly on Coquet island, which lies off the coast in the constituency of my hon. Friend the
Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed in Northumberland. Populations there have been gradually increasing since counts began in the 1980s. Indeed, populations in the north-east are generally considered to be stable, and the UK experienced an increase of almost 19% from 1988 to 2002. Considering that approximately 10% of the global puffin population breeds around Britain and Ireland, that stability is an important contribution to global numbers.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Atlantic puffins were heavily exploited for eggs, feathers and meat, causing a drastic reduction in populations and the elimination of some colonies. In England, puffins were considered a delicious food and were sold at the rate of three a penny. Since then, I am pleased to say that we have dramatically increased their protection.

Concerns were raised about the population in Norway. I plan to visit Norway over the summer, and that is one of the issues that I am likely to raise—along with the fact that, like Norway, we will very soon become an independent coastal state and be able to negotiate a better deal for the fishermen in the fantastic ports around our country, including in the constituency of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn).

Our seabirds are protected principally by special protection areas set up under the wild birds directive, and by sites of special scientific interest set up under domestic legislation. SPAs protect areas identified as being of international importance for the breeding, feeding, wintering or migration of rare and vulnerable bird species found in Europe. There are currently 47 marine SPAs that protect seabirds in English waters.

England’s largest breeding colonies of Atlantic puffin are found on the Farne islands and Coquet island, where populations have been increasing. The islands have been protected by SPAs since 1985, and puffins’ foraging grounds were protected in 2017 as part of the Northumberland marine SPA. That is one of the most important sites in the UK for Atlantic puffin.

As well as using these protected waters for feeding during the breeding season, puffins and other species also use them for other important activities, such as preening, bathing and socialising. These activities are all part of the behavioural repertoire for which they need undisturbed waters. Protecting both their nesting sites and foraging grounds gives iconic species such as puffins the best possible chance of breeding.

Unfortunately, we know very little of the puffin’s behaviour outside the breeding season. They are very difficult to monitor as they spend up to two thirds of their lives at sea. Those from north-western Britain disperse widely outside the breeding season, as far as Newfoundland in the west and the Canary Islands in the south. In contrast, most puffins from colonies in parts of eastern Britain, like Northumberland, remain within the North sea.

Puffins are a key part of the marine ecosystem and good indicators of the overall state of the marine environment, including the damaging effects of climate change. That is because their diet consists mainly of small fish, particularly sand eels, whose spawning season is affected by variations in sea temperature impacting upon their own prey of plankton. The puffin breeding cycle is less adaptable. If the sand eels are not available at the time that puffins are breeding, it affects how many birds breed and how many chicks they raise.

In 2000, our friends in the Scottish Government implemented a sand eel fisheries closure in an area off the east coast of Scotland to preserve this important food source for our seabirds. Other pressures on puffins related to climate change include the increasing frequency and intensity of storms, which have had a considerable impact. Indeed, in the winter of 2013-14 a succession of severe storms resulted in 54,000 seabirds being washed ashore, over half of which were puffins. This mass mortality had a serious knock-on effect on the breeding population.

As we have heard, puffins also suffer from the effects of pollution, particularly plastic pollution, and from predation by ground mammals such as rats. On Lundy island in the Bristol channel, the total population of puffins fell to just 13, largely due to rat predation. However, 15 years later and following the successful eradication of rats, the island’s puffin population has come back to life, with numbers soaring to 375. Although that number may appear small when set against the UK’s total population of 580,000 breeding pairs of puffins, these important birds produce only one puffling, or baby puffin, per year, and they are limited to a small number of breeding colonies. So protecting these sites is imperative.

To make sure that our puffins are sufficiently protected, my Department commissioned a review of the UK’s terrestrial and coastal network of SPAs. I am pleased to note that the first phase of the review, published in October 2016, concluded that the SPA provision for puffin breeding is sufficient.

Puffins will indirectly benefit from this Government’s plans in several other ways. Our 25-year environment plan sets out how we will fulfil our ambition to leave the environment in a better state than we found it, building on existing strategies and identifying key areas of focus. We want even cleaner air and water, richer habitats for more wildlife, and an approach to fishing, agriculture and land use that puts the environment first.

Globally, less than 10 per cent of the world’s seas are currently designated as marine protected areas, which is one of the most important ways to protect precious sea life and habitats from damaging activity. However, at home in our waters, we are at the forefront of establishing marine protected areas. We are committed to delivering a well-managed blue belt of protection around our coasts, and 40% of English waters are within marine protected areas. Just a few weeks ago, we created 41 new marine conservation zones, marking the most significant expansion of England’s blue belt to date. Within these zones, we are protecting species and habitats, such as the rare stalked jellyfish, the short-snouted seahorse and blue mussel beds. Two species of seabird are also being protected in these marine conservation zones: razorbills, off the Cumbrian coast; and eider ducks, along the Northumbrian coast. We discussed this protection in the previous debate on seabirds, which my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed also secured.

Overall, the UK now has 355 marine protected areas of different types, including SPAs, spanning 220,000 sq km, which is an area nearly twice the size of England. However, we are not stopping there. We recently announced a review to examine whether and how highly protected marine areas could be introduced for English seas. These are the strongest form of marine protection, which would stop all human activity that has the potential...
to cause harm in vulnerable areas. This review is being led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) and a panel of independent experts. It aims to establish criteria for designation and it will potentially recommend up to five pilot sites.

Of course, our blue belt would be meaningless without appropriate management measures to protect the sites. For example, activities that are damaging, such as the use of bottom-towed mobile gear, would either not be allowed or—if possible—adapted to allow them to continue in a way that does not damage habitats and enables sites to meet their conservation objectives. Regulators, such as the Marine Management Organisation and the Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities, are responsible for making sure that no damaging activities take place in marine conservation zones, using a combination of byelaws and voluntary measures. These regulators will monitor marine activities to make sure that these measures are being followed.

We are a global leader in protecting the marine environment. Our updated UK marine strategy will include targets to ensure that good environmental status is achieved for seabirds, and it will also set the indicators we use to assess seabirds’ status and identify the pressures affecting them. We will continue to protect marine birds, for example, by reducing the risks to island seabird colonies from invasive predatory mammals, such as rats, by delivering the UK plan of action on seabird bycatch, and by reducing marine litter. The UK has a well- respected bycatch monitoring programme in place, which is run by the Sea Mammal Research Unit. The data that is gathered is currently being used to conduct a preliminary assessment of the extent of seabird bycatch across the UK, which will inform the initial focus of our plan of action.

As we have heard, plastic in the seas is a hazard for seabirds. I was pleased to take part in a debate here in Westminster Hall on packaging on Monday, which was secured by the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). Evidence shows that marine birds, particularly diving birds, can be injured or even killed by abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear. Diving birds may become entangled in such gear when chasing fish, becoming trapped underwater and drowning. Indeed, as we heard from the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), the scouge of micro-plastics and nurdles impacts upon a whole variety of species, including puffins and other seabirds.

In 2017, the UK signed up to the Global Ghost Gear Initiative, a pioneering scheme to tackle lost and abandoned fishing gear on a global scale. Through this initiative, we are committed to working with our partners to address the management of existing fishing gear, and the mitigation of the potential effects of abandoned, lost and discarded fishing gear. In addition, the UK continues to lead the way in tackling the scouge of plastic pollution entering our oceans.

We recognise the importance of protecting the marine environment and we see the health of the ocean as key to tackling climate change. We have already exceeded the 30% global sustainable development goal to protect 10% of our marine and coastal areas by 2020, with 25% of UK waters currently protected. At the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2018, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs called for 30% of the world’s oceans to be marine protected areas by 2030.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed will be pleased to hear that we are extremely committed to protecting the marine environment as we leave the EU. Through the EU (Withdrawal) Act, we will make sure that marine protected areas set up under European directives, including SPAs, will continue to be effectively protected post exit. The Office for Environmental Protection will monitor and report on our progress, holding the Government to account. After we have left the EU, we will be able to manage our marine environment in a more dynamic and flexible way than is possible under the common fisheries policy. Using powers that we are seeking through the Fisheries Bill, the Marine Management Organisation will be able to apply byelaws to manage the resources of sea fisheries for conservation purposes throughout English waters.

I now turn to one or two of the points made by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport. He talked about disturbance of seabirds. That brought to mind an experience I had when visiting Immingham, which is not far from the constituency of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby, where I visited an oil refinery. I was told that it was probably the best habitat for a number of seabirds, because there were lots of things to perch on, such as fences and pipes, but I was told that the most important aspect was that there were virtually no people and in particular no dogs whatsoever.

We need to be very thoughtful about how we allow access to some of these marine protected areas, in the same way that we are in some of our national parks and other areas on land. Yes, it is great to have more public access, but we must ensure that the people who gain that access understand the effect they can have. Indeed, we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) how well-meaning visitors can sometimes cause damage.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport asked me in particular about the funding of environmental schemes. We are a net contributor to the European Union, so there will be scope for innovative and UK-centric schemes, and I can reassure him that there will be no changes to funding. In particular, he mentioned the scouge of plastics, an issue on which we need to take global action. I was recently talking to a friend in my constituency who had been on holiday to Vietnam, and sailing down the coast he saw three separate locations where whole truckloads of plastic and other rubbish were being tipped straight into the sea. We in this country take plastic pollution very seriously, and important moves have been made to address plastic straws and other types of pollution and litter. However, looking around the world, we see some egregious examples of how pollution can cause problems.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned sand eels, which I would like to say a little bit about, because they are an important component of marine food webs that provide food for many species of marine predator, such as seabirds, mammals and fish. The sand eel life cycle is affected by climate change, as warmer seas have a direct effect on plankton. The puffin breeding cycle is less adaptable, so if the sand eels are not available at the time puffins are breeding, that affects how many birds
breed and how many chicks they raise. We also know that that varies annually, and in different parts of the country.

The RSPB’s citizen science project, Puffarazzi, is currently collecting data on puffin diet to complement research being done by several academic groups, which will give us an insight into puffins’ current diet and changes over time. There is some evidence that the exploitation of sand eels affects the wider ecosystem, such as causing a decline in seabird populations. For example, a recent study has found a correlation between kittiwake breeding success and sand eel fishing mortality, although there are many other factors that could have an impact on small fish populations, such as climate change.

The UK does not have a strong commercial interest in sand eels, although we have some quota that is fished occasionally. Most of the fishing of sand eels in UK waters is by the Danish fleet, although Sweden has a commercial interest. Fishing is concentrated around Dogger Bank, which in most years accounts for over 90% of sand eels caught in the UK’s exclusive economic zone. Sand eels are a quota species; the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea provides annual recommendations on the total allowable catch for sand eel in management area 1r, Dogger Bank. In recent years, with the exception of 2016, the TAC has been set in line with ICES’ recommendations. However, catches have often exceeded that TAC.

Sand eels are not used for direct human consumption, but their fishery provides livestock and aquaculture feed and fertiliser. Arguably, alternative ways to produce those goods that should not interfere with marine ecosystems and food webs would be more sustainable; however, we do not currently have evidence on whether production of alternative feed stocks and fertilisers would actually have a lower overall environmental impact. A sand eel fishery closure has been in place off the east coast of Scotland since 2000. It is prohibited to land or retain sand eels on board within the closure area, although a limited scientific fishery is permitted to monitor the stock.

Again, I thank hon. Members for contributing to the debate. I emphasise that we are a world leader in protecting our precious coastline, and we continue to increase protection in the UK to safeguard our puffins’ future. The relatively new Northumberland marine SPA is a welcome addition to that suite. With rising populations in some colonies, the UK continues to play its part in improving the chances of one of our most vulnerable and iconic species.

5.22 pm

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive and detailed response to today’s debate. I look forward to the challenge of long-term rebalancing, through which we will have the opportunity to manage our waters and think in a much more holistic way than perhaps the common fisheries policy has given us the opportunity to do. I very much hope that we will be able to work together as we go forward, so that we can genuinely be a world-leading country in understanding that balance of decision making and ensuring we support those who work in our seas alongside those who look after our natural wildlife.

In the long term, we often discover that plants and animals that we did not appreciate before have a greater value holistically to our natural habitat, of which we are a part, than we perhaps understood. I thank the Minister very much for his detailed responses, and look forward to working with him on this issue in the months and years ahead.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved,**

That this House has considered puffin habitats.

5.24 pm

**Sitting adjourned.**
Westminster Hall

Thursday 27 June 2019

[GRAHAM STRINGER in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Combat Air Strategy

1.30 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered Combat Air Strategy progress and next steps.

It is an honour and a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

As we consider what aircraft will replace the Typhoon, it is appropriate for us to remember those who operate that aircraft now. I am particularly mindful that only a couple of days ago we heard the tragic news about the loss of two German Eurofighters and a pilot in a crash. The German air force remains a key ally, as it was during the cold war, and it is one of the best equipped in the world. Germany is one of our closest friends, as well as being a key NATO ally. I am sure that we are all mindful of the loss of that German pilot. We cannot know the reason for the crash at this stage, and we ought not to speculate, but it may be that we touch on issues such as training or serviceability as part of the debate. Whatever the reasons, it is a sad moment for all friends of Germany and of aviators. I would like us to remember them all at this time.

It is good to see so many Members here as we consider the combat air strategy, particularly given that so many were also present in November 2017 when the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and I sponsored the original debate calling for a combat air strategy—in fact, it was for a defence aerospace industrial strategy; I will refer to that terminology, which is not just semantics, in a moment or two. Progress has certainly been made: the combat air strategy was published in July 2018, while Team Tempest—including the Royal Air Force, the Ministry of Defence, BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce, Leonardo UK and MBDA UK—and the mock-up of the Tempest aircraft were unveiled at the Royal International Air Tattoo last year.

However, there is much more to do. It is appropriate for us all to take stock at this stage, not least because other competitors in the field are forging ahead. This is the right moment to have this debate, given that only last week at the Paris air show the Franco-German team unveiled what has been referred to as their “squashed Raptor” design; anyone who does not know what I mean should take a picture of the F-22 Raptor and then look the Franco-German model, then they will see it exactly. The Turkish fighter concept was unveiled at the same time. In some ways, they are a year or so behind Team Tempest’s efforts, but in some ways they are more developed. They seem to have dates for first flight outlined, which I think I am correct in saying we do not yet have. In any event, there is clearly no room for complacency.

I make one perhaps basic point, although it is not the most important: perhaps we could just call the aircraft that we are discussing “Tempest”. The name has historic resonance—the Hawker Tempest replaced the Hawker Typhoon, as this Tempest should replace our Typhoon. It also provides a logical progression, from Tornado to Typhoon to Tempest. I appreciate that this is not the most important point that we will discuss, but it might make it easier for everyone if we do not have to wrestle with baffling military acronyms or phrases such as “combat air” or “FCAS”—future combat air system. I would rather that we did not have a minor international incident, as with Typhoon, by debating at the end of the programme what the aircraft will be called. In any event, I suggest that we call this aircraft Tempest, and I will refer to it as Tempest today.

Before we get into the details, we should look at why it is so important that we have a combat air strategy. Defence aerospace has accounted for about 87% of defence exports over the last 10 years, and the UK combat air sector has an approximate annual turnover of more than £6 billion. The F-35 programme directly employs around 2,200 people, with Hawk at 1,500 and Typhoon around 5,000. Hawk is estimated—through the 1,000 or so aircraft built or on order—to bring in £15.8 billion over its lifetime to the UK Government, for an outlay of around £900 million. Typhoon will have brought in £28.2 billion, against an outlay of £15.2 billion, showing a clear economic benefit, entirely leaving aside the geopolitical desirability of British sovereign capability. Those figures are before we consider the recent Qatar deal or any future sales over which discussions are ongoing.

However, the issue is not all about money: it is also about finding a way to develop, sponsor and bring on the technology that has a spin-off in other areas of everyday life, as it has throughout history; the combat air strategy rightly points out that the software used in the Tornado, the Typhoon and the C-130J now provides the rail timetabling system for the London Underground. However, the battle that we often seem to fight in the House is over funding for these projects, in the face of the short-sighted argument that military equipment is simply a financial drain. Of course it costs money, but it brings in money, as well as maintaining vital national independence.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for introducing the debate so well. He particularly highlights the contribution of the hardware side. Is it not also important that we maintain the military side, because of the impact right the way through the supply chain on many specialist subcontractors—often at tiers 3 and 4—that are also a vital part of civil aerospace, Formula 1 and the motor industry? Those are all areas in which we are internationally competitive and which help us to pay our way in the world.

Robert Courts: I agree entirely. We often do not realise the impact of the defence industry on each of our constituencies. Many of us will have in our constituencies sometimes quite small companies that make something as part of the supply chain for a much bigger machine. That is absolutely right, and we must work hard to protect that. As the right hon. Gentleman rightly identifies, it goes to the wider impact of technology on the rest of our lives.
I would like each and every one of us, as individual MPs, to consider making arguments to the Treasury about how defence is accounted for. We have to start fighting the battle to turn the tide against the perception that defence and the defence industry simply cost money.

I am very encouraged by the Secretary of State for Defence’s comments in the current edition of The House magazine; I hope you will not mind if I quote her, Mr Stringer. She says:

“I think that the Treasury has been missing a trick. It has not really understood the full value of defence to the nation. The methodology that it uses is flawed. So, in advance of the spending review I will be setting out why I think it should change its methodology towards its assessment of the return to the UK of investing in defence. I think there’s much more we can do to reap the benefits that defence brings to the UK prosperity agenda.”

I entirely agree. However, I do not think it is a matter for only the Defence Secretary to deal with. It is a matter for each of us—whether we have military or the defence industry in our constituencies, or both—to keep making the case for what the defence industry and our armed forces bring to UK plc.

John Spellar: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. What he describes requires a really significant change in mindset in the civil service, and particularly in the Treasury, regarding procurement guidelines: they relentlessly refuse to take into account the impact on the prosperity agenda, which they talk about, or even how much they will get in as revenue from the taxes of people working in this country, rather than working in other countries. That goes across the board. Is not it time for a fundamental rethink, in line with how every one of our major international industrial competitors operates?

Robert Courts: Again, I am grateful. The right hon. Gentleman has made the point succinctly. I agree entirely, as I suspect all of us will today—and I think that the Secretary of State is on the same page as we are. Yes, it is time; that is exactly what I am asking for.

John Spellar: Has the memo got to the Minister for procurement?

Robert Courts: We are very much asking for a fundamental rethink of the way the Treasury accounts for the contribution of defence. It is probably time for me to make the old joke that we often make when having these debates. I am mindful of the words of my grandfather, who was in Bomber Command during the war. He used to say that the opposition, the opposing armed forces, were not the enemy; they were just people who were playing the same game but at the other end of the pitch. The opposition are just the opposition; the real enemy is the Treasury.

As I said, we often make that old joke in these debates, but it is true. We all find ourselves constantly having to ask the Treasury for more money, but also begging the Treasury, as we have done on both sides of the House, to see the value that defence brings to the economy—it is not just the cost—when programmes have to be invested in. It was a slightly flippant point, but this is the ongoing battle that we have to fight every time any of us stands up to speak about the defence industry or investing in the equipment that our armed forces will need for the future.

That understanding is vital. Although I am addressing my remarks to the Minister responsible for defence procurement, the ramifications of what I am saying go far beyond this Minister and his Secretary of State. They extend also to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, because we need people to have the skills required to build the systems that we are talking about. We need to look also to the Department for International Trade and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, because of the diplomacy required to assemble the multinational team who are likely to be required to build the aircraft. Of course, the Treasury will always sit in the middle, because it is the one that holds the money, but this work will require top-level political direction to ensure that it takes place. We will want to see the next Prime Minister direct and ensure the cross-Government co-ordination required for this project to be a success.

We ought to look at the form of the project. The Franco-German team who announced their project last week have made it clear that it will involve the next-generation fighter, as it is called, but also remote carriers—they are sometimes called loyal wingmen; essentially they are unmanned aerial vehicles that feed off and support the main manned aircraft—and that that will encompass an air combat cloud, the manned aircraft accompanied by UAVs as a swarm concept. Although we are likely to look to do the same, the form of the project is not yet entirely clear, but it does have significant ramifications in terms of work share, intellectual property protection and, consequently, who the national partners are or can be.

I would like to talk first about national partners. We will all welcome the British drive and British lead, but it probably is not a wild stab in the dark to suggest that we will probably not design and produce a sixth-generation aircraft all on our own, only to equip the Royal Air Force, because sales and production of aircraft are inextricably linked to work share and to the ultimate sales partner. We are aware that conversations are taking place. The Swedish, the Italians and the Japanese are perhaps the obvious partners with whom we are considering working, but there is a real need for urgency.

In November 2018, the Spanish announced that they were considering options for replacement of their F/A-18 Hornet fleet and they were in discussions with the Dassault and Airbus team, who are a Franco-German operation, as well as Team Tempest. They stated that the key factor was the level of industrial participation that was offered. Of course, last week, they signed up with the Franco-German operation at the Paris air show. I have no way of knowing—the Minister may—whether that was as a result of a deliberate British decision. It may be that the level of expertise or financial input offered was unattractive to us, or it may be that it was a result of a Spanish decision to go elsewhere, but at the very least we can say that it is clear that there is competition between the rival British and Franco-German blocs, either to become the more established and advanced programme and to persuade the other to join in, but on their terms, or to ensure the success of their programme because national participation naturally brings orders.

The Franco-German operation is naturally looking at the same potential partners as we are, so it is essential that we have top-level political engagement, repeating Mrs Thatcher’s work in the early stages of the Eurofighter programme in the 1980s. I will turn to the issue of political
engagement for a moment now. The Minister will have to forgive me. I know how deeply engaged he is, but this is something that goes beyond his hard work and his Secretary of State as well. It goes all the way up to full Cabinet support and the support of the Prime Minister.

We can see the approach taken by France. President Macron launched the Franco-German project on 17 June, introducing the partnership of those countries with Spain and signing an agreement at the Paris airshow. There is no doubt that for the French and Germans, that is a national and European project in which they invest considerable prestige, and they will be determined to succeed and to claim for themselves, potentially, aerospace territory that has traditionally been the purview of the British, and they are deploying top-level politicians to achieve that.

The downside of the Franco-German approach is that they will want to be the architects of the project, shaping the capability and design of the aircraft. They may allow others to make the metaphorical bricks, but they will not allow them to sculpt the resulting edifice. We therefore have a golden opportunity to involve those who have outstanding aerospace sectors that either are under-appreciated—such as, perhaps, the Italians—or have not achieved the cut-through that they deserve, which may be the case with Sweden. However, as I have said, that will require political engagement at the very highest level to bring them together.

Just as the Franco-German project is a symbol of those countries’ increasing integration in political as well as military terms, so it is vital that the Tempest project is, for us, a symbol of an outward-looking, co-operative, internationally minded UK post Brexit, a practical illustration of the frequently uttered words that although we are leaving the European Union, we are not leaving Europe, and proof that European co-operation and a European identity exist and thrive outside the political union of the EU.

The current terms of the combat air strategy suggest that it would not be possible for Britain to join the Franco-German project, for reasons such as retaining UK IP—I will return to that point in a minute—but the very last thing that the country or industry needs is lukewarm political commitment leading to a British folding into a rival project, with all that that would mean for our national industry. I am wary of warm words.

We are heading in the right direction, and the document that we have seen is very valuable, but history has shown that what I am warning about has happened all too often in the past. There is no avoiding the fact that top-level political commitment is needed not only now, but in the months and years ahead.

We have the biggest air show in the world at the Royal International Air Tattoo in July, as well as the Defence and Security Equipment International exhibition, which international leaders will be visiting, but I would like to see our national leaders going abroad to visit other countries to seek and gain their support. When that is got right—as it has been with Australia for frigates and Wedgetail—we can see the benefits, in terms of not just capability but international influence, as we are a country that does not just work within the Five Eyes intelligence network but provides top-class capability. We stand to gain skills and prosperity as well as international influence if we can manufacture and support aircraft. Hawk shows us how successfully that can be done.

The ambition to secure international influence is shown on page 25 of the combat air strategy, as part of the colourfully illustrated national value framework. I am glad to have that on my point of me, and I know the Minister does as well. I am pleased to see it, but currently these are just words; they need to be supported by the top-level political leadership of which I have spoken. I would like to dwell for a moment on the wording of paragraph 38 at the top of page 25, which reads:

“The framework allows the Ministry of Defence to compare the relative benefits of a range of options from procuring ‘off-the-shelf’ to partnering with allies. When placed alongside detailed cost analysis it will enable us to determine relative value for money of the options and consider trade-offs.”

That seems to me to be very broadly drafted and to encompass about five possible options. The Minister might tell me that there are others.

First, that could encompass life extensions to Typhoon. Although that would be welcome for the purpose of bringing on new technology, it is not something that we should be looking at long term. Secondly, it could mean no aircraft—a re-heated Sandys report. I think that was wrong then and remains wrong now. Thirdly, that wording could simply mean buying off the shelf. In fact, the phrase “off-the-shelf” is used. There has always been a good argument, on the face of it, that we can buy good kit cheaply from the Americans. That is true, so far as it goes, but it would leave us without a domestic industry or the ability to make our own combat aircraft, and would remove the international influence that I have spoken of, which is the main advantage of a combat air strategy. I suggest that that option ought to be no more than a last resort.

Fourthly, partnering with allies might mean being a junior partner, as is the case with F-35. That is fine. We might have the advantage of large workshare, but be unable to shape the aircraft for our needs, obtain international influence or protect our leading high-tech capability, which we all want to protect. Fifthly, there is the option of being a leading partner, which is what Team Tempest seems to be aiming for. I would favour that option.

The wording leaves a lot of room for manoeuvre. Perhaps—heaven forbid!—it was deliberately drafted like that. I am pushing for the fifth option, where the UK is a lead partner. Other hon. Members and I are pushing for political leadership to that end. We do not want a strategy that sounds good in practice but ends up leaving sufficient space for a far less ambitious position, which does not provide the Royal Air Force with the capability it needs or protect the sovereign industry, about which hon. Members in all parts of the Chamber have spoken so powerfully. We have seen that in the past.

Any hon. Members who have been in debates with me before will remember my aviation history lessons—I will not give them another. [Interruption.] I am sorry to hear that that is regretted. Perhaps I will do so another time; I have spoken for long enough already. The whole point of the combat air strategy, which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North and I pushed for way back in November 2017, was precisely to avoid that happening again. Can the Minister confirm that the Government are determined to pursue the lead partner option and whether any of the options that I have posited have been ruled out?

We will need to consider whether the offer of an airframe alone will be enough to make a success of this strategy, or whether it will need further expansion.
I suggest that we ought to be looking at a system, rather than an airframe, so that we can include other capability and diplomacy. We can look at the Qatari Typhoon sale as an example. As part of that multibillion pound contract to supply Qatar with Typhoon and Hawk, No. 12 Squadron is integrating Qatari personnel, including pilots and ground crew at RAF Coningsby, before moving to Qatar.

That is a package of training and co-operation with UK counterparts that has not been seen since the second world war, when the RAF last formed a squadron with another nation. Perhaps we need to be a little careful and assess the success of that project, to ensure that it is working for the RAF as well as for industry. However, we have seen from that sale that the need for training—particularly the desire for training associated with the world-class quality mark of the Royal Air Force—may be a major part of any deal in the future, whether regarding aircraft alone or as a package. We ought to consider that sort of thing as part of the combat air strategy as well.

Saab has added GlobalEye airborne early warning and control aircraft to its offer of Gripen for the Finnish air force, which Typhoon is already also competing in. If we are to offer Tempest to other nations in due course, will it include, for example, an air combat cloud, and if so, who will we be able to share that IP technology with? Would we want to offer, for example, tanker or ISTAR—intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance—transport assets as part of the package? Would we want to offer training packages or training aircraft?

That last point is important, and it is why I return to the title of the debate. I am not simply focusing on semantics here. The debate held in November 2017 called for a defence aerospace industrial strategy. That encompasses more than just combat air, which is what this strategy principally deals with. This deals with the airframe that will become Tempest, but I suggest that an overall strategy ought to consider what will replace, among other things, Hawk. I ask the Minister to approach that issue again.

The point of having a defence aerospace industrial strategy is to understand what air power we will need as a nation in the future. That includes not just the frontline air force, which Typhoon is already also competing in, but what will keep them. We cannot consider what skills we will need until we have decided whether to build radar, airframes, pilot support, or mission control systems and so on. That must all start now, which is the reason for my gentle prodding today.

I have four asks of the Minister, beyond the more detailed Team Tempest updates that he will remember having promised when we discussed military manufacturing in May, in particular on the outline business case that the report said would be produced by the end of last year. I hope that the Minister will relay to the Department that top-level political support and re-engagement are needed to require international partners to come on board. We need improved cross-departmental working, with the Treasury seeing the benefits to British industry as a project of national value, rather than seeing the defence industry simply as a cash drain. We also need next-stage funding; the £2 million that Team Tempest has had is only seedcorn money, and more will be needed to move to the next stage. Finally, the wider requirements of the defence aerospace industrial strategy should be considered alongside the Tempest combat air strategy.

We are on the cusp of a very exciting national project. I look forward to the Minister’s comments and to driving this forward with colleagues in all parts of the House.

1.59 pm

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): As ever, Mr Stringer, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. It is an honour to have worked with the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on this issue for what is now a significant period of time. As an Opposition Back Bencher, there are very few opportunities to make a real difference, or change Government policy. One of my most confusing moments as a Member of Parliament was when the former Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin
Williamson), gave me credit for the change in policy—so I will now be taking credit for everything that everybody is doing on the issue.

I alert the House to my registered interests; I have the great honour to be the GMB lead in manufacturing. I must also apologise for the fact that, since business is quite interesting in this place at the moment, I have managed to get into the bizarre position of co-sponsoring debates in this Chamber and the main Chamber at exactly the same time. You have kindly given me permission, Mr Stringer, to go between the two debates as the afternoon progresses, so I will be going from combat air strategy to child food poverty in an easy step from one room to the next.

I welcome those who are watching from the Gallery—not least the Unite reps from Brough, who have travelled quite far to hear about the future of their sector, about what we care about and about what we are doing to fight for them. It is a great thing for us all to meet skilled men and women who deliver day in, day out, contributing to different ways to our national security—it is something I love to do. I have had the pleasure of visiting the team at Brough and other BAE sites to see how it works.

We asked for a defence aerospace industrial strategy at the beginning because it has several different components for Members from all parties, ranging from our national security to our sovereign skills and the wider defence family. We can forget that the reason for our sovereign skills capability in the sector is our own national security. It is about the men and women who come together at times of national crisis to develop the capabilities that our armed service personnel need to protect us. It is never, ever just about the platforms; it must always be about the people who design them, make them and use them to keep British citizens safe. We need to look at our defence industrial strategy in the round, so we should be talking about our defence family, not just our military family or the defence manufacturers.

What have we achieved so far? What have I achieved so far? Some 1,000 people are currently working on Tempest. We must not underestimate the fact that none of them was doing this two years ago. We came to this House and said that a new fast jet takes 30 years from conception to build. This Government did a wonderful thing in appreciating that as soon as we have commissioned and bought one platform, we need to consider the next.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I am loth to interrupt the hon. Lady when she is making such an eloquent speech, but the annunciator seems to think that she is somebody else—it may be confused by her loth to interrupt the hon. Lady when she is making such an eloquent speech, but the annunciator seems to think that she is somebody else—it may be confused by her

Ruth Smeeth: I am not sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) has ever spoken on defence industrial strategy—well, she has now—but it would be very helpful if I had a clone so that I could be in both Chambers at once today. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for highlighting that point.

Tempest has 1,000 people and £2 billion already invested and committed, both from the sector and from the Government. Moving forward, that will lead to potentially 22,000 jobs in the wider supply chain. When we talk about sovereign skills and investing in UK plc, that is exactly what we mean.

As the hon. Member for Witney highlighted, we asked the Government not just for a platform. We asked how the Government would look at our combat air strategy in the round, and what the defence aerospace plan was for the next 30 years. I am delighted with what we have—but, as ever, Minister, it is not enough. We have seen recently how difficult it is to train new pilots and how long the waiting times are. In no small part, that is because of the delay in replacing the Hawk training platform.

The Hawk has done our country a huge service for many years and is still flown by the Red Arrows—although I think they could do with an upgrade, too. However, the Hawk is probably coming to the end of its natural life, and there are competitors that have positioned themselves, even to provide training for the F-35. We need to talk about what replacement aircraft we will need for the F-35 and what Tempest will finally look like. We need to talk about all this in the round, not just for a single platform.

The very talented men and women at Brough need some guarantees about their future. They need to know—as does the whole wider supply chain, not just BAE Systems—what we are talking about for the sector’s future, so I have specific questions for the Minister about plans for a training platform. What conversations is he having with the wider industry about what we will do to develop a new platform? If we are not going to do that, are we really talking about buying something off the shelf? That will be no good for sovereign skills as we seek to leave the European Union.

My other question to the Minister is about Brexit—sorry, I mean Tempest, although I have many questions about Brexit. There are currently four significant players involved in the design process. We have a huge opportunity with Tempest that we have not had before, because it is a blank piece of paper. Our weapons systems can be built into the platform, not added to it; the way the ejection seats operate can be included at the beginning, rather than the end; and the way we refuel can also be included at the development of the new platform. As we saw with the Rafale, not only does adding an in-air refuelling system make the product ugly, but—not that I am partisan—it adds challenges to stealth capability and the ability to be located on radar. We have an opportunity to do this all at the beginning, so we should be talking not just about the four companies, but about how we work with our small and medium-sized enterprises and the extraordinary companies driving change, and how they can access the programme with the four main partners.

With the Select Committee on Defence—our Chair, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) is in his place—I had the privilege of visiting the Paris air show last week, as did the Minister. We saw the opportunities available for UK plc, and we also saw where our international allies are looking to fill gaps in areas that we are not ready to participate in. Can the Minister share with us what conversations he is having with our international allies about working collaboratively?

We are leaving the European Union, I hope, at the end of the year, but that does not mean that we are leaving the continent of Europe. Continuing to work with our allies to develop a platform over which we can be in more control than we have been with the F-35 gives us the opportunity to build our security and...
financial relationships with allies by which we are currently challenged. Will the Minister inform us what we are doing?

It is a great thing to be able to talk about defence, work on a cross-party basis with so many colleagues, and continue to work with the hon. Member for Witney on the issue. We are grateful for what has happened so far—we just want more.

2.9 pm

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con):

It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate after my great friend the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing it. It could be described as a continuity debate, because it gives us the chance to review progress on the combat air strategy, for which the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend both pushed the Ministry of Defence so successfully two years ago.

The strategy document published last year sets out a clear industry relationship proposition. It even committed funding for development—always an exciting thing to see in the military space—and committed to trying to keep sovereign capability in the UK as far as possible. This is clearly important and part of the MOD’s commitment to the UK prosperity agenda. The strategic defence and security review clearly sets out clearly that we have three key objectives: to protect, to project and to promote. Our armed forces personnel do all three in all that we ask of them, and the reach of UK military plc through the soft power of global industry leadership from UK defence businesses is without question.

The combat air strategy’s focus on the issue of industry sustainability, through the commitment to British defence companies and the opportunities for export and economic outputs from technological developments, is to be welcomed. Following on from the comments by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney, I will share most proudly the story that first with the shipbuilding strategy, which was published by Sir John Parker at the end of 2016. As one of the members of the all-party parliamentary group on shipbuilding and ship repair—I am the only woman and the only Conservative in that group, of which I am proud to be a part—I am pleased that the MOD has welcomed our review of that strategy. Much of our focus was on the question of sustainability for industry, since new classes of ship only come along every 30 years, but they have such high capabilities that we now only build a few of them. For far too long we have failed to consider export markets for those models or similar ones to ensure that the yards remain open, expert shipbuilding skills are maintained and new generations of shipbuilders are brought on.

The current feast-or-famine nature of military demand threatens our ability to maintain the sovereign capability to produce warships, and the national shipbuilding strategy significantly reduces the threat that a UK is qualified to build. That could threaten the long-term viability of those fragile shipyards. The very shape of today’s UK shipbuilding industry is the result of rationalisation, following a period of policies that urged shipbuilders to compete with each other, with the result that some yards went bust.

Furthermore, the Government’s inability to provide certainty for industry through a secure timeline of contracts endangers the UK’s position as a world leader in shipbuilding. When it comes to future orders, driving the industrial drumbeat would enable private sector shipbuilders and the wider supply chain—always a critical part of the industry—to invest in infrastructure, facilities and emerging naval technologies, and renew the UK’s competitive advantage.

The secondary economic impact and tax returns to the Exchequer would provide further benefit to the UK as a whole. I reiterate what my hon. Friend the Member for Witney said earlier: to get the best value and the most effective outcomes, the Treasury models absolutely need to adapt and change to ensure that there is understanding across the whole of Government. I know that the Minister is at one with the Secretary of State, who is trying to pitch that battle in a new way.

The argument goes so much further, because one could confront the combat air industry with the same challenges. A new aircraft carrier costs £3 billion—there are two of them—but each F-35 that will travel in her costs around £100 million; the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North regularly picks fights with me about this, but the cost is around £100 million. Those jets are only such good value because we buy them from the USA, from a programme that produces thousands of them, in order to get some benefit in relation to the enormous development cost of the F-35.

The combat air strategy already asserts that sovereign capability for a sixth-generation combat aircraft just is not going to be realistic as a UK-only proposition, and that we will end up working in partnership with our allies to develop and build such a plane. I reiterate my hon. Friend’s comment about wanting to make sure that we are a lead partner in that development. Although we see a level of work sharing on the F-35, there are risks to creating a big gap in our capability and production by buying in from the USA. In so doing, are we all working to the same basic principles and seeking similar freedom of action? That is the really challenging part of the military question. Will we all be working together in NATO against a common enemy, or should we be considering that the question of being able to fight alone must never be ignored? The eye-watering costs of such technologically extraordinary planes means that we need to consider honestly the sort of warfare we could conduct if needed.

In the maritime space, the Royal Navy is looking once again at the question of quantity, as well as technological quality and advantage. For some challenges, high-end war-fighting kit is not the necessary weapon. Of course, the simpler and cheaper warship also has value as an export commodity for smaller countries whose defence budgets will never reach those of the top 10 spending nations.
What is the answer to that question in the combat air space? Eurofighter Typhoons, which came into operational service in 2003, are now expected, with a bit of a stretch, to remain in service until 2040. The F-35s are coming on stream as the Tornado is retired, and I imagine that we can expect them to have a life span of at least 30 years. However, with this strategy we are simply considering a sixth-generation replacement for Typhoon in 20 years’ time. Typhoon’s gestation to service has taken longer than that, thanks to the vagaries of multinational partnership.

If historical timelines are anything to go by, we are certainly cutting it fine, and the nature of international co-operation also risks slowing progress. However, my central concern is that technology and the nature of warfare are changing so fast; and the nature of airspace, its congestion, and the rapidly improving reach and resilience of unmanned drones make me wonder whether a manned sixth-generation fighter jet is where we should invest all our thinking and cash.

If the Navy cover on and below the sea, and the Army cover all that is land, the Royal Air Force must cover air and space. There is an excellent nascent and growing team of people in the space division within the RAF, but space does not seem to feature in the strategic thinking at all. Perhaps the Minister will reassure me that a space strategy will come to us soon, but even if he does so, it would somewhat miss the point. For me, “combat air” means combat activities above ground and sea. That will, without doubt, be more than 33,000 feet up in the decades ahead.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney and the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North first called for a coherent, long-term way that, for too many decades, we have not had. It should build into the strategic statements of the armed forces and the Ministry of Defence. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, more resistant, and resilient to whatever kind of threat may be encountered, but it is a strategic decision.

The strategy document has nothing at all on training, maintenance and development of present-day pilot skills. In the House in recent weeks, we have discussed with Ministers the lack of trainers for our pilots, who have to use private training facilities and displace private training programmes, thereby stunting wider civilian flying training business models.

Surely the Minister agrees that if we are to prepare for the unexpected—the as yet unthought-of—we must ensure that we are planning flexible training programmes for this generation of our serving RAF personnel and for the generations to come. They may well not be pilots, as we consider that word now—the strutting pilot walking confidently to his or her cockpit to take to the skies to battle an enemy, or to use firepower to provide air cover for ground or maritime forces—because that role may be in its last throes. Unmanned equipment and war-fighting far from battle zones may become the norm.

My concern with all these strategies—do not get me wrong; they are a great step forward—is that they do not address the changing nature of war and persistent conflict, or the question of what tools, weapons and skills we need to plan for in order to maintain our operational advantage over enemies unknown and as yet unidentifiable. We are really talking about a weapons system and how we plan to get to its birth, rather than wider strategic questions.

The textbook consideration of strategy challenges us to consider the ends, ways and means of our plans. It seems that in our strategic documents, we are discussing the means of fulfilling a strategic intent, with some discussion about the ways in which we will do so. However, we are fundamentally ignoring part of that equation—I do not doubt that it is the most difficult—in our discussions. Surely, a strategic document from the Ministry of Defence, which is one of the world’s leading defence organisations and has the best service personnel in the world working for it, ought to be setting out in a broad-brush manner, at least, what ends we should be considering. That is not just a new, faster, whizzier, cleverer and more tech-filled piece of kit—designed in the UK, I hope, and made or at least built in part here—but the big questions of what our intent and reach will be.

I ask the Minister to come back to the House with the next phase of the combat air strategy—perhaps, as he keeps being reminded, with its new title. That strategy should help parliamentarians to gain confidence that there is clear thinking and planning about more than just the next generation of a fighter jet to replace Typhoon, since that may not be the sort of warfare we need in 20 years’ time, and that the Department is not acting in a piecemeal way on technology or its commitment to the UK defence industry, but is thinking in the coherent, long-term way that, for too many decades, we have not had. It should build into the strategic statements for land, sea and air—they are most welcome—a clearer indication that the Department is working to draw together and support our strategic thinking. We look forward to the full aerospace strategy in due course.

2.21 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is a pleasure to make a brief contribution to this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. All three previous speakers
have shown absolute mastery of the detail, which I cannot hope to match in this context, so I intend to draw out some of the broader issues and seize a particular current opportunity: the forthcoming election of a new leader of the Conservative party and Prime Minister.

Occasionally in politics, a window of opportunity opens, usually when aspiring leaders of the nation wish to generate support from those whom they presume to lead. We on the Select Committee on Defence met on Tuesday and decided that we would write to both of the final candidates in the leadership election. I have in front of me the text of the similar letters sent to each, picking up on the Foreign Secretary’s bid for the support of defence-minded MPs. In those letters, we spell out the fact that the Defence Committee, whose members represent four different parties, has for several years been absolutely united about the fact that we need to be spending more on defence.

In particular, the Committee believes that we ought to have as our target figure not the bare 2% of GDP that we currently just about manage to spend, but a figure approaching 3% of GDP, the proportion of gross domestic product that used to be spent by the United Kingdom—not during the cold war, when that figure was 4.5% to 5%, but as late as the mid-1990s, several years after the cold war had come to an end.

The complexity of weapons systems in any of the dimensions that we might care to identify—land, sea, air, cyber-space, or space itself—is increasing. If we do not have an adequate financial base for defence, it is difficult to see how any of those projects can hope to be brought to fruition. That applies as much to what from this moment onwards I will call “the Tempest strategy” as it does to every other system.

In a few moments, I will come back to the terms of the letter that I sent. However, I want to emphasise what my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) has just said by noting that as these advanced weapons systems get more complex, their numbers get fewer, and they have to be planned longer and longer in advance. Needless to say, they also cost a great deal more. I am a little more familiar with the cycle involving warships than I am with aircraft, but the complexity of weapons systems in any of the dimensions that we might care to identify—land, sea, air, cyber-space, or space itself—is increasing. If we do not have an adequate financial base for defence, it is difficult to see how any of those projects can hope to be brought to fruition. That applies as much to what from this moment onwards I will call “the Tempest strategy” as it does to every other system.

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**Graham Stringer (in the Chair):** Order. I do not wish to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, who is making some interesting points, but the question is “That this House has considered Combat Air Strategy progress and next steps.” I hope the right hon. Gentleman will focus his remarks on the objective of the debate.

**Dr Lewis:** All will become clear very soon, Mr Stringer; you have my assurance.

Just as we must not interrupt that cycle, whether it be for a nuclear-powered submarine that is an attack submarine or a nuclear-armed submarine that is a ballistic missile submarine, we must not interrupt it for frigate or destroyer construction. We face exactly the same problem with aircraft strategies: we have gone from the Typhoon to the F-35, and even as we are introducing the F-35—the fifth-generation aircraft—we must already be planning for the sixth. That is despite the fact that, as has been pointed out, one of the existing aircraft still has at least 20 years to go in its lifespan, and the other has only just begun a period in service with the Royal Air Force lasting probably twice that. The question that arises, therefore, is how the new generation of aircraft can be financed.

With that, we come back to the issue of what we are being promised. Whenever Prime Ministers or Defence Secretaries are in place, we are told constantly that all is fine and everything in the garden is rosy and flourishing, yet when Defence Secretaries leave their position, they immediately call for increases. Recently, one brave Defence Minister even said at the Dispatch Box that we are not spending enough on defence. Now, we find that the Foreign Secretary is saying that within the next five years we ought to increase defence spending by a quarter, and he even made a speech at Mansion House suggesting that over 10 years, the rate of increase should be that much greater.

Looking at the Tempest strategy, we have to ask ourselves how an aircraft of that degree of complexity, requiring so long to be designed and brought into service and demanding so much in the way of our resources, will be financed. The sole issue that I wish colleagues to consider today is that, if it takes 30 years to conceive and build the sixth generation of our air power, we will have to invest a great deal of money in it. We on the Defence Committee have worked across party lines to try to change the terms of the debate on funding aircraft, land systems and naval systems, as well as dealing with the issues that arise from what are commonly called the 21st-century threats in space and cyber-space.

It is a matter of concern that there have been indications that the permanent part of defence and security machinery has been advocating that we move away from our traditional profile and stance: of investing in such systems as those aircraft to a greater degree than the rest of our NATO European allies. Normally, as we know, the overall burden of NATO’s expenditure has been borne by the US superpower; the continental allies have put forth something below the minimum guideline and we have been somewhere in between.

It has been disturbing to see arguments being put behind the scenes that we should come to terms with the fact that we should not in future seek to outdo our continental European allies and should lower our expenditure to the level they invest. Personally, I feel that would be a disastrous mistake—it would mean that we would no longer be able to rely on retaining an industrial base that could produce and develop weapons systems of a complexity to keep us at the cutting edge of air power, sea power and land power, let alone protect ourselves in space and cyber-space.

**Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): In this debate, we have spoken about sovereign capability, the industrial base, the agenda for jobs and apprenticeships and the economy. In his position as Chair of the Defence Committee, would my right hon. Friend say that we should always be seeking the capability to conduct unilateral operations? On that basis, is it not crucial, in terms of sharing intellectual property and technology with our partners in building the new generation of aircraft, to have the most reliable strategic partners who will enhance our capability to conduct unilateral operations?
Dr Julian Lewis: That is a critical point, because the argument to which I have obliquely referred—I was tempted to refer to it more explicitly, but I decided not to, bearing in mind your stricture, Mr Stringer—and which is being put forward by civil service mandarins is not only that we should spend less, but that we should recognise the fact that we will only ever be involved in major conflicts along with allies and so we do not need the full spectrum of capability on land, at sea or in the air.

The problem with that approach is that it assumes that if we were to go into a conflict alongside allies at the beginning, those allies will remain available throughout—right until the end. What happens, however, if one of those allies is overrun and occupied, as has frequently happened in major conflicts in the past? If we are relying for the sake of our air power, for example, on a particular injection of expertise and capital from a particular ally who is no longer available, our defence capability could be fatally undermined.

I will conclude with this point. We are trying, as always, to construct a system for the air, as in the other dimensions, that is the most advanced the world has ever seen. That means that we have to be prepared not only to pay for it, but to recognise that we cannot expect to anticipate the context and circumstances under which the crisis will arise where the system will be put into action. We cannot anticipate that, so equally we cannot anticipate whether our allies who might be available in one type of conflict will be available in another and, even if they are available in that other context, whether they will remain available until the fight is brought to a close.

As we get involved in more complex and expensive systems—systems that take longer to design, develop and produce—we also must recognise the limitations on our scenario prediction ability. That is why we must invest enough and recognise that a full spectrum of military capability is essential, including, of course, in relation to the Tempest aircraft strategy.

2.34 pm

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I almost said “under your premiership”, and there is indeed a leadership contest under way—but even the Conservative party has not stretched our opportunity to get involved that far. I apologise to the Chamber for my lack of voice; I have rapidly sucked two throat lozenges and drunk a bottle of water in the hope that that will make my vocal cords relaxed enough to contribute. I am just about there.

It is a huge pleasure to lend my support to my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) in this debate, which he secured. The combat air strategy matters to my constituents at BAE Systems in Warton, to the many who work at Samlesbury and to the colleagues who work over at Brough and build the Hawk, whose final assembly takes place at Warton. It also matters to the RAF, which I have the great pleasure of serving as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme.

Above all, the combat air strategy matters to the nation. As has been said by some previous speakers, it is not only about building a platform for defence, but about having the means of sovereign capability where we can invest our research and development across a whole spectrum of areas—everything from avionics to the actual platforms themselves, through to new materials and in-flight systems and IT development. In many of those areas, the United Kingdom is without question a world leader.

Indeed, some of the technologies that have come out of previous air platforms, particularly the Harrier, have been rolled in to future programmes, such as the F-35. The nature of the beast that we are dealing with is one that gives us great longevity and considerable return on investment in almost every aspect. I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) is not with us at the moment: the point he made about Treasury models and business cases is incredibly important. When looking at the cost of and investment in combat aircraft, we have to consider the amount of revenue generated throughout the whole supply chain and the new technologies that emerge and can be rolled in, even into non-military applications. The value to the nation is much greater than the Treasury ever gives it credit for.

With that in mind, I was thrilled when last year at Farnborough, the Prime Minister—I had the privilege of being there with her—announced the Government’s intention to pursue the combat air strategy. It is good for the Government and the industry that the £2 billion investment has been forthcoming, but considerably more resources will have to flow through.

Before I talk about Tempest, I want to mirror the words of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) about the importance of Hawk. It is beloved by the nation because it is a symbol of the Red Arrows, but it is also unique because it is the one aerospace platform that is truly British. From design to final assembly, Hawk is not part of a large multinational pan-European consortium, but is 100% British. We need to ensure not only that we retain the true sovereign capability demonstrated in Hawk, but that we think about what the future of Hawk looks like and what its successor aircraft will be.

Hawk fills an incredibly important role. Not only is it a trainer aircraft, which every modern air force across the world requires—Hawk is the platform of choice in training for the Typhoon, the F-35 and similar types of aircraft—but it has other uses as light tactical support and, in many air forces around the world, as a display aircraft, which is a great way to represent a country’s air force. However, that will be the case only if we are now serious about investing in and developing a successor platform.

Hawk has had many life extensions—I think we are on to its fourth or fifth mark. That is wonderful, but at some point we will need to look at investing in and developing a new platform. My request to the Minister is that that becomes a priority for the very clever people who work in Main Building, and that we start to identify what that looks like. It would be not a crying shame but criminal if the replacement for Hawk were something that we bought off the shelf, even if from our closest allies. We can, and must, do better than that.

My big ask to the Minister is that, as part of a combat air strategy, we think of that trainer solution. In pounds, shillings and pence—without reverting to old money—let us also think about the export value that that kind of platform can generate. As I mentioned, every air force around the world requires that capability—not just as a trainer but, in countries with less advanced
[Mark Menzies]

defence requirements, as light tactical support. If the Minister could take that away as a challenge, I would be truly grateful.

Typhoon, which is the current defence mainstay of the Royal Air Force, is final-assembled in Walton. I have always been incredibly proud to represent the men and women who build and final-assemble that magnificent aircraft. It is very important that, as part of any combat air strategy, the aircraft remains current, which we can achieve by ensuring that we anticipate future mission requirements and invest in that capability.

I thank the Minister and the Government for a number of announcements in the last couple of years that will enable Typhoon to remain current, but we need to ensure that that remains the case throughout the life of the aircraft. The aircraft can then not only adopt current weapon systems but ensure, as I think my hon. Friend the Member for Witney mentioned, that it incorporates upgrades that will be the prelude to what we will see in sixth-generation aircraft.

Finally, anyone who was at Farnborough last year and saw the mock-up of Tempest could not fail to be impressed. It was an incredible-looking platform, but truly impressive was its capability to be in effect the mothercraft, supporting a range of unmanned aerial combat vehicles, to gather data and intelligence and to work in an autonomous way, keeping the pilot safe but still delivering the critical aspects of the mission. A lot of that technology comes out of the Taranis programme, which was also operated out of BAE Systems at Walton.

In a combat strategy, all the programmes feed into each other; nothing really operates in isolation. I congratulate the Minister and the Government on developing such a strategy. Without it, I am afraid that down the road would be very costly or unacceptable decisions, such as buying off the shelf from countries overseas. Sovereign capability is everything. We must have the ability to design, build and operate in isolation if required, and to invest in jobs, apprenticeships and new technologies.

The combat air strategy allows us to do that.

I encourage the Minister to stay on the path that the Government are on, and to fight for that additional slice of the Government expenditure cake. I am far more ambitious than 2.5%—I think it should be much closer to 3%. As the world becomes a more dangerous place, the stretch on our armed forces becomes all the more obvious, as challenges such as cyber become even greater, and as new theatres such as space begin to emerge, it is important that the United Kingdom is prepared. We can be prepared only if we plan, invest and do the right thing. I know that the Minister will do that.

2.44 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Members for Witney (Robert Courts) and for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), who has had to leave us, on introducing the debate and being tireless campaigners on the issue for a number of years. It is appropriate that we are having the debate in Armed Forces Week, in which we are getting many opportunities to talk about the impact of our military.

The hon. Member for Witney highlighted in great detail the importance of the combat air strategy. As he stressed, the benefits of the aerospace sector to our economy cannot be overstated, and he gave us some important figures that are worth repeating. He said that the sector has accounted for 87% of defence exports over the past 10 years and that the UK combat air sector has an annual turnover of more than £6 billion. That supports 18,000 jobs directly, and there is of course a multiplier effect in the local economy and tax revenues. All recent combat air programmes in the UK have delivered significant returns on Government investment.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North highlighted the number of people already working on Tempest and the number that we expect to see working on that programme over the next few years. It was great news when, as part of the combat air strategy, the former Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson), announced the launch of Tempest last year, along with £2 billion of funding to develop the technologies necessary for the UK to lead the development of a next-generation combat air system. I hope to see a positive outcome for those plans in the comprehensive spending review this year, and subsequently in the first major programme approval gate at the end of 2020.

There are issues surrounding funding. The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) talked about the feast-or-famine approach to spending, and the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) talked about how, as soon as we start one programme, we should consider the next. That drumbeat of planning and procurement is so important. We should not be scrabbling about for money when funding our defence. We need to commit to a much longer funding stream, to ensure proper planning of the spending within the Department.

Frankly, we are seeing too much of a siloed approach to spending, not just in Defence but in many Government Departments. I will briefly highlight the fleet solid supply ships, which we are talking about building outwith the UK. Given the economic impact of building in our own shipyards, it is ludicrous to consider countries such as South Korea, with its state funding of bids. It will fund those bids because it understands the tax revenues and economic multipliers. We need a far less siloed approach.

It should also remain a priority that any exports take into account where the equipment will be used. I am looking for some clarity on that, especially in the light of the recent Court of Appeal ruling, which found that the Government “made no concluded assessments of whether the Saudi-led coalition had committed violations of international humanitarian law in the past, during the Yemen conflict, and made no attempt to do so”.

There is no justification for exporting arms to countries that repeatedly and flagrantly violate international humanitarian law.

[Mr Peter Bone in the Chair]

The partnerships and collaborations involved in the combat air strategy will play an essential part in determining the UK’s place on the international stage in the immediate future. It is therefore essential that our defence policy remains in step with our European allies and our closest neighbours. I was pleased that a number of hon. Members made reference to that this afternoon.

The combat air strategy recognises the UK’s “unique network of capability collaborations” and pledges to “work quickly and openly with allies to build on or establish new partnerships to deliver future requirements.”
It is important that the Government make good on those intentions and follow through on the proposals for the combat air acquisition programme as an international collaborative programme with the UK as a prime partner.

Our interests must remain aligned with our European partners, our closest neighbours—even after Brexit. That is not just because of defence interests. It is also because, through building such collaborations and alliances, our research is far richer and far better. Being able to draw upon skills from across Europe means that we end up with a product that is far better than it would be if we were simply working on our own.

The hon. Member for Witney talked about the skills required for the Tempest programme and the importance of involving schools. As a former teacher, I agree 100%. We need to be in schools, and not just at secondary level. We need to be in primary schools. We need to be working with young people to make them aware of the sector and to help them to see the opportunities that the sector offers. In particular, we need to be trying to tap into a resource that we are not using enough: the females. We need to be targeting girls so that the aerospace sector has a far more balanced workforce. That is not important just because we want to see diversity and people getting on. It is important because different types of people bring different types of ideas and will look at things in different ways. We must do that.

The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed mentioned space. I had not actually considered the space implications, but she is quite right. As our understanding of space and our development of space vehicles increases, we need to consider how that is going to play out. I was very pleased when last year the Government committed £2 million to the development of a space port on the A’ Mhoine peninsula in Sutherland. There are real opportunities, not just in terms of our forays into space but also in terms of building up a skills hub around that.

The hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) made me think of space when he talked about the mothercraft. It took me back to my “Star Trek” days. We were left in space. I had not actually considered the space implications, but he is quite right. As our understanding of space and our development of space vehicles increases, we need to consider how that is going to play out. I was very pleased when last year the Government committed £2 million to the development of a space port on the A’ Mhoine peninsula in Sutherland. There are real opportunities, not just in terms of our forays into space but also in terms of building up a skills hub around that.

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Of course, any strategy will succeed only if it receives the full backing of those expected to carry it out. The strength of our armed forces absolutely relies upon the strength of our personnel. Frankly, as I said yesterday—I think the Minister was there for that debate—we need to do more to improve the welfare and treatment of our personnel, not just in the RAF but across all the armed forces. The Minister will know that the SNP has been pushing for an armed forces representative body that would allow them a proper say in how personnel are treated and their welfare, and would feed into Government policy. It would not allow for strike action—we can have a federation that does not allow that—but would allow us to consult and bring on board the personnel.

Our defence capability and longevity must be strengthened by proper investment and proper ambition. It was great to see the combat air strategy launched, but it should not need the hon. Members for Witney and for Stoke-on-Trent North to be pushing in order to move it forward. It should already be part of the Government’s programmes. There is a strong overlap in defence when we look at our European Union allies and the UK.
The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) talked about protecting, projecting and promoting, which is part of the document on the combat air strategy, and she is absolutely right. She also told us about the importance of the supply chain and pointed to the example of the part of the Typhoon wing made in her constituency, in Alnwick. She said that we are all connected to the defence industry, which is absolutely true.

The Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), said that we need to be united and need to spend more. The Opposition certainly agree with that. He said we need the adequate financial base for defence expenditure, and we would always try to support that.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies), who talked about the 100% Britishness of the Hawk aircraft. We are all very proud of it. Why can the Red Arrows not replace their current Hawks with new models, which would help to create the work that is so badly needed in the Brough order book? We want to see that continuity while we look for further orders, so I am glad that the hon. Gentleman made that point. We should not buy these products off the shelf; we should develop them 100% in the United Kingdom. Our sovereign capability is vital.

Our aerospace and defence sectors are truly world leading, and they are vital to our security and national prosperity—every hon. and right hon. Member who has spoken in the debate has agreed with that. The Opposition welcomed the publication of the combat air strategy last year, but we raised some concerns at the time that it might have been better to publish an overarching defence industrial strategy—some hon. and right hon. Members have referred to that—to give the wider industry the certainty that it requires. That is indeed one of the problems, is it not? We need that certainty and continuity, otherwise we might stand to lose the vital skills on which we depend.

The Opposition expected to see some development on the combat air strategy in the modernising defence programme report, but that turned out to be rather underwhelming at best, with many pages filled by photographs and material that summarises the current and past activities of the armed forces. This remains pertinent, because the Ministry of Defence recently entered into a $2 billion single-source agreement with Boeing for its E-7 Wedgetail, which we understand will replace the airborne warning and control system aircraft. The Government effectively excluded any alternatives from the outset, which we think is a real shame. I am sure the Minister will want to comment on that in his winding-up speech.

The new Secretary of State has used recent speeches at the Royal United Services Institute to talk up the possibility of buying British and has referred to the importance of defence to the broader prosperity agenda, which was something we have all reflected this afternoon. We hope to see concrete proposals that will put prosperity, as well as sovereign capability, at the heart of our procurement policy. I hope the Minister can update us on the Secretary of State’s agenda on that.

I welcome this week’s announcement that the F-35 aircraft have joined the fight against Daesh in their first operational missions, making use of their superior reconnaissance capabilities. We are currently in the process of obtaining 48 F-35Bs, some of which have already arrived, and they are all expected to be delivered by 2025. The Ministry of Defence has previously committed to purchasing 138 F-35 aircraft, but it has been rather tight-lipped about the 90 that it has not yet ordered. Can the Minister confirm that the UK will order all 138 F-35s? If that is the case, can he confirm the timelines for their delivery? Can he also confirm whether other variants of the F-35 are being considered, particularly given the reports suggesting that the RAF is quite keen on having some F-35As, which have a longer range than the B variant and which seem to be the preferred option for many of our allies?

Chapter 3 of the combat air strategy document is entitled “International by Design”. The strategy formally announced the Team Tempest project, which is looking at developing our next-generation combat air systems. Sweden has shown an interest in collaborating on this project. Meanwhile, France, Germany and now Spain are developing their own joint initiative. Given our close links with those European allies through NATO, the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force and common security and defence policy missions, what assessment has the Minister made of the separation of these two projects on our interoperability with our European allies?

Finally, an effective combat air strategy must ensure that the RAF is properly staffed. The strategic defence and security review target for full-time trained strength RAF personnel for 2020 is 31,750. The recent quarterly personnel statistics released in April demonstrate that we are currently more than 5% below that target. The figure is virtually the same as the one in January, so will the Minister concede that it is now highly unlikely that that commitment will be met by next year? Will he confirm how the Ministry of Defence is undertaking to improve recruitment in the RAF, and indeed across all services?

3.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I offer my thanks and congratulations to my hon. Friend for introducing this debate. I echo his opening comments about the recent crash of the German Eurofighter, and the sad loss of life. Our thoughts go out not only to the German people, but to the pilot’s family, at what must be an incredibly difficult time. We will take close notice of the reports that come out of that incident; my hon. Friend was absolutely right to say that we should notice of the reports that come out of that incident; my hon. Friend was absolutely right to say that we should not speculate at this stage, but we will seek to understand the issues that caused the crash and learn from them for the safety of our pilots.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing the debate, because he has shown a tremendous amount of personal enthusiasm and dedication on this issue. I know that because he writes to me quite regularly and asks to meet, and he rightly challenges us about it. He does that not only from a personal interest, but because he clearly cares passionately about the benefits it will bring for his own constituency, which I know he works incredibly hard to support. I, as a Member of Parliament, and the Government share that ambition and the commitment to ensuring that we continue to have a world-leading combat air sector.
We want to build on the United Kingdom’s excellent reputation, and on its excellence and innovation. That reputation has been underpinned by more than a century of significant investment by both the Government and the industry, but by 2018 it was clear that some important decisions were needed if the UK was to retain its position as a world leader in combat air, while retaining sovereign choice in how we deliver the future capabilities that the Royal Air Force will need.

At the heart of the Government’s response is the combat air strategy, which, as many hon. and right hon. Members have already said, was officially launched at the Farnborough International Air Show last year. It sets out an ambitious vision for the sector, with plans for driving a comprehensive approach across Government and our industrial base, together with international partnering in the future. The strategy provides a clear roadmap for the future, aligning national programmes and investment decisions to sustain a sector that is profoundly important to the UK’s economy—as my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, it accounts for around 85% of our defence exports over the past decade and directly supports 180,000 British jobs. At the heart of the strategy is the launch of the next-generation combat air acquisition programme, which will define and deliver the capabilities required when the Typhoon fighter leaves service.

The strategy also reaffirms the Government’s commitment to the future combat air system technology initiative, under which £1.9 billion was invested in demonstrator projects using the latest technology. More generally, the strategy highlights the clear need for profound transformational change in the way the Government and the industry jointly approach the combat air enterprise.

I will move on to some of the points that hon. and right hon. Members raised during the debate. I note what my hon. Friend said in his speech about the Franco-German project; I absolutely accept that there is no room for complacency, and I can personally reassure him that I am not complacent about it. I always wish our friends and allies the very best of success, and we will see how the move from fourth generation to sixth generation goes. We will always continue to work with allies on a host of different projects.

My hon. Friend was right to make the point, which I accept, that we should look at a better model for understanding the contribution that the defence industry makes to the United Kingdom. He described how the UK economy benefits from our investment in defence, and he mentioned some big figures. I gently encourage all Members to continue to have conversations, as I am sure they do already, with my colleagues in the Treasury about the difficulties that we sometimes find in the Treasury Green Book. I will leave that there for now.

I will come on to skills a little later, because I want to address some interesting points made by my hon. Friend. I took no offence whatever when he said that the national value framework not only describes options, but assesses which ones reach the right balance between prosperity, capability, affordability and, of course, international influence. I assure him that I will continue to put forward the message that this is an opportunity for us to keep UK skills and industry at the heart of the initiative.

My hon. Friend talked about STEM issues. Several right hon. and hon. Members have said that we need to attract younger people into the subjects that they will need to take part in projects such as this. As I go round industry, I get a sense that industry has woken up to that. A lot of industries are now determinedly engaging with primary schools and running competitions to get it into the minds of young people that this is an exciting opportunity for their future. When I was at BAE Systems in Lancashire it was interesting to see the training centre right next door. It benefits not only BAE Systems, but other industries across the north-west, and I hope we will see more of that sort of thing.

Carol Monaghan: For many years, we have had engagement events in which industry goes to schools, does some sort of bells-and-whistles project activity and goes again, but the impact has not been great. The kids love taking part, but there has not really been any knock-on effect. The outcomes are far better when relationships are built up over time. It is important for engagement to be not just about going in and back out, but about getting to know the young people over an extended period of time.

Stuart Andrew: I take that point completely, but I think the hon. Lady has a pessimistic view of what is happening. In the industries that I have visited I have seen a lot of new apprentices, and it has been encouraging to see female apprentices taking up the opportunities. I accept that we have a long way to go, but I get a sense that there is more of a commitment to work with schools through the years to encourage young people to take up such posts. When I visit factories, the most enjoyable part is meeting the apprentices, because they are full of enthusiasm and they recognise that they are taking part in a national endeavour to secure our nation’s future.

Jack Lopresti: My hon. Friend the Member for Witney talked about STEM issues. Several parts from other countries, and it is incumbent on the new Prime Minister to do exactly the same. The Chair of the Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), rightly said that it presents us with an opportunity to really push the issue and see this as a national endeavour, with senior cross-Government figures pushing the project forward and encouraging more international partners.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney talked about paragraph 38 in the strategy. I reassure him that the national value framework not only describes options, but assesses which ones reach the right balance between prosperity, capability, affordability and, of course, international influence. I assure him that I will continue to put forward the message that this is an opportunity for us to keep UK skills and industry at the heart of the initiative.

Stuart Andrew: I am always happy to visit my hon. Constituency visits my constituency a lot, but he does not have to keep writing to me before he comes. May I suggest that the next time he visits, he drops into Aerospace Bristol, an £18 million STEM learning centre that houses the last Concorde that flew? It has been heavily supported by local industry and local government, and it is really worth a look. It pays tribute to the past, but, crucially, it also inspires the next generation of engineers and scientists.

Carol Monaghan: I entirely agree. At the Farnborough International Air Show last year, I visited the BAE System stand, which had a robust STEM programme. There was a lot of activity there. If I may offer one bit of advice to the Minister, there is a real need to improve communication between the Department for Education and the Ministry of Defence, so that there is a clear understanding of what is being delivered and how that is being measured. That is a golden opportunity.
Carol Monaghan: I thank the Minister for allowing me to intervene once again. What he is talking about is indeed happening and we are starting to see things change. However, when I visit industries they often introduce me to the female engineer. If we are talking about “the female engineer”, we have problems. A female engineer should be so commonplace that there is no reason to introduce visiting dignitaries or MPs to such people.

Stuart Andrew: I completely take that point, but, as I say, I have seen a greater number of females in the industry. There are not enough, and I accept that there is more to be done, but I do get a sense that things are going in the right direction. However, we should never be complacent, and the hon. Lady makes a valid point. It is something I continue to press with industry.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) is not here, but I was quite amused by the fact that she was mistaken for the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). When I was first elected to this House, I was constantly mistaken for my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson). In fact, he sent me a text message once to say, “Thank you for doing such a brilliant speech for me on HS2 yesterday”, because he got the credit for it. So I know that such mistakes can happen.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North pointed out that we have representatives from Brough here today, who have been brilliant advocates of the work that they do in the factories there. I am acutely aware of the issues that they face and the uncertainty for the people who work there. I hope that I have demonstrated my commitment to try to get the exports to Kuwait. I have been there on a couple of occasions and have met them here. I constantly meet BAE Systems to talk about the programme and will continue to do so because the matter is of great concern to them.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North also pointed out that the issue is not only about platforms and that we should also talk about the skills, designers and engineers that we need and can really help us. She talked about the four national players currently in the Tempest and what the SME involvement is. Again, I am absolutely passionate that the SME involvement needs to be extensive. I was pleased to open a conference where about 150 SMEs came along to learn about the opportunities and what we are looking for. Since then, the conversations with at least 100 of the SMEs have continued.

Just this week, I chaired a meeting with the four national players and MOD representatives; I pushed the point that we need to make sure that we get the very best out of those SMEs. From what I can see, that is where a lot of the exciting technology and development is happening, and they can sometimes be more responsive in delivering the technology that we need for the platform. I assure her that I will continue to make that point in any meeting that I have.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) talked about the national shipbuilding strategy and how we learn lessons from that. There has been some controversy about it and I have had some challenging debates and sessions in front of the Select Committee, but I also had a good meeting with many representatives of the trade unions for shipbuilding and ship repair. There is a lot in its report that we can examine and transfer into the strategy.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East rightly talked about the leadership election and the opportunities it presents. I welcome the debate on defence spending. Even before I was in this position I firmly believe that defence spending needed to increase and be appropriate to the risk that we face. At the end of the day, the first duty of any Government of this country is to protect the nation and our people. I will certainly encourage both candidates to increase the funding. I want to see that.

I was concerned to hear my right hon. Friend mention that some say that we should lower our expenditure and expectations; he will be glad to know that I have not heard that in the Department. If I did, I suppose I would coin the phrase, “No, no, no.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) secured a debate not long ago on a similar topic and I know how important it is to his constituents—that was one of the first visits I did in this position. He rightly talked about the Treasury models and I look forward to him lobbying Treasury Ministers. He also said, as did other hon. Members, that the strategy is not just about a new platform in Tempest, but about keeping Typhoon current and upgrading and modernising it throughout its life, so there is an easy transition into Tempest, or whatever that may be. That is at the heart of the strategy to ensure that we are maximising those opportunities.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) was absolutely right that the comprehensive spending review will be significant. The Department is already preparing for that to make the point that we need the funding that we have been talking about. She also talked about European partners and concern about what leaving the European Union might mean. I gently point out that a lot of our collaboration with our European neighbours happens bilaterally or through NATO. I see no reason why our leaving the European Union would bring an end to that collaboration. We will continue to do it through NATO and bilaterally, and we will look to partner nations across the globe to ensure that we continue to maximise it.

The hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) is indeed my constituent and I am happy to represent him in this House—I am sure he is not so happy about that.

Fabian Hamilton: We are trying to do something about it.

Stuart Andrew: Yes, I know.

I heard the hon. Gentleman’s point about the replacement for the Red Arrows, but that is not a priority; there are a lot of pressures on our budget and we have to ensure that we continue some of the projects that we already have, of which he mentioned several. That said, we are not giving up on the export opportunities for Hawk and we are working closely and regularly with BAE Systems to make that happen, as I said.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned Wedgetail, about which there has been a lot of debate. We did not shut out competitors because, frankly, there were none. There was no other proven capability that could provide the same level that we needed and that Wedgetail provides. We could have done a longer competition, but that would have delayed the acquisition of that critical platform. The old platform has been letting us down for a long time.
The one that we have is used by the Australians and has a proven capability that meets our needs. That is why we decided to go for it directly.

The hon. Gentleman rightly talked about prosperity. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) produced that wonderful report. We are already working to many of his recommendations and we will continue to explore some of his other points. A key thing that we are doing is working closely with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy through the defence growth partnership and looking to create the joint economic hub, which will get the information we need as to the true value of defence to the UK economy.

The hon. Member for Leeds North East also asked about the F-35s. I confirm that we will stick to the figure of 138. I cannot indicate at this stage which variants; we will make that assessment nearer the time. I hope that answers his point.

I will return to our progress in implementing the strategy since its launch with regard to the four areas I have already touched on. We are looking at the long-term replacement of Typhoon. We delivered the strategic outline case at the end of last year and we are working hard to complete the outline business case by the end of 2020.

As all hon. Members know, £2 billion of future investment has been approved. Importantly, since the announcement 1,000 people have taken up new jobs to look at that area, and that figure will be 1,800 by the end of the year. Among the industry partners that we are directly in contact with, that includes 400 jobs at BAE Systems and 260 jobs at Leonardo all over the country. As well as securing those jobs, we are trying to demonstrate the significant technological advances that have been made, including Rolls-Royce’s demonstration of an advanced embedded electrical starter-generator in a military engine, which allows the engine to be started through electrical power rather than high-pressure air. That could allow the removal of several mechanical components in next-generation engines and could equally apply to civil aero engines, as hon. Members said.

As I said, we continue to work with the SME community and we are looking at skills. I am pleased to say that this year, Leonardo will recruit a record 104 graduates and 300 apprentices. The majority of those will be involved in the Team Tempest project and activities. Similarly, BAE Systems is training a record 3,000 young people around the UK; this year, it is planning for about 700 apprentices and 300 graduates. Again, that can be only good news.

I will not dwell on the matter much further because I am conscious that I have spoken for some time, but I hope that the launch of the combat air strategy demonstrates the Government’s commitment to looking at the future and ensuring that we keep that seamless skillset in our country. We will continue to update the House regularly as we make more progress. I confirm that detailed updates will be provided on the opening day of the Royal International Air Tattoo at RAF Fairford on 19 July, and that the Secretary of State will lay a detailed statement before the House, which I hope will provide more information.

I conclude on a positive note: the strength of our combat air sector is confirmed by our recent export successes, including the sale of £6 billion-worth of Typhoons and Hawks to Qatar, and the £500 million contract that we were awarded for the avionic and aircraft component repair work for the UK’s F-35 hub in north Wales—again, creating a centre of excellence.

We have had a useful and wide-ranging debate, and I am glad to have been able to show our commitment and inform the House of the progress that has been made. The Government firmly believe that the strategy will ensure not only that the RAF retains its world-leading capability into the middle of the 21st century and beyond, but that our military aerospace sector retains its rightful position at the cutting edge of technology development across the globe.

3.29 pm

Robert Courts: I thank the Minister for his full and comprehensive answer. One of the things I love about debates such as this is that no matter how much I rack my brain to try to cover every point, I never do. Every hon. Member brings to the table something new and interesting that I have not managed to cover, and I always learn something. I am very grateful to all hon. Members who have taken part, and to the Minister for his response.

I echo the words of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), who said that the Government have done a wonderful thing. The spirit of our remarks is of celebration and—I hope the Minister will forgive me—gently pushing for a bit more. That is where the enthusiasm takes over. The Government did a wonderful thing in listening to a debate secured by Back Benchers from both sides of the House, responding to it and producing a detailed plan, which, as the Minister said, has led to the employment of 1,000 people in new jobs, rising to 1,800 by the end of the year. It has created something from nothing, and that is a great example of the Government listening to Parliament. I thank the Minister, the Department and everybody who has worked very hard on it for all their work.

That does not mean that we will not keep pushing for more; I make no such promise. I ask that the Minister consider some of the broader issues that we have mentioned today, particularly those relating to the broader defence industrial strategy. We are talking about a platform, vital though it is. The Minister is right about the vision that it gives us for the future, but perhaps it should be wider.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North for emphasising that SMEs must be deeply embedded in the strategy, and to my hon. Friend for rightly mentioning the historical context. We must consider whether we will be fighting as part of a NATO alliance with allies, or whether we will be fighting alone. We always hope that we will be fighting with allies in a NATO context but the Falklands is the obvious example of a time when we were not, for a reason we could not foresee. If history teaches us one thing, it is that whatever comes around the corner probably will not be the thing that we are expecting. My hon. Friend was right to point that out.

My hon. Friend was also right to talk about space, which we have not dealt with, but with which the Royal Air Force and the Ministry of Defence are increasingly engaged. It is of increasing importance.

I am also grateful to my hon. Friend for rightly raising the issue of whether we should have a manned platform or not. My personal view is that we are not
quite there yet. For a number of reasons. For issues of morality and accountably, people are probably not quite ready for us to take men and women out of platforms altogether. There are also questions about technology: who we work with and whether we can afford to allow that high level of technology out of the country. We are not quite there yet, but she is quite right that that will be more and more important. I think she said that we should not put all our effort into that. I think the Minister will agree that Tempest includes an unmanned element—it is an airframe that can be flown manned or unmanned—and I believe that the Minister and the combat air strategy are correct in taking that approach.

I am always humbled to speak in the presence of the Chair of the Defence Committee. He is right to argue, as he always does, for the financial base. I think his target is 2.5%—

Dr Julian Lewis: Three.

Robert Courts: Sorry, it is 3%—that is even better. We all agree about that. My right hon. Friend’s overarching point is that we cannot expect the industrial base to be there in the way that it has been in the past. In the past, the Government have been able to allow the industry to create the incredible machines that the Air Force has used and exported, but because of the extraordinary complexity and cost, the Government now have a greater role in identifying what we will need and why. He is right that more Government input will be required.

My hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) echoed the point about increased funding—I quite agree. I am also grateful to him for emphasising that the Hawk is the last all-British aircraft. Perhaps it will not be the last; let us hope not. It is a flying British ambassador that does wonders for our international influence and our standing as a country every time it is seen at an air show.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) for emphasising both the multiplier effect of jobs in the supply chain, and primary school involvement. She is absolutely right that the younger that people get interested, the better. In her intervention on the Minister, she put her finger on something: in the past, industry or the military went into the school and everyone had a great day, enjoyed themselves and remembered it, but the next week they moved on to something else. I am conscious that it is no longer like that—not at Carterton Community College, which has a partnership with Brize Norton. Perhaps one of my letters will follow to the Minister, who might like to come and see the interplay between the base, the industry on the base and the local school, where they are starting to build almost a supply chain of engaged, technically aware pupils. That is very much what we aim to do at Carterton, and I am grateful to the hon. Lady for putting her finger on that.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for mentioning the F-35 point. I did not go into detail on that because it is slightly away from the topic, but he has given me an idea. I might apply for something on that issue in the near future.

That brings me to the Minister, and again I am grateful to him for everything he said. He gave me another idea: I might apply for a similar debate, but I will work with the House authorities to see if I can get a Treasury Minister to answer instead of him. That would be valuable. I have issued an invitation to him to come and see Carterton, which I know he would enjoy. I am grateful to him for agreeing in principle that more money should be spent on defence. I emphasise that, and I make that plea again. We have gone as low as we can, given the world we face and the complexity of our armed forces’ requirements. We need more money in defence, but—this is not aimed at the Minister—we must reassess the way in which its contribution to the entire country is measured. I thank you, Mr Bone, and everyone who took part in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered Combat Air Strategy progress and next steps.

3.37 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 1 July 2019

[Mr Charles Walker in the Chair]

Online Homophobia

4.30 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 239444 relating to online homophobia.

I will begin by outlining the case put by Bobby Norris, who started this petition and is in the Public Gallery. It was an honour and a joy to meet him earlier this afternoon, and to get a real sense of his excitement that Parliament has responded by scheduling this debate to discuss Bobby’s Bill. Strictly speaking, we are some way off a Bill, but I am sure the Minister will be listening closely. The main thing I took from our conversation—apart from being slightly star-struck on meeting him—was how real, hurtful and profoundly unpleasant is the abuse that he and others receive. We should all be determined to stamp it out wherever it occurs.

Bobby’s petition, entitled “Make online homophobia a specific criminal offence”, reads:

“As a gay man I find it devastating how members of the LGBT community are still subjected to homophobic abuse online. Just because I am on TV I don’t think that makes it acceptable to be sent homophobic messages/comments on social media platforms. Nobody should have to receive these comments. I won’t go into detail as to the various names I have been called, but this should not be acceptable and can have an impact on people’s mental health and has certainly helped in making my anxiety and low self-esteem worse by receiving them.”

It has been signed by more than 152,000 people, so it has immense public support, arising from the fantastic publicity campaign by Bobby, “The Only Way is Essex” and my hon. Friend. The Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), who has worked with Bobby and spoke passionately, eloquently and powerfully on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights last week in a debate in the Chamber.

We were all moved by her speech, and as a long-term supporter of Bobby and his work, I can honestly say that I am passionate about this cause. Bobby’s Bill is one of the things that I have been passionate about for a long time, and I believe it is time that Parliament responded to this Bill.

When I was researching this speech, I thought it would be useful to seek some local advice. I spoke to Anglia Ruskin University’s LGBT+ society, which said:

“As a society, and an LGBT+ community at ARU, we were shocked to learn online homophobia isn’t considered a specific offence. British society often praises itself for its support of LGBT+ people which, while often fair, comes with the assumption that the fight for LGBT+ rights has been won. However, those congratulations are hollow if we aren’t being protected properly by the laws of this society. The LGBT+ society at ARU works hard to offer safe spaces for LGBT+ students across campus, but we feel powerless to help students when they know they can be subject to online homophobia, something we can’t necessarily help with. We need legislation to ensure LGBT+ people are protected in all walks of life, in all activities of life.”

The society put it very well.

Online homophobia and other kinds of online abuse are a relatively new phenomenon, with the rise of omnipresent tech and the fact that most of us communicate digitally—in some cases almost constantly. Social media allows us to speak to people we know and people we have never met at the click of a button. Regulation of the online space is a contentious issue, and we have not got to grips with it. Some tech giants are struggling to find ways of monitoring their users’ behaviour. The number of moderators working for some is both impressive and dismaying. It is much worse for people going through that process.

There are many examples of that. I will leave it to others to talk more about the injustices of homophobic abuse. There are people in the Chamber today who have powerful personal experiences to share. We all agree that it has no place in our society and must be stamped out.

Online anti-LGBT+ hate crime is defined as any crime taking place online that is targeted at a person because of hostility or prejudice based on their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. That could include abuse or even outing someone without their consent. That injustice is not going away. Stonewall statistics tell us that the number of lesbian, gay and bisexual people who have experienced a hate crime or incident in the past year because of their sexual orientation has risen by 78%, from 9% in 2013 to 16% in 2017. One in 10 LGBT people—10%—have experienced homophobic, biphobic or transphobic abuse online directed towards them personally in the last month. People are understandably shocked by that appalling figure and by the fact that no specific offence is being committed, outside the very fragmented and complicated laws that are used in the offline world.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I warmly congratulate those who set up this petition and everyone who signed it. I do not know how I would have coped as a young man coming out and dealing with my sexuality in a world in which social media existed. It is much worse for people going through that now. Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the main issues is that people can send online abuse anonymously?

If we are to make this an offence—I think we should—do we not have to deal with that first? People using social media platforms must be identifiable if we are to take action.

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I will come on to that point, but I absolutely agree with him.

When I was researching this speech, I thought it would be useful to seek some local advice. I spoke to Anglia Ruskin University’s LGBT+ society, which said:

“As a society, and an LGBT+ community at ARU, we were shocked to learn online homophobia isn’t considered a specific offence. British society often praises itself for its support of LGBT+ people which, while often fair, comes with the assumption that the fight for LGBT+ rights has been won. However, those congratulations are hollow if we aren’t being protected properly by the laws of this society. The LGBT+ society at ARU works hard to offer safe spaces for LGBT+ students across campus, but we feel powerless to help students when they know they can be subject to online homophobia, something we can’t necessarily help with. We need legislation to ensure LGBT+ people are protected in all walks of life, in all activities of life.”

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Online homophobia and other kinds of online abuse are a relatively new phenomenon, with the rise of omnipresent tech and the fact that most of us communicate digitally—in some cases almost constantly. Social media allows us to speak to people we know and people we have never met at the click of a button. Regulation of the online space is a contentious issue, and we have not got to grips with it. Some tech giants are struggling to find ways of monitoring their users’ behaviour. The number of moderators working for some is both impressive and dismaying. Can we ever really check everything that is said? Frankly, do we want to? That is the conundrum that we face.

The laws governing hate speech and online abuse are drawn from various pieces of legislation, much of which was written before the widespread internet use and online communications that we enjoy today. Hate speech, including homophobia, is outlawed under five or more Acts. The Malicious Communications Act 1988 dictates that it is an offence to send an electronic communication in any form that is indecent or grossly offensive, conveys a threat, or is false, with intent to cause distress or anxiety to the recipient. The Communications Act 2003 updates that slightly, confirming that it is an offence to use any
public electronic communications network, such as Twitter or Facebook, to send messages that are grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character. The Protection from Harassment Act 1997 contains a number of other offences such as harassment, and harassment when someone fears violence. However, the quantity of legislation means that it is sometimes unclear to victims where they stand. It is based on a communications environment that no longer exists, as some of it dates back some 30 years. Although it references online communication, it does not anticipate the all-encompassing nature of the digital world that we live in today, and thus the impact that online abuse can have as part of an online environment in which many people spend much of their lives, rather than simply the email inboxes of the 1990s.

Galop, the LGBT+ anti-violence charity, explained:

“Online life is so enmeshed in our day-to-day lives that increasingly the online and offline world are not separate. Sometimes online hate speech is a part of wider pattern of harassment and abuse that is happening in other areas of our life, for example a neighbour that is targeting you in your home and online”.

That is particularly damaging, because for some people—school students for example—it can all too easily feel that there is no escape from abuse if it is happening on the streets or in the playground, and online too.

The Government’s response to the petition highlighted their request to the Law Commission to review the current law on abusive and offensive online communications. The Law Commission produced its scoping report in November 2018, which concluded that abusive online communications are theoretically criminalised to the same or even a greater extent than equivalent offline offending. However, there is considerable scope for reform. It said that many of the applicable offences do not adequately reflect the nature of some of the offending behaviour in the online environment, and the degree of harm it can cause.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend recognise that the Law Commission itself pointed out that only 3% of malicious communication offences are ever prosecuted, so there is a lot of impunity and a weakness of enforcement that must also be taken into account when we are thinking about how we can counter this issue?

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is of course absolutely right. Enforcement, which I will come on to, is a key issue.

The Law Commission also said that “practical and cultural barriers mean that not all harmful online conduct is pursued in terms of criminal law enforcement to the same extent that it might be in an offline context.”

It said that, more generally, criminal offences could be improved so that they are clearer and target serious harm and criminality more effectively. It recognises that the large number of overlapping offences can cause confusion. It says that ambiguous terms such as “gross offensiveness”, “obscenity” and “indecency” do not provide the required clarity for prosecutors. The commission calls for reforms such as reform and consolidation of existing criminal laws dealing with offensive and abusive communications online; a specific review considering how the law can more effectively protect victims who are subject to a campaign of online harassment; and a review of how effectively the criminal law protects personal privacy online. Such reforms could serve to clarify victims’ rights and make prosecutions more likely to succeed.

Campaign groups have also made recommendations. Stonewall recommends that online platforms should communicate clearly to all online users that anti-LGBT abuse is unacceptable, and advertise clear privacy, safety and reporting mechanisms; should deal with all incidents of anti-LGBT abuse seriously and swiftly and keep people informed about the progress and outcome in respect of reported incidents, including what actions have been taken and why; and should work with the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to develop more effective responses to anti-LGBT hate online, in consultation with LGBT people and organisations.

The Government are currently consulting on their “Online Harms” White Paper, and I look forward to the roundtable hosted by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport this Wednesday, because this is an important issue that cannot be left while the Government prevaricate on our place in Europe. The White Paper confirms:

“For illegal harms, it is also important to make sure that criminal law applies online in the same way as it applies offline.”

These are big questions and they raise big challenges about how social media platforms in general should be regulated, about anonymity and about enforcement. The bullies should be unmasked, and the tech platforms should be doing that themselves, not waiting to be forced. Unmasking will also allow more effective enforcement.

In my view, the White Paper does not look sufficiently at ways to tackle enforcement. That is a wider issue—it seems to me, from my brief time in Parliament, that it comes up so often. We spend hours legislating and considering policy but then do not provide the resources or systems for implementation and enforcement, so too often, laws are observed by the law-abiding but are largely ignored by those who are not—a pointless and frustrating situation.

There is an even bigger question as we begin to understand the age of surveillance capitalism. You do not have to read far through Shoshana Zuboff’s astonishing work on this subject to get a distinct feeling of unease. The White Paper fails to acknowledge that online abuse exists within a system that is run by capital-building algorithms, which push controversial or divisive content for increased clicks, and has a business model based on personal advertising but also maximum engagement regardless of content. That means that, too often, commercial online platforms are content to allow toxic environments, as the content that is pushed hardest is that which is divisive because it provokes extremely strong reactions.

In an excellent article in The Guardian last February entitled “Fiction is outperforming reality”, Paul Lewis exposed the way in which algorithms promote fake news on YouTube. The promotion of this kind of content contributes to an environment in which problematic language and ideas are completely normalised, meaning that there is a degree of desensitisation. We must row back from that and take online homophobia for what it is—hate speech that must not be accepted.

I have strayed a little from the specifics of this petition into the wider debate; I will conclude by returning to the narrower subject. As chair of the all-party parliamentary
group on data analytics, I meet many people who are rightly enthused by the potential of big data to be a power for good, but the sheer pace of change, often out of public sight, means that we have a responsibility also to ask serious questions about how the new technologies are being used and what effect, unintended or not, they may be having on individuals and on our society. We do not need to develop new ways for people to be unpleasant to one another—we have enough of that already.

I am not one who instinctively wants to ban or regulate; I would rather that people behaved well and decently to one another. There will always be differences of opinion, and that is a good thing. My plea, as we move towards Bobby’s law, is for people just to be nicer to one another. Is it really that hard? But for those who cannot do that, we need laws to protect ourselves from them, and my very simple message to the tech companies and the Minister is that we now need to move swiftly to make it clear that online homophobia, like all other hate, has no place in a civilised society. The one difference between the online and the offline worlds is that, offline, we do not terminate people’s accounts, but in the online world, we should. The message should be, “If you can’t behave, you’re out,” and in my view, we will be all the better for it.

4.46 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker.

I may not be gay, but I have an intense feeling of sympathy with the human rights of individuals, and what this petition does is strike a blow for the human rights of individuals. We have heard the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) describe the enormous scale of this problem, and we have heard about some of the areas in which it occurs. I thank him for exposing the full extent of this activity.

The petition suggests that there should be a separate offence for homophobia, and I can see the logic of that and why people might want it, but this is part of a much bigger picture, and we need to see it in the context of that bigger picture to be able to decide what to do about it.

There have been references already to the work of the Law Commission in looking at this matter, and I think we are expecting a report from the Law Commission in 2020 on hate crime and how it has developed. I have a lot of time for the work of the Law Commission; it is the rigidity in how people look at the sexual orientation of individuals, is in some ways a bit misleading. It is absolutely essential that we stamp out the rigidity in how people look at the sexual orientation of individuals, and we do that both offline and online.

There is something special, though, about online abuse—it is so utterly cowardly. It is so utterly cowardly that the people who perpetrate it do not need to disclose, half the time, who they are or what their views are. We can see the point that they want to make, and it is exactly the same point that we see in other areas where hate crime is endemic—examples include Islamophobia and antisemitism. I have spent quite a bit of my career looking at what is happening in those two areas.

I, for one, welcome the creation of the national online hate crime hub, because it has the potential to bring in specialist police officers who can be used to really root this problem out. The problem with online activities is that we need specialists in order to be able to get to the bottom of it. Bringing in specialist police officers and staff is a good way to take this forward.

The hon. Member for Cambridge mentioned the important aspect of the mental health effect of all of this on those who suffer from hate crimes. That is a very serious problem, and unless we focus on the experience of those who suffer these things, we will miss a great point about what we should aim to achieve.

I have said many times in this Chamber that, given my interest in human rights, I am proud to be a member of the Council of Europe. It will be no surprise to hon. Members that the Council is fully supportive of the actions we want to take. It stands up for the human rights of every individual. It is important to make that point this week, because, only last week, the Council made the fundamental mistake of readmitting Russia. If we look at the way that gay people have been treated in Chechnya, we see the hatred with which they have been singled out in that part of the country. At the Council, we tabled 230 amendments, which may have been a bit excessive, but it made our point forcefully. I was pleased that one of our amendments called for an apology for what has gone on in Chechnya and for a cessation of those activities.

The Council has also taken on board how to deal with this problem more generally. It has a questionnaire on existing measures and is highlighting examples of good practice—if anyone is interested, they can see it online. I suppose it is ironic that the internet can facilitate the good practice that exposes the bad practice, but that is the nature of things.

We are dealing with challenges to individual’s privacy, including whether they want to come out or not. That is a decision for them to make. The more we can do to promote a good check on online activities, to focus on this issue, to ensure that all of us understand what is happening and to take action against it, the healthier we will be.

I have taken the time that you allotted me at the start of the debate, Mr Walker, I am pleased to have done so, because this is an important subject, not only for gay people but for all of us, and discussing it allows us to show our common humanity with others and our support for the protection of their human rights.

4.53 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, which does not happen very often. I look forward to the rest of this timely debate. I pay tribute to Bobby Norris, whose petition to make online homophobia a specific criminal offence we are debating today. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for the thoughtful, sensitive and effective way in which he introduced our deliberations. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response. We have high hopes that the Government will listen and take rapid action to deal with these issues.

Bobby Norris came to see me to talk about the level of hate that he perceived LGBT+ people were receiving on social media. He felt rightly that this was detrimental
to their health and wellbeing and that not enough was being done to stem the tide of homophobic hatred being generated online. He asked me what might be done to bring the Government’s attention to this growing problem and to take effective action to stop it. I suggested that he launch this petition as a first step towards highlighting this serious issue.

The petition has attracted over 152,000 signatures, which is why we are having this timely debate. That demonstrates that our petition system is working well. It is a relatively new part of our old Parliament, but it connects us to the modern world and demonstrates that Parliament can be responsive to the issues that people worry about outside of our Westminster debates.

Bobby has now found himself the target of turbo-charged online hate—a sign of the angry and hate-filled times that we live in—for daring to put his head above the parapet and take a public stand against this damaging growth in online homophobic abuse. He is strong enough to deal with it, but the point is that he should not have to, and nor should anyone else. The unwritten threat that someone who sticks their head above the parapet or who has an opinion about something will be dealt with online in the way Bobby Norris is being now does not cast a good light on the health of our democracy.

Those who argue that one should be able, in the interest of freedom of speech, to say anything online somehow miss the bad effect that this abuse, which is lurking and ready to be uncurled and thrown at somebody, has on our democracy. The fact that this is happening shows that, although the development of social media has many benefits, which we can all name, it has also brought significant downsides. Social media has unleashed a level of hatred and harassment that shames our society and threatens to undermine and dampen our democracy.

Hatred and abuse generated on social media are doing real damage to the mental health and wellbeing of hundreds of thousands of people who are targeted by trolls. Undoubtedly, hatred and abuse spill out from the virtual world into the real world. If we are to call ourselves a civilised and good society, these things must not be allowed to flourish online or offline with impunity. We need to change our laws to protect against these new harms much more effectively. I look forward to the Minister’s response. I am looking for urgent action from the Government to try to get a grip on this worrying situation. I am sure she will have sympathy aplenty, but we really need determined and rapid action.

This debate is timely, being held 51 years after homosexuality was first partially decriminalised in the UK, 50 years after the Stonewall riots in New York, which signalled the beginning of the fight for LGBT liberation worldwide, and in the aftermath of the WorldPride march in New York this weekend, which drew 3 million people—it looked like quite a party, and I was sorry to have missed it. However, our debate also comes in the week of the huge Pride march that will bring London to a joyful halt on Saturday, and I certainly have no intention of missing that party.

LGBT liberation and the fight for respect and equal treatment in law have undoubtedly come a very long way in the UK over the past 30 years, and we should not underestimate the progress we have made. As the first openly lesbian Government Minister, and only the second out lesbian ever elected to the House of Commons, I am proud to have played my part in the many gains made under the last Labour Government, including granting equal status in law to LGBT+ people and their relationships; repealing the odious section 28, which stigmatised LGBT+ people at school; and banning all discrimination in the provision of goods and services on grounds of sexual orientation.

Those progressive advances have undoubtedly made the lives of many LGBT+ people immeasurably better. However, although we have come a long way as a community in a relatively short time, these angry political times have created a backlash. There has been a spike in violence and hate crime against the LGBT+ community in recent years, and online abuse seems now to be spilling over into real-life violence. Homophobic and transphobic hate crimes have doubled in the past five years, yet according to the LGBT equal rights campaign group Stonewall, four in five hate crimes go unreported by the victims. Its comprehensive survey “LGBT in Britain” has revealed that one in 10 LGBT people has had online abuse directed at them personally in the past month, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge pointed out, with that figure rising to one in four for trans people, who are especially at the frontline and vulnerable at the moment.

The figures are brought to life when we think of the actual victims of the increases in violence. In London a couple of weeks ago, two gay women were beaten and robbed on a bus by five teenagers for refusing to kiss each other on demand. In Southampton, two women kissing in the street were injured by an object thrown from a passing car. In Liverpool, two men were stabbed and seriously hurt in a homophobic knife attack; one of the people held for that attack is 12 years old. In Birmingham, there have been vocal anti-LGBT demonstrations outside two primary schools, mischaracterising and protesting the No Outsiders curriculum, which teaches respect for diverse families and seeks to end the stigmatising of LGBT people in school. Utterly false and outrageous claims have been made that its lessons are trying to turn children gay, and the Government have not reacted firmly enough to prevent such claims.

Our values of respect for diversity in society are now being tested, and we must not be found wanting in our defence of them. As my hon. Friend said, the current criminal law rightly offers legal protection to all who experience direct homophobic physical violence. In fact, both the Public Order Act 1986 and the Criminal Justice Act 2003 offer extra opportunities for the courts to increase sentences in such cases of assault if they believe that hatred of LGBT people was an aggravating feature of the crime. It is right that that is an aggravating offence in law, because it demonstrates our determination to prevent the kind of hate speech and activity that would cause our society to lose its civilisation.

The laws on online abuse are far less coherent and far less effective when it comes to being used successfully. My hon. Friend pointed out some of the practical difficulties and the fragmented nature of the law, which is inadequate and in urgent need of an update. Inadequate as it is, however, it would still benefit from being enforced more seriously by the police, who all too often tell victims to avoid going online. Such victim blaming is not an adequate response to the hate and trolling that
many people experience online. Expecting people who are being bullied to exclude themselves from the digital world will simply isolate and punish them further.

**Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend; although I am new to this place, I know that she has led the way for many years in fighting for the rights of LGBT people in our country. I stand with her every single step of the way.

Online homophobia is growing across the UK, even in my constituency. Given the ability of criminals to access and hack cyber-security measures, does my hon. Friend agree that resources such as specialist IT services must be increased and apportioned effectively to tackle this form of hate crime?

**Ms Eagle:** I thank my hon. Friend for her kind words. She is right that we need properly financed enforcement, as well as ensuring that we can make our laws more user-friendly and easier to understand and enforce for the authorities responsible for making decisions.

The two provisions most often used to protect against online abuse, hatred and threats are the Malicious Communications Act 1989 and section 127 of the Communications Act 2003; the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, which was originally introduced to deal with stalking offences, is also available for use in more extreme cases. All those statutes were passed by Parliament before the emergence of social media, which has fundamentally reshaped the way in which we engage and communicate as a society. The world wide web—as you may remember, Mr Walker—was invented only in 1989, the iPhone did not exist until 2007, and Facebook was created only in 2004, and we have not yet reconsidered our laws in that context.

So much has been changed by the arrival of the world wide web and dominant tech giants such as Apple, Google and Facebook that the Government must now urgently update our laws to make them fit for purpose. I know that the Government are aware of that need, because their second response to the petition points out that they have asked the Law Commission to consider specific reform in this area. They admit that the current level of online abuse against vulnerable groups, especially women, is completely unacceptable, yet there seems to be little urgency, if I may say so, about the action that they are prepared to take to counter that abuse. A Law Commission review is welcome, but it has never been and can never be an active or effective way to take rapid action against a growing threat.

As a recent Law Commission report points out, the law has not kept pace with the rapidly changing environment online. Some 96% of 16 to 24-year-olds are now using social media, but only 3% of malicious communications offences, online or offline, are ever prosecuted, even though there is demonstrable harm to the victims, the seriousness of which we are only just beginning to understand. The report outlines the harms that online abuse can cause, including “psychological effects, such as depression and anxiety; emotional harms, such as...shame, loneliness and distress; physiological harms, including self-harm” and, tragically, suicide; “exclusion from public online space” and all the potential that it provides; and “economic harms”. The report also concludes, as we all should, that hate crime harms society.

I am afraid that the Government’s response to the Law Commission’s report typifies their response to the entire issue: they have asked for a further review. We expect that to happen in 2020, but I would have thought that if the Government were really determined, they could come up much earlier than that with more concrete ways of dealing with this ever-present problem. I certainly hope that the Minister can give us a bit more confidence that the issue is getting a higher priority than it appears to have at the moment, and that her reply will make us happy.

In the White Paper on online harms that was published in April, the Government rightly characterised the new online environment as resembling the wild west. After all, it is the world of alternative facts and casual fascism, which has been allowed to fester, and it is high time that there were tough rules and regulations enforcable in law. Completely spurious anti-vaccination propaganda spreads, doing real damage to real lives offline, and mad conspiracy theories also spread, unchecked by truth and reality. For example, large numbers of people believe the world is run by lizards. It is hard to believe that we went through the Enlightenment if that kind of approach to truth and facts is going to be allowed to fester online.

We ought to be worried about the effect that this is having on people’s ability to judge facts and truth, without which we will not have a democracy deserving of the name.

Terrorist propaganda and the online exploitation of children are also proliferating. After the Christchurch terrorist attack, 300,000 of the 1.5 million copies of the live streaming of murder that were uploaded to the internet went undetected by the automated systems that were attempting to take them down, making that horrendous event available to all who wanted to view it.

Can the Minister therefore assure us that we can expect more determined and urgent action to enforce decency and standards online? Is she prepared to increase the punishments for abuse, so that the harm caused is better represented in the sanctions available to the courts? What action can we expect, including on the financing of adequate enforcement, to ensure that enforcement is much more effective? Currently, it is laughably inadequate. When can we expect to move from endless press releases and the commissioning of more reviews to concrete action that minimises online harms rather than tolerating them and expecting victims to put up with them? Will the Minister support moves such as those we have seen in Austria to end online anonymity and remove the digital mask behind which so many perpetrators of abuse hide? It is time to get serious about the trail of damage that this behaviour causes, and it is also time to introduce updated, effective and streamlined laws to counter this menace.

5.12 pm

**Vera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure, Mr Walker, to serve under your chairmanship.

I am happy to contribute today and to represent the 159 constituents from Bath who signed this petition, but I also want to pay tribute to those who initiated the petition and the many thousands who have signed it.

It is shameful that a debate about online homophobic abuse is necessary in 2019. Intolerance anywhere is unacceptable, but it is especially despicable when it is directed at people we should support and protect. Insulting those who already face so much discrimination is vile and we should do our utmost to stamp it out.
We have made real progress in tackling homophobia, and I am proud to be a representative of the party that championed the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. However, there is so much more that we need to do. Homophobic abuse, intimidation, threats, harassment, assault and bullying are hate crimes, both in the physical world and online. Social media is full of such content, which has gone unpunished.

Legislation changes slowly, while abuse and bullying are very adaptable and move quickly. While I was working on the Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019 last year, this became painfully obvious; our law is designed to govern real world spaces, and our security forces struggle to enforce it online.

Banning upskirting was a positive step, bringing an abusive online practice into both the public and parliamentary spotlight. In the case of upskirting, there was a specific gap in the law that needed to be filled. Homophobic abuse is more complex. Creating new legislation is not always the best way to protect people. My party calls for an extension of the definition of “aggravated offences” to cover hate crimes motivated not only by racial or religious hatred but by hostility based on gender, sexual orientation and disability. This change would protect victims, sending a clear message that homophobic abuse is a hate crime.

The online aspect of this abuse is harder to solve, and I am not sure that creating a new offence is what is needed; on this issue, we might have a debate and possibly disagree. We must make our existing law fit for 2019 and ensure that our security forces can handle online crimes.

This is a question of capacity, training, and education. Police forces and prosecutors are under increasing pressure from central Government to do more with less resources. That simply is not good enough. If we want our security forces to be responsive and to protect people across the spectrum, we cannot handcuff them to ever-shrinking budgets. We need an online crime agency, an organisation with the training and resources to investigate online abuse and harassment. The Government must also invest in understanding internet safety, and locate the gaps between enforcement and regulation.

Upholding the right to freedom of expression does not mean a laissez-faire approach. Bullying, abuse and harassment that prevents people from expressing themselves freely cannot be tolerated. As many of my colleagues here are already aware, and have agreed in this debate, online harassment often falls into the grey area between expressing a view and inciting harm. We must educate everyone about where the boundaries lie, and users must be empowered to report comments or content that they are concerned about.

We have fallen behind when it comes to protecting our LGBTQ+ community from online harassment. That is a symptom of the Government’s failure to understand and resource cyber security adequately, to engage with the new problems of the digital age, and to educate in a way that protects tolerance and progressive values. And, yes, absolutely—why cannot we all be a little bit nicer to, and more tolerant of, each other?

The days of normalising homophobia are behind us, but we must work collaboratively across the House to ensure that they do not return. We must do everything, in the House and indeed everywhere in our society, to stamp out homophobic abuse online.

Luke Pollard
(Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Walker.

It was a real privilege to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) introduce this debate with such clarity and passion. At risk of “fanboying” on both sides of my place, it is good to see Bobby Norris here today—the leadership he has given on this issue has been incredible—and to see my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle); to witness the leadership she has shown in this debate was also a privilege. So I am between two incredible people here.

Hate is on the rise; we all know that in our communities and it is no different in Plymouth, which I represent. We need to recognise that hate is on the rise and we also need to properly identify the reasons and causes, and deal with them. However, we also need to reflect that the vast majority of people in our society are not in control of laws; they do not get to write the legislation they will be governed by. However, we can do so here, and that is the real opportunity presented by this petition, because it speaks to lived experience, not only of the 150,000 people who signed it but of countless others who are victims of abuse all the time.

I have said this in a number of different debates and every time I get emails from people saying, “Oh! I didn’t know.” I would like to think that it is because I am so epically fabulous that I do not need to out myself all the time, but frequently I do. I am very proud to be gay, and I say that because I am Plymouth’s first ever out MP, which means something in a community in which we have not always been out and proud; instead, we have often been hidden at the periphery of society and written out of the very history that we have contributed to. LGBT people have not always been at the forefront of our public life, especially in a naval city such as Plymouth, but that is changing, which is a good thing. That is why I feel very passionately about this issue.

It is also important that we talk about people not as one homogenous blob of LGBT people but as individuals who all have different experiences: in their family lives; in their working lives; in their societies; and even at different times of the day. When people talk about LGBT+ equality—I know there are lots of them here today—we often just say LGBT. However, if we break down what “LGBT” means, we can see different lived experiences for all those different communities online. By and large the debate around LGBT is so much driven by people such as me—the “G's in “LGBT”—that we do not frequently pick up the “Ls” in public debate, which is not only a recognition of the hatred towards gay people and lesbians that exists, but a reminder that in many cases women are marginalised in these debates anyway, so they get narrower and narrower. In gay culture, it is fashionable sometimes to diminish the Bs, to say that bisexuals have not made their proper decision yet, and that is something within our own community—and sometimes within our community online—that we must challenge. We also know there is an awful lot of hate towards those folks who are trans. We need to look at the lived experience of all those people.

As I frequently do before these debates, I posted on my Facebook page inviting the good folks of Plymouth to send me their views about online homophobia, and I was pleasantly surprised. It might be because those who
like a Labour MP’s page are not some of the biggest bigots in the world, but the stories that came back were really interesting. I was expecting some abuse myself, a repetition of some of that which came when I spoke in a debate in the main Chamber about LGBT-inclusive children’s books, including the fantastic “And Tango Makes Three”, about two gay penguins that adopt a baby penguin. For those who have not read it, it is well worth a trip to the local library. I was speaking about age-appropriate sex and relationships education and the abuse that came back was direct. I will not mention all the words I was called, but they included faggot, queer, fag and bitch. I will not drop the C-bomb but that was used as well.

One reason LGBT people take on insults and make them their own is the frequency with which we hear them. That, and the hurt the insults cause both off and online is one reason why we sometimes make the words our own, to take the strength away from the people who use them. But we should not have to absorb the insults and suck them up.

We must also recognise that the language that is frequently used in our political debate can be equally disappointing. The use of “bum boys” for instance, by one of the contenders to be Prime Minister merits, I think, extra reflection in trying to get something better at the end of this.

We must strive for better, and that is why, when I woke up this morning and checked my Twitter, I was overjoyed to see Olly Alexander’s speech yesterday at Glastonbury. He is a fantastic LGBT icon, and he used a moment in his set to talk about the importance of equality. Today we are talking about online homophobia, and it is really important to do that because it is a specific type of hate that we see online, but Olly Alexander spoke about the importance of the LGBT community not just standing with other people who are LGBT but against racism, sexism and ableism. He spoke about us embracing it all, and that matters, because when you break down LGBT into the different bits someone is not just gay in isolation; they can have many other characteristics and that is where the research from Stonewall that a number of colleagues briefly mentioned really highlights what is going on.

When asked by Stonewall whether they had been victims or targets of homophobic, biphobic or transphobic abuse online in the last month, 8% of women and 10% of men said they had been, but the figure for non-binary people—those who identify as neither a man nor a woman—was 26%. One in four 18 to 24-year-olds had been personally targeted in the last month, which shows that the problem is perhaps more acute in younger age groups than in older ones. A third of young people had been targeted online in that way, as had one in five black, Asian and minority ethnic LGBT people, compared with only one in 10 white LGBT people. I use those statistics not to say that one group is worth more than the other, but to show how prevalent online hate can be and how someone can be abused for being black and gay or for being disabled and gay. Hate begets more hate begets more hate in the online pile-ons we frequently see.

How algorithms work has been mentioned, and directing more and more traffic to those posts that generate the most controversy and interest directly contributes to the perpetuation of hate because it drives an economic value for hate. We are talking about the criminalisation of online hate, but we should also talk about its economics. Although I am hopeful that the Minister will listen to the petition and the speeches today, we need the Government to get toughly with all foul of online media.

At the moment, it seems appropriate to roll out Nick Clegg every now and then to apologise for Facebook, but we need to recognise that online hate drives traffic, traffic is the basis of advertising and advertising is the basis of the economic model of our social media companies. The more traffic that can be driven, the more money that can be made, and that is where hate drives money, and profit. We need to not be blind to that in this debate, because the online social media companies have a role in this as well. They cannot just leave the reports for algorithms to deal with; they must take responsibility and, importantly, take the reports seriously. All too frequently, when people report online abuse it is not acted upon by the people at the other end. I do not know where my report goes when I press “report”, whether it goes to an algorithm, or to someone in Dublin or San Francisco, or just goes the road in Old Street. Where I want it to go is to a person who looks at the piece of abuse and at what its impact could be on the individual. All that matters.

Last week, something gave me cause to hope: my fantastic friend and the co-chair of Labour’s LGBT group, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), organised a fantastic showing in Portcullis House of trans photographs—young trans kids with their parents—from the British Film Institute’s Flare exhibition, and I had the opportunity to meet many of the young trans people. We meet a lot of inspiring people in this place, but I have been more uplifted by their experience than by anything else. I spoke to some of them afterwards and asked, in relation to this upcoming debate, whether they had been the victim of online abuse. One trans kid looked at me and said, “Yes, of course. Every day. Every single day. I carry around an ‘insult machine’—his phone—“and I get a notification when someone wants to hate me”.

That was really worrying, because it was true. I spoke to another person, who said, “Why would my friends do that?” That showed that in some cases people live free from abuse, but that is not everyone’s lived experience. It really lifted my heart and showed where we could be if we took the right steps.

What Britain does matters, what we do in this place matters and what the Minister says matters; whether we agree with the introduction of homophobia and abuse against other protected characteristics as a discrete criminal offence, the language around this debate also matters. I was really pleased to hear the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) speak about his support for human rights, because that is effectively what we are talking about. We can categorise and sub-categorise ourselves all we want, but we are talking about the protection of individuals so that they can live their lives and fulfil their potential, based on who they are. That is very, very powerful and we need to do it.

The distinction between online and offline that has been mentioned by a number of Members is important. One of the tests I give to people, especially those folks who sometimes accidentally fall foul of online abuse is: “Would you say it in a pub? Would you just rock up to someone else’s conversation in a pub and shout ‘faggot’?” It is a good test, and well worth trying. If someone did
It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Walker, and to see a safer place that we want to see. LGBT people can feel safe, included and free to be in our society, because Britain is not yet a place where the past 25 years. We now need the law to catch up with law-abiding citizens; they are the people my hon. that we are talking about. Those people are not normal, persistent bullies: people who abuse, make death threats and might accidentally fall foul of using language that is not talking about those people in this debate. It is really or clumsily chosen or typed quickly. However, we are online, but sometimes their words are inappropriately who do not want to hurt their neighbours or people vast majority of people are good, law-abiding citizens they are bullying. That is why bullies do it. someone, a person can create an effect on the person they would not do it. Bullying does work: by bullying is a bit like an economic driver—if it did not work who have been bullied and have felt the impact. Bullying does work: by bullying someone, a person can create an effect on the person they are bullying. That is why bullies do it.

In some cases, people fall into it accidentally. The vast majority of people are good, law-abiding citizens who do not want to hurt their neighbours or people online, but sometimes their words are inappropriately or clumsily chosen or typed quickly. However, we are not talking about those people in this debate. It is really important to make a distinction between those who might accidentally fall foul of using language that is not appropriate or timely anymore, and those who are persistent bullies: people who abuse, make death threats or rape threats online, and talk about outing people inappropriately or revenge porn. That is the type of stuff that we are talking about. Those people are not normal, law-abiding citizens; they are the people who my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge spoke about, and who we must do something about.

We have come so far in terms of LGBT equality in the past 25 years. We now need the law to catch up with some of those welcome, positive advances and changes in our society, because Britain is not yet a place where LGBT people can feel safe, included and free to be themselves. I am hopeful that the Minister will give us positive news, as a step towards making Britain the safer place that we want to see.

5.30 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Walker, and to follow so many eloquent speeches. I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for introducing the debate and for the way in which they placed it. I hope Bobby will understand—he is no longer in the Public Gallery, I think—that, as an honorary Essex boy, having studied at the University of Essex for three years, I commend him for all the work he has done.

As has been mentioned, the intrinsic nature of homophobia—whether in the real world or the unreal world—is bullying. It is a bully that does not show its face, and is often ignorant of the reality and the impact of that type of discourse. Plenty of people engage in this type of discourse, which is based on a falsehood, evidenced by hate, which allows them a veneer of respectability; there are those of us who believe we see it even in this place on a regular basis.

Therefore, why should the digital age be less full of hate than the previous age? Since the dawn of time, the LGBT community has faced unfounded and pernicious discrimination. As an openly gay man, I am very much aware of it; I was born into a world in which homosexuality was illegal. I hope the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) will forgive me if I mention that the legal systems of the United Kingdom meant that, in Scotland, homosexuality was not decriminalised until 1980—when I was nine years old—and that in Northern Ireland, it was not decriminalised until 1982.

Notions of who we should be, and the dictates of what we are meant to conform to, are so often what underlines hate. The transfer of hate from the real world to the unreal world should come as no surprise. This debate is taking place on 1 July, so we have come to the end of Pride celebrations in June specifically—I know a Pride march is coming up in London at the end of the week. That should remind us, especially those of us in the LGBT community, about the real nature of Pride, which is activism and solidarity. We must now seek to transfer that traditional method of activism and solidarity to the unreal world, where we really need to challenge these things.

This is a situation in which neither politics, religion nor society is free. As I mentioned during a debate on the Floor of the House last week, I am especially grateful that the Bishops’ Conference of Scotland has signed up to the Time for Inclusive Education campaign. It has stated that no child in state-funded Catholic schools in Scotland should leave school having been bullied because they are gay, whether in the real world or—as I have said—the unreal world. I use the terminology “unreal world” because online is not real; the words are real, and the hate is real, but it is a world that is controlled in a very different way.

We need to be clear that online homophobia crosses over to the political sphere—a place in which it has always found fertile ground, whether on the far right or the extreme far left. Earlier, we heard mention of the LGBTQ community in Russia, which suffers more from the onslaught of online hate transferring into physical hate. We also heard about Chechnya, and we can only imagine the trauma caused to the LGBT community there. However, let us not assume that social or liberal democracy is free from homophobia; how many political debates in this place have been infused by it, across both the right and the left? No political party, including my own, can claim a clear conscience about the history of homophobia. As of today, I am sure I will start to get a hell of a lot more of it; I actually do not get that much,
but I believe that is about to change. I have actually told my team who deal with online communications for my office to expect it, because it is something they have never really had to deal with.

I am especially grateful to my 256 constituents in West Dunbartonshire who signed the petition. I also note the actions—I have to say this, because a lot of the elements mentioned today are devolved—of the Scottish Government and Members of the Scottish Parliament in light of the Lord Bracadale review of hate crime legislation in Scotland, which reported in May 2018. It has been noted that crimes against LGBTQ people in Scotland have risen, and, in an ever-changing world, there is no place for complacency. The Scottish Government’s consultation on hate crime aims to ensure that the legislation is fit for the 21st century and that Scotland, like the rest of the UK, has laws that remain focused on protecting its citizens from all hate crime, in either the real or the unreal world and across myriad platforms.

We have heard mention of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and so on, but what we have not heard about is mass data storage. Large conglomerates own the physical data, strewn across the globe; some would think of Google and so on, but, more importantly, there are organisations such as Amazon, which owns that data through Amazon Web Services, commonly known as AWS. It is hate data, and there can be no doubt that such private companies are aware of the online hate that they physically own. They must be challenged about their custodianship of such hate-filled data. To exclude them from this debate is to ignore the word “online” in the title of the petition, such hate-filled data. To exclude them from this debate is to ignore how hate-filled data dominates our lives today.

Before I conclude, I will pay tribute to some of my colleagues who cannot join us today, who come from what is proportionately the largest LGBT group of parliamentarians in the House of Commons. In this very room, my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) has articulated, boldly and publicly, the vile and pernicious abuse that she receives on a regular basis, both for being lesbian and for being a woman. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) receives pernicious, continuous online abuse because he happens to be a gay man. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) highlighted, when race is added into the equation, the numbers go up further.

It is interesting that social media can be so antisocial. What is good about social media is also what is bad about social media. A lot of things have fuelled this hostile environment for the LGBT+ community. Many in the community have said to me, “It feels like we are going back to section 28 days, with all the stuff around the schools and the protests.” Brexit has fuelled hate in all areas, but particularly for LGBT+ people. The Government should take responsibility for the delay on the gender recognition Bill, which has left a huge void. That delay was fuelled by misconceptions, misinterpretations, lies and hate, and it has created a hostile environment that has meant that hate crime has gone up by almost 400% in some areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey made some excellent points, and I hope the Minister will address them almost as if they were a tick-list, because we will go through them and hold the Government to account. We need more than warm words from the Government. Too often we have a lot of warm words, but not a lot of action. I plead for the Minister not to announce any new consultations. I am up to my eyeballs in Government consultations. We have had 29,952 consultations since 2010. We need to start changing the law and changing legislation. We know that hate crime exists and that it is happening, so we need to change things.

The Home Affairs Committee report states:

“Most legal provisions in this field predate the era of mass social media use and some predate the internet itself. The Government should review the entire legislative framework governing online hate speech, harassment and extremism and ensure that the law is up to date.”

That is the Government’s responsibility, and it will make a huge difference to people’s lives.

There is a common understanding now that the old mantra, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me”, is not very helpful and is wrong, because words do hurt. That mantra is no longer valid. We should no longer accept bad language and bad words, because they do hurt and they are powerful. Wars are started by words. Words can be used for good and they can be used for evil.

Gandhi had a quote. He said:
“Watch your thoughts, they become words; watch your words, they become actions; watch your actions, they become habits”. All throughout the excellent speeches today, we have heard that people are forming habits of being hateful and aggressive online when they would not do that face to face with someone. We have to ensure we say legislatively that that is wrong.

Labour has already committed to bringing the law on LGBT+ hate crimes in line with hate crimes based on race or faith, making them an aggravated offence. That is really important. If a person’s sexuality has been a factor in how they have been treated or in their being attacked, what has happened needs to be classified as an aggravated offence and have harsher sentencing. We need to ensure that we change discrimination laws so that things can be done on multiple grounds. Labour has already committed to that. We do not need an Olympics of oppression; we just have to understand the intersectionalities of hate and to ensure that equality is equality and applies to everyone, so that we all fight for each other’s equality.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge mentioned unmasking the bullies. It is important that we hold social media providers to account in unmasking the bullies, because it can be done—we can trace them back. Not only should they be unmasked, but we should be closing down all their social media platforms, whether that is Twitter, Facebook or Instagram—I am sure there are more I do not know of, because the platforms increase in number every day. Once someone is hateful or vindictive in any way online, that is it: the platform should be taken away from them. We could save someone’s mental health and save people’s lives. That is the difference we should be making in this House.

Luke Pollard: The list of social media platforms that my hon. Friend gave should also include online dating apps. The abuse that is sometimes given on apps such as Grindr, especially to those with disabilities, can be painful. In many cases, people have opened their hearts up to look for someone special, so the abuse can sting even more.

Dawn Butler: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I absolutely agree. Sometimes people deliberately go on those platforms and pretend to be something else. I think they call it catfishing.


Dawn Butler: I have to keep up. People deliberately go on those apps just to get people to open up, and then they bring them down and abuse them. Who wants to live in a world with that kind of cruelty, and where we are not actively doing something to close it down?

Many people in this arena have paved the way over the past 25 or 50 years to ensure that we are living in an inclusive society. I hate the terminology “tolerant”; I do not want to be “tolerated” as a black woman—I want to be accepted for who I am. I do not want us to “tolerate” people for their sexuality; I want us just to accept them. Many organisations are involved, including Stonewall, DIVA and LGBT+ Labour, as well as lots of people, including Lady Phyll. New York Pride was just this weekend. Ruth Hunt has just stepped down from Stonewall and has done amazing work, as have Linda Riley, Sarah Garrett, Pride and UK Black Pride. The Albert Kennedy Trust looks after people who have been kicked out of their homes and removed from their families just because of who they love. The trust gives them a safe place to be and live.

I will end on this point. If anyone is looking for something to do this weekend and they want an environment where they can surround themselves with happiness, love, diversity, smiles, a lot of dancing and a lot of drinking, if I can say that—there is a lot of drinking—they should join me, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey and all the others who will be on the Pride march in London. If anyone ever needs to understand why we should just let people be, Pride is one of those places where people can just live and understand what that means.

5.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I start by thanking Bobby Norris for raising the important issue of online homophobia. I thank the more than 152,000 people who have signed the petition so far. I understand that it is still open.

I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for opening the debate in such a thoughtful way and I thank all colleagues who have contributed this afternoon. They have given different accounts, some very personal, of their own experience or that of their constituents of online homophobia. The hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) spoke movingly about Bobby and others putting their heads above the parapet. I feel honour-bound to reflect on the fact that she herself has done the same. I thank her sincerely for all that she has done in the pioneering fashion that she has described.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) rightly talked about the diversity within the phrase “LGBT+” to describe a wealth of experiences, a richness of life experiences, some happy, some not, but I thank him for making that very important point. As has been mentioned, this debate is timely because we are on the cusp of one of the world’s largest Pride events this weekend in London, and last week we remembered that it is 50 years since the Stonewall riots, an event that sparked a global advancement of LGBT+ rights around the world. We have come a long way in those 50 years, but these debates and discussions today show how much further we must go.

To be clear—I do not think it is necessary, but I want it on the record—homophobia, online or offline, is wrong. It is a prejudice all too often accompanied by behaviour that has no place in a modern, vibrant and inclusive Britain. Unfortunately, homophobia rears its ugly head, including, as we have heard today, online, where it can be particularly pernicious and pervasive. The hon. Members for Cambridge and for Wallasey set out some stark statistics, including the terrible one highlighted in the Stonewall research that showed one in 10 people surveyed had experienced online homophobic, biphobic or transphobic abuse or behaviour in the past month. I have seen and been appalled by such abuse. Indeed, Mr Norris shared on his Instagram account on 15 June a particularly disgusting message that he received. I will not dignify either the messenger or the message by

[ DAWN BUTLER ]
reading it into the record of our democracy, but if Mr Norris and others face such hateful language, with all the terrible repercussions that it can have for someone, particularly if they are in a vulnerable place at that point in their life or perhaps do not have the network of support that we would all wish for loved ones, it can have, as we have heard from the hon. Member for Wallasey, very serious consequences.

The internet, as in life off the internet, should be a place where all people feel free to socialise, share information, do business, share photos, and enjoy the massive benefits of the online space. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) brought an international perspective to the debate with his work for the Council of Europe. He talked about the treatment of people within our community, our neighbourhoods and our society, who may love someone of the same sex or gender and about other manifestations of LGBT inclusivity, and rightly pointed out the dire experiences that people overseas, particularly in places such as Russia, can face. I am sure we are all with him in agreeing that we would like other countries such as Russia to follow our lead.

For the purposes of the debate I shall set out the current legislation, given that the petition asks us to make online homophobia a specific criminal offence. There are already criminal offences to cover some of the horrific forms of abuse that we have heard about. For example, there are harassment offences in the Public Order Act 1986 and the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. There are offences covering “grossly offensive” material in the Malicious Communications Act 1988 and the Communications Act 2003. There is also an offence of “stirring up” hatred based on sexual orientation in the Public Order Act 1986. Where such crimes are motivated by, or demonstrate, hostility towards a victim based on sexual orientation, or perceived sexual orientation, they are hate crimes. The hate crime legislation, which also covers race, religion, disability, and transgender identity, allows for increased sentences for those convicted of such an offence.

However, I absolutely understand the concerns that have been raised today, not least the fair observation that all of the legislation that I have cited was passed before the internet, as we know it today, came into being. I suspect that were we to have this debate in 10 years’ time, the internet would be very different from today. That is precisely why the Government asked the Law Commission to take forward two important reviews. The first review looks at the current legislation on abusive and offensive online communications to ensure that laws are up to date with technology. The Government announced the commencement of phase two of the Law Commission’s work last week. It will build on the analysis in its scoping report, including considering the potential for improving existing communications offences, and whether the law might more effectively address co-ordinated harassment by groups of people.

Ms Angela Eagle: The Law Commission does important work in trying to bring together sometimes fragmented laws and updating them, but the review is not due to be published until 2020. There is a tradition of Law Commission reports sitting gathering dust on shelves and never being acted on, so will the Minister say something about the Government’s determination, if such there is, to act on the Law Commission’s report? Will she consider bringing forward its work so that we can be in a position to legislate faster than the current timetable allows?

Victoria Atkins: I absolutely understand the hon. Lady’s impatience with the timetable. I think I am correct in saying that she was in government herself when some of the legislation we are looking at came into force. I remember the 1997 Act coming into force when I was a practitioner trying to make sure that that law was applied in the criminal courts. I appreciate that my answer will not satisfy the people who have contributed to the petition, but we have to get this matter right. We have asked the Law Commission to look at the issue because it is a very complicated area of law. The hon. Lady will know—this draws me on to the second review—about the debate on whether misogyny should be listed as a hate crime. In this Chamber almost a year ago I was open to the concept or the idea that that form of hatred, particularly, as has been said, the intersectionality with homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, should be looked at carefully to ensure there are no unintended consequences of any legislation that we bring to this House in future. We must get it right. As has been noted in the debate, the ways in which people of ill intent target the people to whom they wish to be hateful shows that we need to be considered, thoughtful and careful in the way in which we approach it.

The second review that we are conducting is a full review of hate crime legislation. As I have said, we are looking at the coverage and approach of the current hate crime laws, including whether misogyny should form part of it, to ensure that the legislation continues to protect the existing characteristics towards but also whether we need to update the law in this really important area, given all the factors that have been raised in the debate, to ensure that the law reflects the lived experience of our fellow residents.

The petition raises questions not only about our criminal laws, but about how we stay safe and are kept safe online, which is one of the biggest debates of our time. The challenges presented by the internet—the wild west, as it has been described—along with the freedoms that it brings about have to be carefully balanced. We are clear that we want the United Kingdom to be the safest place in the world for everybody to be online. That is why the Government published the “Online Harms” White Paper in April. Through it, we plan to make technology companies more responsible for their users’ safety, including through a new statutory duty of care, which will be overseen by an independent regulator. The White Paper sets out plans to hold companies to account for tackling a comprehensive set of online harms, from which we will expect technology companies to take reasonable steps to protect their users.

Geraint Davies in the Chair: We have said that technology companies must do more, and they need not wait for the legislation following the White Paper to do so. The platforms must have clear and accessible terms and conditions about what is and is not acceptable behaviour, and they need to enforce them in a fair and consistent manner.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Other than the platforms, what about those who own the data and own the servers?
Victoria Atkins: That is a very interesting point. The hon. Gentleman will recall that we recently introduced the Data Protection Act 2018, bringing into force the GDPR rules of Europe. Worldwide, Governments are now much more mindful about data. However, this is a fast developing area, and one which I will ask the Security Minister and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to look into, as part of their consideration of the consultation as a whole.

Reports to the police, which I will come on to in a little while, were rightly mentioned, but I am mindful that not everyone wants to involve the police. If someone receives a hateful tweet or Instagram message, they may not want to involve the police for a host of reasons. That is why it is critical that tech companies have proper measures in place to clear up their own backyard. Many platforms have been making progress across a whole range of harms for which the Home Office has responsibility, but frankly it is not enough. That is why we introduced the White Paper.

Colleagues have understandably raised anonymity, which is something that we considered carefully as the White Paper was being drafted. If people feel strongly about the anonymity of users, I ask them to contribute, if they have not already, to the consultation on the White Paper. It closes at midnight tonight, and it will be interesting to see the results.

Ms Angela Eagle: Can the Minister take a view? I certainly believe that we should get rid of anonymity online. Rather than have me respond to a consultation, surely she can take such a declaration on the Floor of the Chamber, and add it to the total that will be counted at one minute past twelve tonight.

Victoria Atkins: I do not pretend to know how the consultation responses are counted; it may well be a dreaded algorithm. I know that officials will look carefully at the Hansard report of the debate. If the hon. Lady cannot contribute online, certainly Members’ views can be added to the result of the consultation. [Interruption.] A number of arms are going up in the Chamber, for the benefit of Hansard.

I understand the points that have been made about the need for action now, as well as in future. That is why we have set out, under the hate crime action plan, a number of commitments that the Government are taking forward that will support a robust criminal justice response for those who feel able to seek the help of the police, or who find themselves in a situation where others call the police on their behalf. I am very struck by the recent horrific attacks in London, Merseyside and Southampton that others have mentioned. The police are doing all that they can to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Of course, I always encourage anyone who feels able to report their experiences to the police to do so, partly to ensure that they get the right support. There are many excellent support and advice centres for victims of homophobic incidents, particularly the charity Galop, with which the Government work closely. However, I take the point about the reaction of the police when someone is able to report an incident to them. That is why we are funding a police online hate crime hub to improve the police response to hate crime. We are raising awareness of hate crime through a public awareness campaign, which people may have seen last autumn and again this spring.

Ruth Jones: I understand that the Government employ experts, but may I specifically request that the Minister looks at the IT side of things? Cyber-security is really important to us in tackling such crimes. Will the Minister give a specific pledge about IT specialists as well?

Victoria Atkins: Yes, I am very happy to do so. We are funding the police online hate crime hub, which is an expert police team that helps forces across the country to respond to hate crime cases effectively. We are also working with the police to ensure that that support reaches the areas that need it, because I appreciate that some forces may need to improve their performance. Indeed, the police inspectorate recently inspected some police forces. Some already do bespoke training and upskill experts in their own forces. Gwent has been held up as a strong example of that.

We need to ensure in our awareness campaign that members of the public understand, first of all, what hate crime is, the forms it can take and, as has been mentioned, that the use of certain words and language may well be incredibly offensive and abusive to people. It is about having that understanding of one’s own conduct as well. We are pleased to support a number of community projects focused on tackling LGBT+ hate crimes, including working with Barnardo’s, Stop Hate UK and the football initiative Kick It Out. We continue to take that and other work forward, working closely with the Government Equalities Office and a range of stakeholders, including Galop and Stonewall.

I conclude by reiterating the Government’s unwavering support in the fight against homophobia in all its forms. No one should have to face abuse, discrimination or harassment based on who they love. The Government are committed to eradicating bigotry and abuse, and I think that the House agrees with the plea of the hon. Member for Cambridge for us to be civilised in our debates. The sketch writers may have a field day tomorrow with us all agreeing that we should be nicer to one another, but I think—[Interruption.] There seems to be disagreement across the Chamber.

Ms Angela Eagle: Obviously we should all be nicer to one another, but the plain fact is that a lot of people are having their mental health badly affected because there are some very nasty people out there. That can be solved only by taking it much more seriously and much more urgently than I am afraid the Minister seems to be indicating that the Government are going to.

Victoria Atkins: I simply do not accept that. I was trying to end on a collegiate note, precisely because of the experiences that have been reiterated and addressed in the debate. I simply do not accept that I am not taking the matter seriously. I was simply agreeing with the hon. Member for Cambridge on how we should use our language, and that trying to be decent and civilised in our interactions will go some way towards making it clear to those who do not use decent and civilised language and behaviour that that is simply unacceptable. I hope that that is a point on which we can all agree.

6.9 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I thank all hon. Members who spoke in the debate. It has been constructive, and we have had positive contributions from all the major parties in the Chamber.
There are reasons to be optimistic. As I was preparing my speech this afternoon, I looked out of my office window and saw the rainbow flag flying above the Treasury. A few weeks ago, we had a marvellous Pride event in Cambridge. I was heartened by a number of speakers’ comments about the action that is being taken around the world at the moment—the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) talked about the Council of Europe.

In conclusion, I echo the frustrations that my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) expressed. I recollect the fine words from the Government in the discussions on the Data Protection Act 2018. Opposition Members are, however, frustrated that the Government do not seem able to move as quickly as the tech industry does, and the technology keeps changing. It is hard—no one disputes that—but the real harm being done out there at the moment cannot be underestimated. I am afraid we cannot continue to move at this measured pace; we need stronger action, and to move more quickly. To return to the petitioners and to Bobby, who raised the issue of online homophobia in the first place, we need Bobby’s Bill sooner rather than later.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,
That this House has considered e-petition 239444 relating to online homophobia.

6.11 pm
Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 2 July 2019

[ANDREW ROSINDELL in the Chair]

Acquired Brain Injury

9.30 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered acquired brain injury.

You might have noticed, Mr Rosindell, that we have considered this matter once or twice already over the past year or two, but today we are looking at some specific elements of acquired brain injury. As all right hon. and hon. Members will know, brain injury can relate to so many parts of Government: the Ministry of Defence, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education, the Ministry of Justice, the Home Office and so on. Today we have the Health Minister before us, so I am keen to focus on health-related issues.

I know that many right hon. and hon. Members will have been approached by the Headway charity, clinicians who work in their area, patients or carers of people who have suffered a brain injury, and will want to make a contribution, so I do not intend to speak at great length. I am passionately conscious of the fact that, since I first became involved in this issue in Parliament three years ago, I have met so many amazing people—not only clinicians and people who work in the charity sector, but patients who have had brain injuries and spoken about what that experience is like. It is so important to hear that experience directly from individuals.

One particularly poignant aspect of brain injury is that in the vast majority of cases it is completely invisible. Yesterday, I met Tom Hutton, who is here—I know we are not meant to refer to the Public Gallery, Mr Rosindell, but I have already and have got away with it. He was training on his bike for an Ironman a few years ago and had a collision with a small lorry. He was in an induced coma for a week. There is not a mark on his head. No one who saw him at work or in the street, including a Department for Work and Pensions assessor, would have the faintest idea that he had had a brain injury, or an injury of any kind.

The fascinating thing he spoke to me about is that he has to talk to himself all the time. One symptom of brain injury is phenomenal fatigue, and if the sufferer does not see the fatigue coming, they can experience phenomenal depression, or dysphoria, as it is called.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend not only on securing this debate, but on his fantastic campaigning work in this area. On the symptoms being invisible, Departments, particularly the Department for Work and Pensions, cannot pick up precisely how such injuries affect day-to-day life, and that needs to be improved.

Chris Bryant: Yes. The all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury—I see that two of the vice-chairs are in the Chamber—has been campaigning to ensure that everyone who does any kind of assessment for the Department for Work and Pensions, whether for personal independence payments, the employment and support allowance, or any other benefit, has a full training in acquired brain injury, so that they understand the variable nature of the condition.

One element of the personality change that may come about is that somebody with a brain injury might be desperate to please the person in front of them, so they might want to give what they think is the “correct answer” to the question being asked by the official. That can give a misleading idea of what that individual’s abilities are.

I have not asked Tom whether it is all right to say all this today—I see that he is nodding, so it is fine. When the Duracell battery inside someone’s head is running low, they talk to themselves to try to re-energise it, but that uses even more energy. That can lead to a vicious cycle: further depression and anxiety makes it more difficult to recharge the battery, in turn making it more difficult to get better.

There are others who have had much more dramatic and traumatic injuries, perhaps where something has penetrated the skull. However, in the vast majority of cases, the injury will be inside the brain. A fundamental part of what we have to address is how the mind and the personality sit inside the brain. Right hon. and hon. Members might have seen the television series “MotherFatherSon”, which deals with someone who has had a massive aneurysm and then a stroke. Lots of things in the programme are not entirely accurate, but many families and individuals have to cope with the very real element of personality change. I met a wonderful woman three months ago told me that she wished that her old self would come back. She could remember what her old self was like, but it is not the person she now is. She just does not know how to recreate that personality inside herself. Again, it is this thing of talking to yourself all the time.

If there has been impairment of the executive functions due to a brain injury to the frontal lobes, particularly in teenagers or as the young brain is still developing, it can lead to all sorts of other problems in terms of employability, and being able to engage with the wider world and their family. Sometimes people share far too much information; sometimes they are far too timid about being able to share information.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): On that point about sharing, as I told the Chamber in the debate on 9 May, my wife suffered from a meningioma. As I think the hon. Gentleman mentioned, a certain fretfulness can come into the character. On sharing, perhaps it is because I live in such a remote area, but I am surprised those who have come through the treatment are not encouraged more to share their pre-operative and post-operative experience with people who are suffering or are about to have a medical intervention, because it would give them great courage and help.

Chris Bryant: Yes, that is true. Because of the pattern of brain injuries across the country, it may be difficult for people to gather with people of a similar age and background. Lots of people with brain injuries arising from road traffic accidents are quite young—in their teens or early 20s. Sometimes they get put into support groups with people in their 60s or 70s. That is not an
impossible combination, but sometimes it is not the most natural grouping for those with a much longer life expectancy.

The most difficult element for a lot of people is the significant impairment in their ability to speak and communicate. Speech therapists are an essential part of the mix in bringing people back to a degree of independent living after a significant event. One worry across the whole of the UK is the shortage of people working in this field, who sometimes do not feel as valued in the team as they might. We need to ensure that speech and language therapy is still available for some time after someone has had their immediate intervention.

One of the most common things that people tell me is that they are accused of being drunk, when in fact they have difficulty speaking properly because they have had a brain injury, not because they are a bad person. They feel the sense of stigma that attaches to not being able to speak as clearly as they might have been able to before their brain injury.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions that people can have the appearance of being drunk. My 15-year-old adopted son’s mum drank heavily while she was pregnant with him, which is where he acquired his brain injury. The most recent research suggests that every year tens of thousands of children are born in this country with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder; it is a spectrum, as the description implies. It is a massive problem, and it leads to the kind of emotional and behavioural difficulties that my hon. Friend will be familiar with from speaking to those who have had acquired brain injuries later in life. What are his thoughts on what is needed to address the numbers of people who have brain damage through their lives?

Chris Bryant: My mother was alcoholic. I do not know whether she drank during my pregnancy—[Laughter.] Was it my pregnancy? I mean before I was born. I am painfully conscious of how difficult it is for women who are alcoholic to stop drinking when they are pregnant. The message about the dangers of drinking during pregnancy has been out there for a long time, but we still have remarkably little in the toolkit for dealing with alcoholism in this country. Broadly speaking, it is still about the 12-step process, which has a very low success rate in comparison with other therapies and which relies on surrendering to a higher being, albeit not necessarily a religious one. It just does not work for many patients. The syndrome that my hon. Friend refers to is much more prevalent than we realised even 10 years ago. Further research is going on, and we need to ensure that it is fully understood across the whole educational spectrum, as well as the health spectrum.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman believe that brain injury in children and young people requires a different approach from how we handle adult brain injury?

Chris Bryant: There are specific issues that affect children. It is a profound source of depression to me as a Labour Member and a socialist that a child from a poorer background is four times more likely to suffer a brain injury before the age of five than a child from a wealthy background. We need to look at all the elements that lead to that, because prevention is far better than cure. I have spoken in other debates about issues that relate particularly to education, including the importance of schools having as full an understanding as possible of how brain injury can affect a child. All the statistics now indicate that every primary school class in this country has at least one child who has had a significant brain injury, although many of them may be undiagnosed. That is an issue for every single school in the country, and I do not think that we have fully taken it on board yet.

The experience of having had a brain injury often includes the sense of being pushed from pillar to post in the health system and in the organisations that the state provides. An element of that is inevitable, because something fundamentally chaotic is being brought into an ordered system. That is how it feels to the individual, too: they knew what their life was, and then suddenly—nearly always completely out of the blue—something has happened to radically change their life and their family’s lives, perhaps permanently. All too often, however, families have to fight for every single bit of support from the national health service, the local authority, the education system or wherever.

If there is one thing that I hope will come out of all the work that we have done in the all-party group, it is that we can change that feeling of having to fight for every single element. So many patients have told me, “If I could devote all my energy to getting my brain better, rather than fighting for support, I would be a useful and fully functioning member of society. I would dearly love to be that person again.” If there were any way in which all the arms of the state could fully recognise that factor, that would be something that we should dearly hope for.

The charity Sue Ryder does an awful lot of work with people who have had brain injuries and other neurological conditions. It reckons that 15,000 people who have had acquired brain injuries are now in generalist older people’s care homes, which are probably not the places to get the right support, but are the only places available. Sue Ryder is aware of at least 515 people who are placed out of area, a long way from home, which means that all the support systems that they might have through family, friends and so on are simply not available or are extremely expensive because of the travel.

We really have to do far better. The Minister is very good on the subject—I have talked to her several times—but the tendency in the NHS and in Government circles is to put a positive gloss on everything and stress all the good things that have happened. I understand that, but we are still a long way from achieving what we all want, and what the people we are talking about deserve.

The national clinical audit of specialist rehabilitation produced a report earlier this year—it has not yet been discussed in Parliament—on all the specialist rehabilitation around the country. Somebody who has had a major traumatic brain injury, or a brain injury caused by factors such as carbon monoxide poisoning, may at first need four or five people to feed them, clothe them, wash them and provide all the basics of their daily life. However, effective neuro-rehabilitation over a sustained period can and often does mean that they need just one person—or, in an ideal world, it gives them back the independent life that they had before, in as large a measure as possible.
The good news from the report is that the rehabilitation prescription that the all-party group has discussed is being steadily rolled out across the whole country. That means that patients and their families can say, “This is what we know we should be getting—we want to make sure that we are getting it.”

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and on his speech. Does he share my concern that neuro-rehabilitation in the UK is particularly limited for children? There is just one option for in-patient neuro-rehabilitation and post-hospital discharge, which is run by the Children’s Trust in Surrey. Should not every region have a paediatric neuro-rehabilitation pathway, rather than the patchy and underfunded set of services that we have at the moment?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Indeed, I know of a case that makes that point extremely keenly, where a young lad ended up having to go from south Wales to Surrey. Obviously in south Wales we love visits to Surrey, but it is a phenomenal cost for the family to have to visit their child there every week because it is the only facility in England and Wales. There is also an emotional cost in being a long way away and not being able to see their child every day. We really need a string of these paediatric services across the whole country.

One of the great successes that the Government have introduced in the past few years is the major trauma centres, which are now saving many more lives—at least 800 more a year. People who would have died of brain injuries are now alive. However, the national clinical audit has found that only 40% of those who were assessed at the major trauma centres as needing in-patient rehabilitation actually got it. That means that across England and Wales we are probably about 330 beds short. We have to strive to get those beds and make sure that nobody fails to get the in-patient rehabilitation that they need, not least because rehabilitation works. According to the audit, 94% of those who got the rehabilitation that they needed ended up able to live far more independent lives.

The net saving to the public purse from rehabilitation is significant. Extrapolated over a patient’s lifetime—in many cases it is quite young people who have had brain injuries—the average net lifetime saving from rehabilitation amounted to just over £500,000 per patient. That means that the total savings that would be generated from just this one-year cohort of patients alone was £582 million.

Investing in the 330 beds that are needed, which might cost somewhere in the region of £50 million, would generate an enormous return for the public purse. Leaving aside the finances, there is also a moral imperative. If we can not only save people’s lives but give them back as much quality of life as is humanly possible—if we can do that medically—we should do that as a society.

The other thing that I want to say about finances concerns the injury cost recovery scheme, which is a little-known aspect of the national health service. We always say that the NHS is free, and that is true. However, under the injury cost recovery scheme, local hospitals and ambulance services can reclaim an element of the cost when an individual has had an insurance claim met. The scheme was last reviewed in 2003, but in 2018-19 the sum total brought in by all the hospitals and ambulance trusts in England, Wales and Northern Ireland was £200 million, which is not an insignificant amount of money. In April, the amount that hospitals and ambulance services can charge was increased by the annual health and community services inflation measure, which meant that for in-patient care they can now claim £891 a day and for out-patients £725 a day. However, these amounts are capped at £5,381 a week and £53,278 in total.

These amounts need to be reviewed. There is no reason why hospitals in the NHS should not be able to claim a significantly higher amount when there are significant insurance claims. The extra money would not come out of the money won by the individual; it would come out of the money paid in legal and other costs. The average cost for in-patient care for somebody who has had a brain injury runs to something like £16,000 a week, yet the maximum that the NHS can claim from insurance companies is just £5,381 a week.

A regulatory impact assessment in 2006—the last one conducted by the Government—said that the cost to the NHS then was £170 million to £190 million. I reckon that in this financial year the figure would be more like £440 million, so yet again we have another means to find additional resources to put into these services.

I want to end with the experience in south Wales. I recognise that the Minister is not responsible for that, but a large number of people in south Wales, including constituents of mine and of other south Wales MPs, end up using English health services because we do not yet have a major trauma centre in Wales; there will be one and I hope that it will be very successful. I hope that the Minister will accept that one thing that was slightly left out of the equation when the major trauma centres network was set up was how to integrate fully neuro-rehabilitation—good, strong rehabilitation—and the whole pathway from ultra-acute or hyper-acute services all the way through to care in the community and patients returning to their home. Such integration was slightly forgotten and left to one side, which is why a quarter of major trauma centres in England still do not have a neuro-rehabilitation consultant.

I say to my colleagues in Wales: let us not make the same mistake in Wales. When the major trauma centre opens in Wales, I want to make sure that we have a fully functioning neuro-rehabilitation centre alongside it, so that every single patient who is assessed as being in need of in-patient neuro-rehabilitation will receive it and will continue to receive it for as long as they need it, so that they can return to full health. That should also apply to children and teenagers.

I say that because in the end, although I am not as religious as I used to be, I always have this little thing running through my mind, and I apologise if it sounds too religious or pious for some. Jesus said something about his having come to give people “life in all its fullness”. The sadness for me is that we are managing to save people’s lives but are then unable to give them life back in all its fullness. That is what the NHS should be about in this regard, because otherwise there is a cruelty, if all we do is save somebody’s life but do not give them life in all its fullness.
produced by the all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury, which he leads, is a fine example of what can be done when politicians from across the spectrum come together, look at a specific subject about which more needs to be done, and produce a report that is thorough, well researched and not antagonistic towards the Government—indeed, it shows a desire to work with the Government to bring about the right kind of solutions.

I therefore thank the hon. Gentleman for the work he has done; he deserves an immense amount of credit. I myself deserve a bit of credit, but much more is owed to those who helped us produce the report, by adding to our investigations, informing our findings and supporting us throughout. Across the scale, the brain injury community, if I may so describe it, deserves great credit for the work we have done so far. As he said, the Minister and the Government, who have given the matter a fair wind and a good hearing, have shown a willingness to listen and a preparedness to change, both of which are absolutely essential.

The last time we spoke about acquired brain injury, I recounted the pattern that most people follow when they have a traumatic event that leads to a brain injury. Of course, not all head injuries lead to brain injuries—it is important to draw that distinction at the outset. Nevertheless, the pattern is straightforward: shock, disbelief, fear and then, with the right support, care and encouragement, realisation and recovery. It might be argued that that is a familiar pattern for most kinds of traumatic injuries that have profound consequences, but there is a difference with acquired brain injury: namely, the effects are immensely variable and sometimes, as the hon. Gentleman said, hard to recognise or discern. Actually, they can be quite hard to discern medically, as well as socially and culturally, as recovery from a brain injury can go on for a very long time indeed, even for many years.

The hon. Gentleman spoke of changed personalities. When I had my own brain injury in my early 20s, the medical experts who were treating me to said that my personality might change. My parents said, “Oh, you don’t know him,” but the doctors said, “No, clinically we have to tell you that his personality might change.” I do not know if it has changed; I might have been less talented, less charming, less accomplished and less clever. [Laughter.] I do not know, do I? How could I know that? For the hon. Gentleman, Gentlemen is absolutely right; one does not know what one might have been.

The reason I have taken a great interest in this subject since being elected to this place 22 years ago is that I am very conscious that my recovery was sufficient to allow me to fulfil my ambitions, and to allow me to do much of what I would have done anyway. That would not have been easy had I wanted to be a great musician, for example, as I am now extremely deaf and have suffered from tinnitus since my accident. But I did not want to be a musician. It would not have been easy had I wanted to pursue a number of other careers, but the one I wanted to pursue was that of a Conservative Member of Parliament—there is nothing more noble.

My injury did not prevent me from achieving that aim, but I am profoundly and constantly aware that others cannot say the same. As I was in hospital being treated for the immediate effects of my injury and then recovering over a considerable time, I was conscious that others were not as fortunate, that I could have been in a very different place and that, if my life had changed beyond measure, I would have been unable to do what I have done. That subtlety in the changes that take place following an acquired brain injury is the second thing, along with the variability, that I wanted to highlight.

But there is also unpredictability. One cannot be clear at what pace and to what degree recovery will take place. The combination of variability, subtlety and unpredictability makes the aftercare—the neuro-rehabilitation that the hon. Member for Rhondda rightly highlighted—a complex and challenging matter for all concerned: clearly for families and friends and those close to those affected, but also for the medical professionals and all the services that people in these circumstances engage and interact with. The Government must therefore employ the same subtlety and flexibility in dealing with the effects of brain injury.

I know that other Members wish to speak, so I will not go on forever—there will be a sigh of relief in some parts of the Chamber, and probably some disappointment in others. None the less, I want to highlight some things that the Government will need to do. As I said, last time I spoke on the matter it was about the pattern that follows an injury, but I now want to talk, from my experience in government, about what the Government need to do. First, they need to be highly responsive to the changes in the condition of sufferers, and I do not think that Governments are all that good at that; they do many things well, but I am not sure that responsiveness is one of them.

Secondly, the Government need to marry, in their work, the changing diagnostic environment and neuro-rehabilitation. I was recently at my old university, Nottingham, looking at the latest technological changes that will enable people to diagnose the effects of injury through improved scanning, and that is the sort of advance that needs to be married with neuro-rehabilitation. The University of Nottingham is also studying how different modes of rehabilitation can have different effects—which strategies work best for different kinds of individuals in recovery.

Thirdly, the Government need to adopt a cross-departmental approach—that is heavily emphasised in the APPG report. We highlight that although some Departments take the matter extremely seriously and are doing an excellent job, others need to raise their game. That is no surprise, I suppose, but none the less it needs to be emphasised. Various people here will know that we recently had a meeting with a Cabinet Office Minister to discuss how that Department can play a part in co-ordinating that cross-departmental approach. A glance at the report illustrates just how wide that approach needs to be; everything from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, through to the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Work and Pensions, obviously the Department of Health and Social Care, and so on. Almost no Department is unaffected. The Home Office is clearly affected and, with housing, we have responsibilities for ensuring that people are properly accommodated. As almost no aspect of Government is untouched, the cross-departmental approach needs to be re-evaluated, with new thinking about how we can ensure consistency and collaboration in dealing with brain injury.
Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir John Hayes: I will happily give way. I am most impressed that no less than a third of the Democratic Unionist party’s Members of Parliament are in attendance.

Mr Campbell: I suppose a cynic might say that it is a good job that a third of Labour and Conservative MPs are not here, because otherwise we would not get into the room. The issue that the right hon. Gentleman touches upon is very important. Does he agree that although those directly affected, and their family and friends, want to hear this debate and see that there is support, there needs to be a tangible expression from Departments, both centrally and in the regions, to show that it is more than just words? Action needs to follow, which is exactly the point I believe he is highlighting.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman always makes valuable contributions to our considerations, across a range of subjects, but rarely does he make a contribution that tees me up for the next part of my speech more than that one did.

I was about to move on to the specific measures that the Government can take, which are all drawn from the APPG report but also—I say this less critically than I might—from the Health Committee’s 2001 report on these matters. For example, that report suggests:

“We recommend that the Government requires the statutory services to improve their supply of information on head injury to head-injured people and their families; such information should be given to these people in written and verbal form during their stay in hospital, should be available to GPs and should include the literature produced by Headway—the Brain Injury Association.”

It goes on to say:

“We recommend that those assessing brain-injured people for disability living allowance have specialist skills which enable them to understand the complex combination of physical, cognitive and behavioural impairments characteristic of this type of neurological disability; and that the assessment process is adjusted to allow the input of a patient’s advocate”.

It continues:

“We recommend that the Government makes explicit the level at which responsibility for planning different levels of rehabilitation for head injury should be located”.

Almost every recommendation made in 2001 is pertinent to the circumstances today. That is not to say that Governments since then have done nothing; I emphasise again that the new Minister and her predecessor have given us a very positive response since the publication of our APPG report. We have high hopes of the Minister, who I know wants to end her time in the job by saying just how much she did. [ Interruption. ] Well, that may be in a number of years, but whenever her time in the job does end, she needs to say, “I did so much for those with acquired brain injury.” That needs to be on her record, and we want to ensure that it is—thus our continued advocacy.

I have just a few points from our report for the Minister to consider. I will rattle through them—there are only six. First, there should be a national review of neuro-rehabilitation, to ensure that service provision is adequate and consistent. Secondly, acquired brain injury should be included in the special educational needs and disability code of practice. Thirdly, all education professionals should be trained, or at least have a minimum level of awareness. Fourthly, all agencies working with young people in the criminal justice system, including schools, psychologists, psychiatrists, general practitioners and youth offending teams, should work together to ensure that the needs of individuals are assessed. Fifthly, in the welfare system, all benefits assessors should be trained to understand the problems that affect individuals with acquired brain injury. Sixthly, a brain injury expert should be on the consultation panel when changes in the welfare system are proposed. I do not say that those are the only important things; we could talk about sports injuries and all kinds of other things that are in our report and have been debated before. But doing those six things alone, or six others taken from the report, would make an immense difference to so many people.

Finally, I want to quote C. S. Lewis—not Jesus but certainly a man who knew Jesus. C. S. Lewis said that “courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point”.

Courage is required by those who suffer from acquired brain injury, but it is also required by Ministers to make a difference, and I know that this Minister, inspired I hope by the efforts of Members across the House and also by the needs, plights and interests of all those affected by acquired brain injury, will employ the necessary courage to make a difference.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): I am sorry to have to inform Members that there will now have to be a time limit. Five Members wish to speak, so unfortunately the time limit will be around four minutes.

10.9 am

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for securing this important debate. I know that many Members have been involved in these debates before, so bear with me: as the newbie, I may be making points that they have made many times over, but I think they bear repeating.

There have been many debates about what the definition of acquired brain injury is. I do not think it helps to focus on little details; it is important to be inclusive and generic, and make sure those people who need services, help and support get them. That is why I believe the definition of acquired brain injury should be wide and far-reaching. It is important that we remember that when we look at the various options.

Our national health service is a fantastic service. My constituency of Newport West is very close to Aneurin Bevan’s, so obviously I am going to say the NHS is brilliant—of course it is. It is great at the life-saving stuff, but it is not so great at the long-term rehabilitation needed by people with long-term conditions. With cardiac arrests, lives are saved, but the aftermath and the quality of life afterwards are so important.

Acquired brain injury may be the result of one incident or acquired over a period of time, but its effects are always lifelong and often permanent. As a physiotherapist, I have worked with patients with acquired brain injury at various stages of their journey, from intensive care—when it is very much life or death what is going to happen next—to the sub-acute, high-dependency and in-patient settings. At those stages, there is thankfulness that the
person is going to survive, but the reality is beginning to set in that this will not change back any time soon; this is a permanent change, and the family has to deal with it. That is a very hard time for people.

There is then the long-term effect, when people might be back in their homes but are struggling to deal with their adjusted circumstances. That is often a time when people feel neglected, left and lost, and it is important that we focus on that area as well. Acquired brain injury does not just affect one person, but their families, friends and work colleagues; as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda has said, this predominantly affects younger people, so work colleagues are also involved. People always express their wish to provide help and support, but they need advice and guidance on how best to do so, and it is important that we recognise that.

The effects of acquired brain injury are also far-reaching, and might be physical, mental, or even spiritual. Others speak far more eloquently about that, and how it impacts people’s working and daily lives, but I would like to emphasise the long-term needs of people with acquired brain injury. Research in the field of neuro-plasticity clearly indicates that recovery can go on for weeks, months and even years after an insult or trauma. It is therefore vital that our rehabilitation services can match that, so they must be available for weeks, months and years after the incident. In the later stages, somebody may not require treatment, advice and support every day, but it should be available for them to access when they need it.

I am delighted that the Health Minister is here today, and I would like to make a plea to her for additional resources for the vital services that people with acquired brain injury require in the long term. Obviously as a physiotherapist I am biased, so I am going to say we need more physios, but we also need occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, and providers of other therapies. Psychological input and support is also vital, and people often overlook that important aspect of rehab. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) has also mentioned diagnostics, because if we do not know what we are dealing with, we cannot treat it effectively.

It is really important that we have those additional resources when we need them; they should be accessible through time, over months and years. It is important to remember that this is not an event, but a process.

10.14 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for having set the scene so well, and for the hard work that he does in the health sector. I have said before in this Chamber that this issue is very close to my heart, as my brother Keith had a severe motorbike accident some 16 years ago, which almost took his life and which irrevocably changed it. We were told that he would be 88-year-old—mother taking care of him; and the local members of my Orange lodge and church groups being incredibly good to him. It is truly a collective response.

The fact is that without any of those elements of support, Keith would almost certainly be in a care home somewhere, watching TV or just looking out of the window. We are blessed to be in a community that takes care of its own, but there are so many people without that care and support who have no alternative to being in a residential facility, with no independence or semblance of who they once were. That is incredibly sad, but it does not have to be that way. I put on record my thanks to all those involved in Keith’s care from the time he had the accident, from the surgeons to the nurses and all those who helped, and for all the prayers that were made for him.

Some 350,000 people are admitted to hospital in the UK every year with ABI-related diagnoses as a result of trauma, stroke, tumour, infection, illness, carbon monoxide exposure, or hypoxia. That means that every 90 seconds, somebody with an acquired brain injury is admitted to hospital. In Northern Ireland, some of the stats are quite worrying as well: in 2014-15, there were 11,287 ABI-related hospital admissions, including 5,304 from a head injury and 4,109 from a stroke. In 2015-16, there were 11,121 admissions, 4,916 from a head injury and 4,256 from a stroke. In 2016-17, there were 10,762 admissions, 4,742 from a head injury and 4,269 from a stroke. The figures have fallen slightly, but the numbers are consistent.

We also have carbon monoxide poisonings across the UK. In England and Wales, there are about 30 deaths and 200 hospital admissions each year, as well as 4,000 visits to A&E, costing the taxpayer some £178 million per year—I know that the cost of lives to families is greater, and we should be aware of that. I support the aims of the all-party parliamentary carbon monoxide group, which has recommended that

“the Government introduce preventative measures including mandating CO alarms in all tenures, providing CO monitors in first-time pregnancies, and tackling sub-standard housing that increases the risk of CO exposure.”

Although I know that area is not directly the Minister’s responsibility, I ask her what has been done in relation to it. The APPCOG also recommends that

“Public Health England and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office do more to raise public awareness of CO in order to encourage risk-lowering behaviours at home and abroad.”

It is my belief that we could do more to prevent carbon monoxide poisonings, and those recommendations could positively affect the figures in future.

It is daunting to see someone who one minute is in their prime, and the next is completely changed. I know, because I have seen that; I have lived through it and felt it in a big way. Many people do not see a light at the end of the tunnel, so there is a need for support and respite. Many more loved ones might be able to stay with their family, rather than having to go into full-time care. More loved ones might be able to stay with their family, rather than having to go into full-time care. There must be access to timely, specialist rehabilitation and support services, and an end to the lengthy waiting list for social service assessments for public support.

Finally, I will make a request about the benefits system. We have had to fight for everything for Keith from the very beginning. We were his court appointees; we looked after his financial affairs and everything for him, yet the benefit system does not seem to understand that. We could have had a wee bit more help with that as well, so I put that down not just for us, but for other family members.

I finish with this: as with all things, funding is key. We must rethink this strategy, and realise that it is more cost-effective in the long term to allow people to remain
at home with support. More importantly, that means a better quality of life for those people, which has to be a material consideration in any Government decision.

10.18 am

**Jenny Chapman** (Darlington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for securing this debate. I knew nothing at all about acquired brain injury until I met someone in my constituency called Nicola Hughes, who told me that she also had known nothing about acquired brain injury until her husband acquired his. I do not know the circumstances; I have never asked her, and she has never talked to me about exactly how it happened. What she has made very clear to me is the impact it has had on her, their daughter and their family, and how inadequate she believes the support is for families of people with an acquired brain injury.

Nicola says that the hardest part of the whole journey for her and her family was when her husband came home. Their isolation, and the lack of support that was there for her, for him and for their daughter is something that we cannot allow to continue; it must be addressed urgently. Initially she was expecting him to get better and was waiting for recovery. I know that happens for some people, and it is a wonderful thing and should be happening more, but for some people, that is not the likely outcome. She has had to learn to love and be with a new person, effectively. It is a journey that I do not think any of us can appreciate unless we have found ourselves in that situation.

In Parliament, we talk a lot about inspiring people, and Nicola is incredibly inspiring. She has written children’s books to explain to her daughter what is the matter with her daddy, to normalise the situation and to get her used to what is happening. One of the things Nicola has told me about that concerns me a lot is the lack of consistency in support for families when people leave hospital. She said there is a clear discharge programme in Oxford, where all staff are briefed and letters go to the family’s GP so that the carer’s GP knows that their patient has now acquired this new caring responsibility and may need additional intervention and support. She said that the support is virtually non-existent in some other areas, and I fear that my area of Durham Tees Valley is not up there with the best in that regard.

I have been to Headway and taken the time to understand the pathway on which many of my constituents find themselves. I do not think we have it right. Luckily, thanks to Nicola and her leadership, we have a wonderful Headway branch in Darlington, but if that was not there, there would be virtually nothing for people in such circumstances. Services should be provided according to the need of the person affected and their family, not according to where they live. I know we say that about lots of conditions, but I have never seen it as stark as I have seen it with brain injury. I would be grateful if the Minister could take it upon herself to look at the services available in Durham Tees Valley in particular and to get back to me with her assessment of how far we are from meeting what should be national standards—a minimum expectation for patients and their families.

10.21 am

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on securing this debate. Here we are again, talking about acquired brain injury, which is a sign of the determination on the part of those of us on the all-party parliamentary group and our partners, the UK Acquired Brain Injury Forum, the Child Brain Injury Trust, Headway and so many other organisations, to see real change and improvement in this area. We are going to be using the broken record technique to ensure that our messages get across and real change happens. As my hon. Friend said, many brain injuries are invisible, with no outward sign of the lasting injury that has occurred. There are real difficulties for people because of that, including stigma, lack of understanding and practical everyday problems.

I want to talk briefly about children with brain injuries. The invisibility we have talked about is a real problem for them, and the question of whether a brain injury has been recognised or diagnosed is a key factor. It is important that we correct that to improve things for children. A Health Minister is responding to the debate, but the issue is not only about health; it is also about education. Schools have a great impact on the future development of the child. It is not just about what happens on their immediate return to school; it is also about how they continue to be supported and developed at school. Neuro-rehabilitation and adjustments at school are great. Some adjustments are minor, but there are other issues such as noise, light and the shade of paper that is used. All those things can be difficult and need continuous attention. We need to do more to ensure that children get appropriate support.

Charities working in this area are doing a huge amount of work to improve things. I mention in particular the Child Brain Injury Trust, which does great work and has developed some proposals. Sadly there is not enough time today to tell you what they all are, but I refer to my previous speech in *Hansard*, where people can find all those recommendations listed.

I was disappointed by the Department for Education’s response to our recommendations in the “Time for Change” report. That response sounded like, “Everything is okay here. We have education, health and care plans and governors and schools know their responsibilities.” Things are not okay, however. There needs to be real understanding of the specific needs of children. After all, what happens in childhood seriously affects the life outcomes of young people. As we have heard, that can bring into play things around justice, employment, health and many other areas of life. As we are speaking, the APPG for the prevention of adverse childhood experiences is meeting, and brain injury is one of the key things that can affect the development of a child.

I am glad to hear from colleagues at the UK Acquired Brain Injury Forum that a group called the National ABI Education and Learning Syndicate, or N-ABLES, has been put together to look at practical steps to raise awareness and to take work forward. I would tell Members so much more if I had the time, but I do not, so I will just say that those people are doing some good work. I encourage the Minister to speak to her colleagues in the Department for Education to ensure that that link is made and that practical steps are taken.

Finally, I want to mention one of our local organisations, a great north-east charity called One Punch North East. It is working hard to say that something as simple as a minute or one incident can cause life-changing damage. I commend it on the work it does.
10.25 am

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell, and to follow so many fine speeches. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), I am not an expert on acquired brain injury, but I recently met Dr Emily Bennett, who is a consultant clinical psychologist in paediatric neuro-psychology at Nottingham Children’s Hospital. She has provided me with some briefing on the subject, which I would like to share.

As many Members have said, acquired brain injury is an under-recognised, hidden condition, yet it can impact on every aspect of a person’s life. As has been mentioned, 40,000 children and young people report to hospital with an ABI every year, but it is very likely that many thousands more have a mild brain injury that goes completely undetected. That can be associated with a range of cognitive, behavioural and emotional symptoms that can impact on education, health and relationships.

It is important that we do more work on that.

We need to address neuro-rehabilitation specifically for young people. An ABI affects their brain when it is still developing and can have a temporary or permanent effect on their functioning. Sometimes it can be forgotten during a young person’s development and their time in school that they have a brain injury. It is important that specialist services follow up with children, particularly at key transitions. Children have a long life ahead of them, so work done in the early years to improve their outcomes can have a long impact through their childhood and adulthood.

An acquired brain injury in childhood can impact on school engagement, attendance and achievement. It can result in young people being more vulnerable to exclusions from school and being involved in the youth justice system. Obviously it can affect their job prospects and further education. It can impact on their mental health and self-esteem, lead to isolation and poor participation, and increase care demands for families.

I have already highlighted the patchy nature of neuro-rehabilitation services. I am pleased that in Nottingham Children’s Hospital, which is a regional centre for neuro-sciences and a major trauma centre for the east midlands, we are fortunate to have a multidisciplinary paediatric neuro-rehabilitation team known as the BRILL team—Brain Injury Living Life. However, that does not mean that everything is perfect, even in our region. There is a desperate need for dedicated rehab beds, follow-up clinics and more neuro-psychological support.

Before closing, I want to ask the Minister a couple of questions. What is being done to ensure that children’s services are better developed and that families are not faced with a postcode lottery as to whether their child receives neuro-rehabilitation? Will the Minister commit to a national review of those services, including those for children and young people? Is there an assurance that the number of rehabilitation beds for children and young people will be reviewed? Will the Government commit to ensuring that children as well as adults leave hospital with a rehabilitation prescription? Will the Minister agree to organise meetings between Departments?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) said, the links between health and education are really important in making sure that children are well supported. Will the Government invest in and support research so that we better understand the long-term impact of a childhood acquired brain injury? Such questions will help us to move forward.

10.30 am

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I am delighted to take part in this important follow-up debate on acquired brain injury. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant)—I hope I have managed to pronounce the name properly this time—for securing the debate. Being in Parliament is a learning experience. I took part in the previous debate with the information that I knew about acquired brain injury, and it prompted different groups and individuals in my constituency to get in touch, so he will be pleased to know that I have some new material today.

We have heard in this debate that the symptoms of ABI are often completely invisible, which echoes a point made to me by one of my constituents since the previous debate. He discussed his own ABI and said that he felt there was often more public and employer sympathy and support for an obvious injury such as a broken leg than there was for a broken brain, which is something we undoubtedly need to address. The importance of speech therapy to avoid people being assumed to be drunk and to get their self-confidence back are highly important points. Since it affects every aspect of our country across all our nations, the financial savings of getting it right give us a financial incentive as well as a moral responsibility to tackle the issue. Fundamentally, for me, the issue is about ensuring that people with disabilities such as ABI can live as independently as possible. Disabled people should have the freedom, dignity and choice to control their own lives. We need to help remove the barriers that stop them from enjoying full and equal access to full citizenship.

It is estimated that ABI is the most significant cause of disablement for people of working age in Scotland. We know that only around 40% of working-age disabled adults are in employment, compared with more than 80% of those without a disability, so we really have to address the employability gap. Many of those with ABI have complex rehabilitation and support needs. The Scottish Government have recently run a consultation on their first draft national action plan on improving the care, treatment and support available to the neurological community. The consultation closed on 8 February this year. They aim to publish their report this summer, and the final national action plan on neurological conditions later this year. I look forward to seeing what comes out of that.

The Scottish Government initiated the National Prisoner Healthcare Network’s report on brain injury and offending, which was published in 2016. The subject of offenders came up in the previous debate, and I admit that I was not fully aware of it at the time. The programme in Scotland was led by Professor Tom McMillan of the University of Glasgow, and it is now in implementation and has developed an empirical basis for the development of a service in all Scottish prisons. The benefits will be to improve the management of people with brain injury throughout the criminal justice system and to reduce the risk of further brain injury in prisoners.

Around 75% of male prisoners and 66% of female prisoners have multiple head injuries. Benefits will also see reduced reoffending—around 70% of those with head
injuries reoffend—and improved community reintegration. Those stark figures are striking. It is also worth noting that prisoners with a history of multiple head injuries are more likely to be convicted of violent offences, so there is a lot of work to do. I am grateful that I have learnt that information since the previous debate, so the hon. Member for Rhondda gets full marks for increasing my education.

In May I spoke about the Scottish Acquired Brain Injury Network and I want to discuss more of its work today. SABIN is a managed clinical network based within the NHS in Scotland, comprising clinicians, third sector organisations, patient representatives and non-clinical staff all working to improve the access to and quality of care for patients with an ABI across Scotland.

Scotland remains the only country internationally with a single set of concussion guidelines across all sports at grassroots and amateur level. The Scottish sports concussion guidance has been in place since 2016, with the most recent update in 2018 contributed to by SABIN. In addition, research into the consequences of sports brain injury, in particular the study “Football’s Influence on Lifelong health and Dementia risk (FIELD)”, is set to provide the first understanding globally of the late consequences of contact sports participation through a series of publications in the next few months.

SABIN was delighted to take part in the Scottish Trauma Network's second annual conference last week, which took place on 26 and 27 June. Over those two days it was able to highlight to clinical colleagues and Government stakeholders the importance of ABI care within a trauma setting and beyond. Patients with an acquired brain injury are some of the most seriously ill trauma cases; patients are often young, with many years of rehabilitation ahead of them. The need for early access to intensive rehabilitation is a message that needs to be relayed to one and all to support investment in rehabilitation. We cannot emphasise that point enough.

SABIN is currently involved in a geographical mapping of NHS services for acquired brain injury patients across Scotland. It previously did that in 2009, and it will be interesting to see how services have changed over time. Preliminary results from the service mapping highlight key challenges across Scotland: the same key challenges that we heard about from colleagues south of the border. They include a lack of access to rehabilitation; workforce shortages, particularly in relation to staff trained in managing patients with an ABI; the difficulties of managing patients with challenging behaviour; and the need for dedicated ABI units. A full report will be circulated to NHS boards in Scotland and will be available on the SABIN website. It is due for completion at the end of August, and SABIN is keen to work with NHS boards to assist them in planning rehabilitation services.

It is due for completion at the end of August, and SABIN is keen to work with NHS boards to assist them in planning rehabilitation services. It is worth pointing out that the first of four major trauma centres opened in Aberdeen in October, and those services have not been included in the mapping exercise. Things are improving, but the report will still be of significant interest.

Alcohol Health Alliance, in advance of today’s debate, has highlighted the link between alcohol and injuries and accidents that can cause an ABI, and also the link between alcohol abuse and problem alcohol consumption. Actions taken in Scotland to reduce alcohol abuse have seen the number of alcohol-related emergency hospital admissions fall by more than 17% since 2007, so there is good practice out there. One of our more recent innovations has been minimum unit pricing. It is probably too early to say how it has affected ABI or other health issues, but sales have dropped by 3% since it was introduced last year. Alcohol sales per adult in Scotland are now at the lowest level for 25 years, so the Minister might wish to consider something similar for England, as I am sure it will have many benefits for health and not just for ABI.

It has been a pleasure to take part in the debate, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rhondda for securing it.

10.37 am

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate, particularly those who have shared their personal experiences and those of their constituents, as well as their expertise in various areas. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for securing yet another debate on this important subject. No cause could have a greater champion. He challenged Members in the previous debate on this subject to learn how to pronounce the name of his constituency properly. Well, I can assure my hon. Friend that I will try my best to do better today. I also pay tribute to all the members of the APPG for the excellent work that they do in raising awareness of this really important subject.

We are here again today debating the subject because of the scale of the problem: currently, 1.3 million people in the UK live with an acquired brain injury. Every 90 seconds someone is admitted to hospital with such a brain injury. We have considered the human cost of acquired brain injury in this debate and we have also heard of the financial cost. In the previous debate the Minister said that it cost the UK economy £1 billion, but the APPG reports that the truer figure is £15 billion, alongside the human cost.

Consideration of this subject is not new. The Health Committee has been reporting on the issue since the turn of the century, furnishing Parliament with a raft of recommendations, many of which have never been implemented, so it really is time for change. Last year the APPG set out a range of recommendations for the kind of support and rehabilitation that must be made available. As the term suggests, acquired brain injury applies to injury caused to the brain after birth, and it can happen to anyone at any time. It is usually caused by a trauma to the head but can be the result of substance abuse, and the Alcohol Health Alliance has reported on the growing incidence of alcohol-related brain injury. My hon. Friend the Member for Salford Central (Bill Esterson) talked about the effect on unborn infants of foetal alcohol syndrome.

All Members have constituents who have lived with the consequences of ABI. A brain injury can happen in an instant, but its effects can be devastating and lead to lifelong challenges. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda mentioned that the condition is often not visible, and that sufferers can appear to be drunk. There is a tremendous lack of understanding in the community. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) talked about the fact that it is difficult to detect, medically, socially and culturally.

There is a total lack of understanding.
Owing to improvements in medical procedures and acute care, more people than ever before survive following an injury to the brain. That is of course really welcome, but it brings with it a responsibility for Government Departments to support those affected, which is crucially all about quality of life. It is cruel to save lives without following up with support and rehabilitation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) said, sharing her expertise, not providing vital support services is where the NHS is at its weakest. My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) talked movingly about the experience of Nicola and her family, and the failure to get the support and help that they clearly needed to get them through.

Early and continued access to specialist rehabilitation has been shown to optimise the chances of recovery and to be extremely cost-effective. As is the case for many health conditions, however, the number of available beds across the UK is inadequate, and service provision is variable. Consequently, long-term outcomes for brain injury survivors are compromised, with many describing being passed from pillar to post. It is particularly distressing to hear the experiences of children, as my hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) mentioned.

It is clear that a national review of neuro-rehabilitation is required, with particular reference to the service provision for children, to ensure that provision is adequate and consistent throughout the UK. Members have described current provision as a lottery. All affected individuals should be given a rehabilitation prescription and a well-defined pathway to recovery. I ask the Minister again to focus on that, because NR can help to avoid or minimise disability and optimise recovery. Early access is critical, and substantial evidence demonstrates that NR is both clinically effective and cost-effective.

Will the Minister ensure that every individual with an acquired brain injury gets an NR prescription and has their individual needs specified in a care pathway? Will she ensure that all health professionals in the community in primary and secondary care are trained to recognise the symptoms of acquired brain injury? I asked for those commitments from her the last time we debated the subject. She has demonstrated that she is listening, which we all appreciate, but can she ensure that the Government up their game and act on those precise commitments?

This is not just a matter for the Department of Health and Social Care, of course. In September 2018, the APPG’s report called for reform in all areas and Departments. It should be an issue for the Department for Education, because 24% of children have some sort of brain injury, compared with 1% who have autism. That has clear implications for teacher training, and it is essential that special educational needs and disability specialists are appropriately trained to recognise the signs. It is also a matter for the Ministry of Justice, as ABI can often lead to criminal behaviour. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda has regularly raised concerns about underfunding of specialist courts, and the need for them to have a well-defined pathway to recovery. I ask the Minister to focus again on that, because NR can help to avoid or minimise the risk of reoffending. Early access is critical, and substantial evidence demonstrates that NR is both clinically effective and cost-effective.

As was mentioned in the previous debate, there is a lack of awareness among those involved in contact sports such as football and rugby. Government and professional clinical bodies must work collaboratively to improve health professionals’ knowledge of concussion management. In defence, we must work to ensure that acquired brain injury among veterans is fully recognised and that the appropriate support is made available. The Minister committed to pass on concerns to colleagues in other Departments, and I hope that she will be able to report back on their responses.

We have heard over and over again about the human cost of acquired brain injury. Frankly, it also makes no financial sense not to put the right care plans in place and deliver the support that individuals and their families need. I urge the Government to implement the recommendations of the APPG in full, and to raise awareness among those involved in contact sports of the measures that have been put in place.

I also thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken, and those who have been present but have not spoken. People have shared personal experiences—things that are painful to them, and that they have lived with for a long time. I particularly welcome the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) to her place. I think that this is the first time that I have responded to a debate in which she has spoken.

As with many long-term conditions, ABI affects not only a person’s health but aspects of their family life, work and relationships. I responded to the debate on 9 May. I am still chasing ministerial colleagues in other Departments for their comments, but because time is quite short I will focus today on the many points that have been raised about the health aspects. However, I will go back to ministerial colleagues, chase them and impress on them that this important issue affects many Government Departments.

I met representatives of Headway after the debate on 9 May, and I thank those who work with Headway and organisations such as the UK Brain Injury Forum. Such organisations are really valuable to people living with ABI. They raise awareness and provide help to support those with the condition, as well as families and carers. The hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) mentioned how important that is. I take on board the report of the all-party group, to which the Government responded, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rhondda and my right hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones).
In 2014, two years after the introduction of major trauma centres, there was an independent audit of the regional trauma networks, commissioned by NHS England. That audit showed that patients had a 30% improved chance of surviving severe injuries, and that the networks had saved 600 lives. That does not mean that they are perfect, but some progress has been made since their inception. Although the majority of rehabilitation care is locally provided, NHS England commissions specialised services for those patients with the most complex levels of need. For people who have ABI, timely and appropriate neuro-rehabilitation is an important part of their care.

I thank the APPG for all the work it has done on rehabilitation prescriptions, which reflect the assessment of the physical, functional, vocational, educational, cognitive, psychological and social rehabilitation needs of a patient, and are an important element of rehab care. Of course, the APPG report stated that all patients with ABI should benefit from an RP.

I will touch on lots of the points that Members have mentioned. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Rhondda for drawing the House’s attention to the third and final report of the audit, which was published in April 2019, only a few days before we last discussed this matter. It is encouraging that 94% of patients accessing specialist rehab have evidence of functional improvement, but the report suggests that there is more work to be done to ensure that all patients who could benefit from specialist rehabilitation can access it.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Does the Minister share my concern that there is no universal information for when people present at A&E or the doctor’s with a head injury? After I fell off a ladder in 2012, I was surprised that I was not given so much as a leaflet to say that there might be long-lasting effects. For people who have ABI, timely and appropriate neuro-rehabilitation is an important part of their care.

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Seema Kennedy: Does the Minister share my concern that there is no universal information for when people present at A&E or the doctor’s with a head injury? After I fell off a ladder in 2012, I was surprised that I was not given so much as a leaflet to say that there might be long-lasting effects. Some people are clearly good at picking it up, but it should be absolutely obvious that everyone who strikes their head should be given extra attention by the NHS in case they develop symptoms.

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The majority of rehab care is commissioned and managed locally and there are guidelines produced by NHS England, such as the principles and expectations for good adult rehabilitation, which describe what good rehabilitation care looks like. There is additional guidance that covers both adults and children.

Many hon. Members mentioned neuro-rehabilitation for children, and I know that NHS England is aware that there is variability in the provision for children. Best practice guidance was published in 2016, but there is always more to be done. I will take the points away and speak to NHS England. We are looking at how we can educate people on foetal alcohol syndrome, and I am happy to report back to the House on that.

The hon. Member for Newport West raised a specific issue about speech and language therapists and physiotherapists. I very much agree that we need a joined-up approach to care and I am concerned to hear that there is a gap. Members can make representations to NHS England on that. I know the situation is different in Wales, but I would be very happy if the hon. Lady would keep me informed.

The hon. Member for Rhondda raised the injury cost recovery scheme. Again, that is a matter for the DWP and I will be pressing ministerial colleagues to respond on that point. That scheme allows for the recovery of costs for providing treatment to an injured person where that person has made a successful personal injury claim against a third party. It recovers funds from insurance companies and pays into the NHS or hospital ambulance services. The current cap is around £53,000, renewed annually in line with inflation. I will follow up with more detail—the hon. Gentleman looks slightly sceptical.

Chris Bryant: I do.

Seema Kennedy: I have found it is always good to be sceptical in this place.

The NHS long-term plan was announced in January this year. There are some key actions designed to improve the care, treatment and support of people with long-term conditions, such as ABI. Community services, which play a crucial role in helping people with long-term conditions such as brain injury, remain as independent and well supported as possible and are to receive significant investment. The long-term plan set out £4.5 billion of new investment in primary and community care, including for expanded community multidisciplinary teams, providing rapid targeted support to those identified as having the greatest risks, including those with long-term health conditions.

There is also the comprehensive model of personalised care, which includes self-care, care planning, personal health budgets and social prescribing, and which we hope will reach 2.5 million people by 2023-24.

Jenny Chapman: I am worried about the long-term plan. Yes, brain injury is included, but so is just about everything else. My concern is that brain injury is getting lost and is not getting the priority it needs; although I appreciate the Minister taking the trouble to raise points and ask questions, that will not be sufficiently effective. We need something with more teeth. We need to be very clear what a patient can expect, what their rights are and what their family can do about it if those things are not provided. Trusts and whatever the structures are in the different parts of the country must be compelled to provide a certain level of service.
Seema Kennedy: I take the challenge set by the hon. Lady. On the question of the response to the audit, I will ask NHS England to show me how it is implementing that. Guidelines are great, and trusts should be doing certain things, but I accept that there is variability.

The hon. Member for Rhondda and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings used some great quotations in their speeches, so I will conclude my remarks with a quotation attributed to Sir Francis Drake, who said:

“There must be a beginning of any great matter, but the continuing until the end until it be thoroughly finished yields the true glory.”

Ministerial office is not something that I take for granted, but I hope that today’s debate has demonstrated how seriously this Government and this Minister take ABI and the devastating effects it can have on our constituents.

10.56 am

Chris Bryant: This has been a good debate and I am grateful to all those who have taken part. I am grateful to the Minister for what is, I think, her bearing down on NHS England, although she is sounding too nice about the way she is going to approach it.

Jenny Chapman: Nice is good.

Chris Bryant: Nice is good, obviously, but a little bit of bearing down is important. I am grateful to the UK Acquired Brain Injury Forum, Headway, Sue Ryder, the National Star College near Cheltenham and so many other organisations, including the Child Brain Injury Trust and the Disabilities Trust, who have done so much work in the field to inform us about a subject that was completely unknown to many of us, in the same way that it is unknown to so many members of the public.

To correct one element, perhaps we have given the impression that all is gloom. I have met so many people who have had brain injuries and whose personality change has been marked, but sometimes they have developed a phenomenally savage wit that they did not have before. There are people who have said, “Yes, it has changed me, but I have become a new person and that person can play a full part in society and has discovered other ways of appreciating life.” So let us not turn all of this into gloom. I just want us to be able to do better—to make sure that there are enough rehabilitation beds for every single person to get the improved care from which they could benefit.

I have met the deputy Prime Minister several times and I think it is really important that the Government now decide, as a matter of priority, to set up some taskforce—probably of junior Ministers, probably with this Minister at the helm—to drive forward this issue in all the different Departments that it affects. We could get the health bit right and lose out on so many other bits and, in the end, we would have failed the people we are talking about.

Who knows what will happen to the Government? Anybody who says they know what is going to happen to the Government later on this year is lying, but I wonder whether there might not be a moment now to say, “We are going to make this a priority. It is going to be a three-year taskforce and we are going to make sure that every single Department pulls its weight to make sure that we truly deliver.” As I said earlier, it is almost cruel to save lives and not give people the quality of life that they deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered acquired brain injury.
Religious Slaughter of Farm Animals

11 am

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

That this House has considered the religious slaughter of farm animals.

Before I get to the issue in the motion, I must say that free votes in the House are wonderful. Those moments when the party structures and the Whips withdraw from the debate—when there are no Whips to point to which Lobby to go through—allow each individual to engage with an issue using their own reason and judgment and can be incredibly refreshing for our politics. Some of the best-quality debates in Parliament take place under free-vote conditions. Cross-party alliances form and, in the end, the House tends to arrive at a sensible and proportionate consensus.

Of course, the party system developed because, if there were free votes on everything, the Government would not be able to get anything done or deliver any of their manifesto commitments, but issues of ethics and religious conviction have always been universally accepted as free-vote issues. For instance, we have free votes on same-sex marriages and on contentious issues such as abortion. My key contention is that religious slaughter should be made a free-vote issue by every party in the House.

Whitehall feels awkward about dealing with this complex issue and it is not sure what to recommend to Ministers. Governments of all shades have tended to leave the issue in the “Too difficult to address” box and have talked themselves into a stance that says, “Now is not the time to deal with it.” If we made it a free-vote issue for the House, we would liberate the Government of that burden of responsibility and, more importantly, liberate Parliament to address the issue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I spoke to the hon. Gentleman beforehand to get his thoughts about what he was going to say. In my council area of Ards, there was an abattoir that carried out some of the ritual killings and stunned and so on. It created jobs and stability and was an abattoir that carried out some of the ritual killings. When visiting a religious slaughter abattoir where it happened in our name, it is important to explain exactly what they are. For cattle, it typically takes 40 to 45 seconds for an animal to lose consciousness—just as the cut has taken place. I apologise to hon. Members for going on for a bit longer, but people will stun them.

George Eustice: I was going to come on to that. There is no barrier to using stunning for halal, provided it is what is called a recoverable stun. That same FSA report also worryingly revealed that 25% of all sheep slaughtered in the UK are slaughtered without stunning. That alarming rise is difficult to explain.

Our laws were formalised by the Slaughter of Animals Act 1933, where the exemptions for religious slaughter were maintained. They have evolved from that through various stages, but the current position has not changed much since 1995. The principal plank of our national requirements on religious slaughter mainly revolve around standstill times. In the case of non-stunned slaughter, sheep cannot be moved until they have lost consciousness or, in any event, for at least 20 seconds. Cattle cannot be moved for at least 30 seconds, or until the animal has lost consciousness. There is a different requirement for chickens, which cannot be moved to the next stage of production until 30 seconds have elapsed or the bird has become unconscious. The purpose of those standstill times is to prevent stress on the animal.

It is worth recognising how animals die in a non-stun slaughter situation. For sheep, most of the evidence suggests—I have discussed this with officials—that they typically lose consciousness in somewhere between 10 and 15 seconds. It takes slightly longer for chickens, which lose consciousness in between 15 and 18 seconds.

The greatest concern, however, is always the impact on bovine animals—cattle—although they are small in number, because their physiology is complicated by the fact that they have a third artery that goes to the back of the head that continues to supply blood even after the cut has taken place. I apoligise to hon. Members for going into the gruesome details, but if we allow such things to happen in our name, it is important to explain exactly what they are. For cattle, it typically takes 40 to 45 seconds for the animal to collapse—not to become unconscious, but to fall off its legs due to the lack of blood supply—and between one minute 20 seconds and two minutes for the animal to lose consciousness. A former Farming Minister, Jim Paice, once described a situation that he had seen when visiting a religious slaughter abattoir where it took six minutes for a bovine animal to bleed to death, which he said was a truly horrific event to watch.

I often hear from representatives of organisations such as Shechita UK that the cut is so precise and clean that it all happens very quickly, but there is not really any evidence to support that. In fact, in the shechita slaughter process, if the blood starts to clot in the throat cut, it is permitted for the slaughterman to push his hand into the wound and disturb the clotted blood to resume the flow. Those are difficult situations. For bovine animals in particular, it is a major cause for concern.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate and for his point about it being a moral issue. We rear animals as farmers and we want them to be stunned when they are killed. It is we—man—who decide how they are killed, not...
the animal. New Zealand has brought in stunning for all the halal it does across the world, and it exports a lot to the middle east. When we leave the European Union, we will have the opportunity to have a similar system.

With shechita, I wonder whether we could not at least have post-stunning of bovine animals. What my hon. Friend has described is horrendous and we need to do more to relieve the suffering of those animals.

**George Eustice:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. I will come to how other countries address this challenge.

All sorts of difficulties arise through our current rules on halal and shechita or kosher meat production. There are a wide range of definitions of halal. As hon. Members have pointed out, some statistics suggest that 70% to 80% of all animals slaughtered under halal are stunned. The key requirement for halal is that animals receive an Islamic blessing and that any stun should be recoverable, so that in theory they could regain consciousness. It is very hard to define what is halal, because it ranges from simply playing a recording of an Islamic blessing, right through to non-stun slaughter.

In the case of kosher meat, there is a further problem. The hind quarters of an animal are not deemed kosher, even if the animal was slaughtered under kosher methods. That means that the rump of cattle and sheep ends up going into the mainstream market—usually the service trade through Smithfield, where unwitting customers in restaurants in London and other parts of the country buy the meat not knowing it has been slaughtered by kosher methods.

**Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the labelling of meat, so that consumers know the exact method of slaughter when they order their food from restaurants or supermarkets, might be a way forward to address overproduction and allow consumers to make an informed choice?

**George Eustice:** Labelling is indeed one option, which I was going to come to. It does not get us all the way, because we have the service trade, where labelling would be ineffective at helping consumers to understand how their meat was slaughtered.

If we had a free vote in Parliament, what types of issues might we want to consider? Although this is a sensitive issue, it is important to ask whether our current derogation accommodates a religious need, or whether it is more a cultural interpretation of such a need. There is wide variance in what is defined as halal, depending on local imams.

**Mr Jonathan Djanogly** (Huntingdon) (Con): I am trying to look at the consistency of what my hon. Friend has said. He has acknowledged that, as far as Jewish koshering laws are concerned, the animal has to be killed in a certain way, and certain parts of the animal are not allowed. He started by saying that he would stop short of banning it altogether—I think those were the words he used. How can he reconcile those two things? If we were to have stunning, it would in effect be a ban.

**George Eustice:** I was going to come on to that. Even within the kosher community, there is not a universal view on whether post-cut stunning should be permitted.

A couple of years ago, I visited Kuwait and talked to a meat importer about the issue of halal production. He explained to me that the main requirement in Muslim countries in the middle east is that there is no pork contamination in the food they eat, which is why all their protocols focus predominantly on not sharing machinery between pork production and lamb, chicken or beef production, to ensure that there is no pork DNA. That is their primary concern, alongside ensuring that there has been an Islamic blessing of the food. When I explained to him that the issue of non-stun slaughter was contentious, he said it is predominantly a western cultural interpretation of the Muslim faith. Interestingly, non-stun slaughtered meat is not a particular requirement in middle eastern countries. There are exceptions, but generally speaking that is not their primary concern. Indeed, non-stun slaughter is banned in Australia and New Zealand, which are the largest lamb exporters to all countries across the middle east, from Israel right through to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

The other point about kosher meat is that Shechita UK insists that it is most certainly not a religious ritual, and a Hebrew blessing is not given. It is simply the case that the ancient holy books describe a method of slaughter that they believe remains the most humane approach. The principal concern for Shechita is that there should be no injury to an animal before it is presented for slaughter. They regard stunning as an injury to the animal—that is their particular concern—but that is not a universal view. There has been some rabbinical support for the idea of post-cut stunning, and we know that some abattoirs producing kosher meat allow post-cut stunning of bovine animals.

I turn now to some of the options that we could consider. My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) mentioned labelling, which is a complex area because there is no single definition of halal. The simplest way would be to label meat as un-stunned, because that is a clearly definable legal definition. That causes some concerns for Jewish communities. They argue that if we did do that, we should also list whether an animal has been killed through anaesthetic gas or electrocution, or all manner of other things. Farmwell, which is a leading charity in this area, established a system that all religious groups are willing to buy into: a coded approach of numbers from one to 10, denoting the method of slaughter. However, it does not deal with the problem of food entering the service trade, where unwitting customers would buy it.

There are a number of other things that we could do, including increasing the standstill time on bovine animals. The current limit of 30 seconds was probably due to a drafting error—we know that cattle do not lose consciousness that quickly. We could therefore move the minimum standstill time to at least one minute and 30 seconds or two minutes, to ensure that there is no movement of a bovine animal while it is still conscious. In conjunction, we could require a post-cut stun on all bovine animals, recognising that there is an issue with the physiology of bovines, which leads to a long and protracted death. I do not believe that a post-cut stun would violate the religious beliefs of either the Halal Food Authority or Shechita UK.

As an alternative, we could simply ban the non-stunned slaughter of bovine animals, recognising that there are issues with that. We could introduce a maximum standstill
time, which is the approach taken in countries such as the Netherlands and France, where there is a requirement to use a bolt gun if a period of, say, 40 seconds has elapsed after a cut has taken place and the animal has still not lost consciousness.

We could introduce more formal quotas for abattoirs, which is an interesting idea. It is already the law that only food destined for Muslims and Jews is permitted to be slaughtered under our current religious derogation, but we know that there is a real problem with the mainstreaming of religious slaughter. We know that that provision, as drafted in our law, is unenforceable. When I discussed that with departmental lawyers, their response was that if somebody maintains that they thought that the animal was destined for a religious community when they committed the slaughter, that is sufficient to satisfy the requirement, so it is entirely unenforceable. In Germany they have a much more sophisticated quota system. They make an assessment of the need of orthodox religious communities, and abattoirs must apply for a licence and demonstrate that they have an actual market for the food they are producing.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): If I am fortunate enough to catch your eye, Mr Rosindell, I will come back to the basic principle. On this specific point, Germany can do it, so why can we not do it? It is not good enough for departmental lawyers to say, “Oh, it’s all far too difficult,” which is effectively what my hon. Friend has said. There is a way through this. We know the market is oversupplied. It should be limited, should it not?

George Eustice: I agree that adopting a German-style model, whereby we put in place the measures and mechanisms necessary to enforce something that has been a facet of our law since at least 1933, makes a lot of sense, and is probably the easiest option for the Government, given the alarm that there has been about the growth of religious slaughter.

We could increase the period of standstill time before chickens move on to the next process. There is a very real concern at the moment that there is typically a moving shackle line for chickens, whose throats are cut randomly by people as they go past, but what happens if they miss a chicken? What happens if the chicken is not stunned through a water bath and they fail to cut its throat? The answer is that it probably proceeds to the next stage. There is a way through this. We know the market is oversupplied. It should be limited, should it not?

Giles Watling: It is known that in many cases stunning fails during the process. Should we not clean up our act on stunning, as well as taking on the issue of labelling? I hate to drag my hon. Friend back to that issue, but why can we not put labelling on menus too?

George Eustice: So-called mis-stunning is also an issue. I am not pretending that religious slaughter is the only welfare issue. Another area of concern, about which I commissioned some work when I was Minister, is the make-up of the gas mixture used in the slaughter of pigs, which was also problematic. Clearly, because it relates to pigs, it has no religious dimension whatever. There are other issues, and mis-stunning is one of them.

The point about mis-stunning is that even if they get it wrong, they are there immediately afterwards with a second stun, which can resolve the issue. I will conclude at that point, because we have only half an hour and the Minister will want to come back on some of these points. I seek to liberate him, the Government and all his successors from having to wrestle with this difficult issue. Instead, they should make it a free-vote issue and give it back to Parliament to decide.

11.22 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. It is good to hear the thoughts of my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who secured this debate on such an important subject.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): Does the Minister agree that there is no conclusive scientific evidence to suggest that shechita is any less acceptable than other forms of slaughter? Does he also agree that this country’s unwritten constitution has always made religious freedom a high priority? The changes that the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) suggests risk undermining the central tenet of our unwritten constitution, which is that religious freedom is important in our society.

David Rutley: I completely agree that religious freedom is essential. We had a fantastic prayer breakfast this morning, at which the principles of respect and tolerance were at the forefront of our minds.

On religious slaughter, I restate that the Government’s preference is that all animals should be stunned before slaughter. However, we respect the right of Jews and Muslims to eat meat prepared in accordance with their beliefs. We therefore allow the religious slaughter of animals by Muslims and Jews for intended consumption by them. The Government believe that that is an important element of religious freedom, and there is a long history of upholding it in legislation, dating back to the Slaughter of Animals Act 1933, which contained an exception from stunning for religious slaughter for Jews and Muslims.

When I spoke about religious slaughter in the debate in this Chamber just a couple of months ago, I said that the Secretary of State and I would be holding a roundtable with a number of interested parties, including religious groups, animal welfare organisations—some of which are here today—and industry representatives. That meeting took place in May, and was a positive and open discussion, with helpful contributions from all who attended. Key issues discussed during that roundtable were the welfare impacts of different slaughter methods, essential ways of improving consumer information, the scope of the labelling scheme and halal assurance.

I strongly believe that the way to make progress—notwithstanding the important contributions of hon. Members from across the political spectrum—is through a roundtable and ongoing constructive dialogue. It is important to remind ourselves that in EU and domestic regulations that protect the welfare of animals at the time of killing, there are additional rules for animals slaughtered in accordance with religious rites, specifically for the production of halal and kosher meat. The primary aim of the welfare at slaughter regulations, which are based on a body of scientific evidence and advice from
the European Food Safety Authority, is to ensure that animals are spared any avoidable pain, distress or suffering at the time of killing. It would be wrong to assume that the legal requirements for religious slaughter have not changed in the past 25 years.

Neil Parish: I thank the Minister very much for giving way. He is dealing with this issue in a very reasoned way, as always. The European law says that all animals should be stunned, and there is a derogation to allow religious slaughter. We have to be careful not to wrap this up too much in the European situation. As we leave the EU, we must be much firmer on how we label and how we manage it, and we must ensure that more animals are not stunned than are needed for particular religions. We can do a lot more, so will the Minister speed up the operation? I fear that it is one of these slow operations that is not getting anywhere.

David Rutley: I would be surprised if the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee did not want faster action, as he regularly does. I hope he sees that we are upping the pace on animal welfare, with his support, for which I am grateful.

There are sensitivities on both sides—from a welfare perspective and a respecting religious freedom perspective—which we have to navigate our way through. This is an important debate, and the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth made in his well-considered speech must be taken into account. He mentioned New Zealand. I recently met one of the New Zealand Ministers of Agriculture, and we discussed this subject. I am aware that New Zealand has a quality assurance programme for halal, which we can look into. Some people suggested that Australia has a similar programme, but there is some non-stunned religious slaughter there in eight abattoirs. The focus should be on what New Zealand has to offer.

Mention was made of whether immediate post-cut stunning should be introduced to improve the welfare of animals killed without prior stunning, but when we look at that we must respect religious views. We are committed to continuing this dialogue and debate. The area that we should focus on, because it brings most people together, is labelling.

Mr Ivan Lewis: It is very kind of the Minister to give way. He will understand that there is a great deal of insecurity in the British Jewish community as a consequence of institutional antisemitism in the Opposition party. Will he reassure that community, which feels insecure and anxious, that the Government will under no circumstances ban shechita, which is a central tenet of the Jewish faith, in the United Kingdom?

David Rutley: I assure Muslim and Jewish communities that we respect their freedoms. Through this debate and the roundtable process that we have put in place, we want to balance those religious freedoms with what more can be done to improve the welfare of animals. That is difficult, but not impossible, to juggle. Through dialogue, we can move forward and learn from what has taken place in other countries around the world. It must be done in the unique spirit of co-operation in this country. That should be respected by all parties in this House. I get the sense from this debate that people respect that requirement and the need to look more at animal welfare.

I think that the way forward is to look at these issues, consider the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth, look at the mechanisms we have got through the roundtable forum that we have created, and move that on. We can focus more on labelling. We must engage with the communities and the industry to see how we can take this further forward. Our exit from the EU will provide an opportunity to do that with more conviction and at greater pace. I am sure that will please the Chair of the EFRA Committee. Thank you for your support in this debate, Mr Rosindell.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
As a helpful assistant, I can provide a plain text representation of this document. Here is the converted text:

**World War Two: Polish Contribution**

[**Mark Pritchard in the Chair**]

2.30 pm  

Daniel Kawczynski: I beg to move, That this House has considered the Polish contribution to UK war effort in World War Two.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of the summer of 1939 was designed to annihilate and destroy Poland and the Polish nation. [Interruption.]

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry, Mr Kawczynski, but I remind those in the Public Gallery not to take photographs, as it is not permitted in Westminster Hall.

Daniel Kawczynski: The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of the summer of 1939 was designed to destroy and annihilate the Poles. On 1 September 1939, a few weeks after that treaty between the Germans and Russians was signed, the brutal invasion of Poland by German forces took place. Despite so much subjugation—so many cities were destroyed and so many Poles were imprisoned, and tyranny was imposed on Poland in 1939 and thereafter—Poles themselves refused to be subjugated.

Poles share our values of freedom and are determined to be free people. They came from Poland in unprecedented numbers to join up with British forces and fight with their British counterparts in 1939 and 1940. The Polish Government-in-exile came to be based in London. Thanks to the hospitality and generosity of the British Government, the Polish Government-in-exile operated in London until 1989 and the fall of communism in Poland, when a democratic and legitimate Government was finally restored to Poland. The most important battle in which they participated was the Battle of Britain.

Today, I again had the great honour of speaking with Lord Tebbit about his views on the Battle of Britain. One of the most enjoyable things that I have done in my 14 years as a Member of Parliament was to join Lord Tebbit at the RAF club for an Anglo-Polish dinner, where he was the guest speaker. He said something that really resonated with me, that I will always remember, that I wanted to share with the House. According to Lord Tebbit, the Royal Air Force and the Luftwaffe were so evenly matched in the summer of 1940 that the British side was beginning to lose that battle. Those were the words of Lord Tebbit, not my own.

Lord Tebbit said that replacing the planes was relatively easy—continuing production in armaments factories and creating the planes was fine—but that replacing the pilots was extremely difficult. We all know how long it takes to train a pilot, and it was very difficult to replace all the losses. According to him, the Poles coming in such unprecedented numbers to join to British forces in the summer of 1940 was what tipped the balance to the British side.

Last year, two wonderful films were released in the United Kingdom: “Hurricane” and “303 Squadron”. I have spoken about those films to colleagues, who have then watched them, and I urge you, Mr Pritchard, as my Shropshire neighbour, to watch them if you have the opportunity. They are modern-day accounts to share with the next generations the extraordinary heroism, courage and determination of those Polish pilots who fought in the Battle of Britain. The Polish 303 Squadron shot down more enemy aircraft than any other squadron in the Battle of Britain. Although it is the most famous squadron, it was only one of 16 Polish squadrons embedded in the RAF.

There are now 1 million Poles in the United Kingdom, and we benefit enormously from their contribution to our country. In the past, I have heard people talking about Poles coming to live and work here and how dependent we are on Polish plumbers and other professions, but we were so dependent on those highly skilled and brave Poles who came in 1940.

Last week, I met Mr Burakowski, the new editor of the Shrewsbury Chronicle, which is the main newspaper in my constituency. He told me about the experiences of his father, who was one of those Poles who came over during the second world war and was part of a bombing squadron.

The Poles were led out of captivity in the Soviet Union by the famous General Anders—we have on many occasions invited his daughter, Senator Anna Maria Anders, to address the Polish diaspora in the House of Commons. General Anders brought many Polish soldiers from captivity in the Soviet Union, through Iran, to join up with British forces in Palestine, where they were equipped and trained before joining the British 8th Army. Before the revolution in Libya, I had the opportunity to visit British and Polish graves, side by side in cemeteries in Tripoli and Tobruk. It was so poignant to see just how young those boys were—in certain cases, they were 19, 20 or 21. The British and Poles fought side by side in desert terrain in Libya, hundreds of miles from their homes, so young and with so much ahead of them—the opportunity perhaps to have children and to live full and successful lives. Yet at the age of 19 or 20, they sacrificed their lives together to fight the tyranny of fascism. That is why we remember them and their sacrifices today.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): We have a Polish community in Coventry. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will talk about Polish heroism at Monte Cassino, because that was quite a battle, and casualties were very high among Polish troops.

Daniel Kawczynski: I will come on to Monte Cassino shortly.

The battle of El Alamein was the turning point in the whole north African campaign. Anybody who has studied maps of the battlefront and topography of El Alamein will realise the extraordinary importance of landmines in that operation. A Pole, Józef Kosacki, invented the mine detector, which was successfully used for the first time in 1941, in El Alamein. As I said, that battle was the turning point in the north African campaign. The allied forces and the axis powers were very finely balanced at that juncture in 1941. Imagine if we had lost and Rommel’s forces had managed to push forward beyond Egypt and take the oil fields of the middle east. The events that unfolded in the second world war may have been very different. We therefore celebrate the great contribution of Józef Kosacki, a great Pole who died in 1990 and who invented the mine detector.
The hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) mentioned Monte Cassino. Once the Polish and British forces had gone through El Alamein and Tobruk, retaken Benghazi and Tripoli, and gone through Tunisia, they came up through Sicily and the spine of Italy, finally reaching the Gustav line, which was part of the most strongly fortified, highly elevated defences across the spine of Italy, which were perceived to be impregnable. The most difficult part of the Gustav line was Monte Cassino itself. On 18 May 1944, at 9.45 am, a patrol of the 12th Podolski Lancers Regiment reached the ruins of Monte Cassino. They put a Polish flag there, followed shortly by a British flag.

It is easy to talk about some of those sacrifices and statistics, but today in my House of Commons office I watched the YouTube video of the battle at Monte Cassino—hand-to-hand combat, throwing grenades at each other, and being fired upon all the time. It was perceived to be one of the bloodiest and most difficult battles on the whole of the western front during the second world war. At Monte Cassino alone, the Poles lost 923 men who died, 2,931 injured and 345 reported missing. It is in the lexicon of the whole of the Polish narrative—all Poles carry Monte Cassino close to their heart.

I had better stop talking about Monte Cassino, or I will start to well up. A song called “The Red Poppies on Monte Cassino” symbolised the extraordinary amount of blood spilled by Polish soldiers to reach the top in order to liberate it. We are not allowed to speak in foreign languages in the Chamber, but in Polish the song is called “Czerwone maki na Monte Cassino”, which translates as “The Red Poppies on Monte Cassino”.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend and neighbour for giving way and for his wonderful speech. Has he had the opportunity to visit the National Memorial Arboretum in my county of Staffordshire, which has a statue of a Polish soldier at Monte Cassino, as well as three other statues of Polish servicemen? The statue was unveiled about 10 years ago in a fitting memorial to the huge contribution made by Polish forces during the second world war.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and neighbour for mentioning that. These Westminster Hall debates throw up all this interesting information, including about the arboretum in his constituency, and I very much encourage members of the public watching the debate on television throughout our country to take advantage of a visit to Lichfield, near his constituency, to look at the wonderful arboretum and at that memorial.

General Anders, who led the Polish forces at Monte Cassino, said:

“Twenty days under constant fire, in terrible conditions, seven days of fierce struggle to break German defences...It was not just the Battle of Cassino, it was a battle for Poland.”

That was from his book, “Without the Last Chapter”.

Recently, we saw the commemoration of the D-day landings on television. Our Prime Minister joined Mr Morawiecki, the Polish Prime Minister, on the 75th anniversary of those important landings. D-day, 1944, was the start of the liberation of the whole of the continent of Europe. Again, the Poles were there at D-day, even though only the month before they were fighting at Monte Cassino. Polish airmen took part in protecting the convoys of soldiers moving towards Normandy. Polish ships took part in Operation Neptune, the naval part of the D-day landings. And, later in the campaign, the Polish 1st Armoured Division, attached to the British and Canadian forces, landed to take part in the fighting around the Falaise pocket.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will my hon. Friend add to that list of Polish contributions to the second world war three mathematicians whose work helped to make the breaking of Enigma possible, which ended the war earlier by at least two years?

Daniel Kawczynski: I have a little section on that later in my speech.

In Operation Market Garden, when the allies tried to shorten the war by landing in the Netherlands, Polish paratroopers took part in unprecedented numbers with their British counterparts. Again, I have had the opportunity to visit the Polish and British cemeteries in the Netherlands, and to see the same recurring theme: the sheer youth of those young men who together gave up their lives so that we might have freedom.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) mentioned Bletchley Park. He is absolutely right, because Polish mathematicians and code breakers came over from Poland. Sir Dermot Turing, a relative of Alan Turing, in his book, “The Real Story of How Enigma Was Broken”, highlighted the unique, outstanding and overwhelming contribution of Polish mathematicians and cryptographers to breaking the Enigma codes. I cannot begin to explain how important that was. It gave us the opportunity to understand where German positions and movements would be forthcoming, allowing us to shorten the war by, some suggest, at least two years—my hon. Friend alluded to this—and potentially saving hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives. I will put three gentlemen on the record: Marian Rejewski, Jerzy Różycki and Henryk Zygalski. For someone born in Poland, even I have difficulty pronouncing those surnames—"I dread to think what the people in Hansard will do with them, so I hope that I pronounced them correctly."

Recently, a book was donated to the House of Commons Library, and only two weeks ago we had an exhibition here in the House of Commons, about a lady called Krystyna Skarbek—or Granville. According to legend, she was Winston Churchill’s favourite spy. She was a young Polish lady who was dropped behind enemy lines on many occasions. She was instrumental in reconnaissance and in helping to ensure that sabotage against German forces was co-ordinated effectively.

Despite all such extraordinary contributions—my hon. Friends and other hon. Members will acknowledge that Poland made them—the Clement Attlee Government refused to allow Polish soldiers to take part in the victory parade on 8 June 1946, for fear of offending Joseph Stalin. By that stage, that dictator had already managed to impose a brutal, tyrannical communist puppet regime in Poland, but for fear of upsetting him we in this country decided to exclude the Polish forces from the victory parade.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and on his tremendous speech. In Suffolk, we are
aware of the contribution made from Norfolk and Suffolk by the Polish air force in support of the war effort. On that point—a good one about the failure of the Attlee Government to recognise the contribution of the Polish community, army and air force in the war—next year, 75 years on from VE-day, we could help to put right that wrong by better recognising the Polish contribution to the war effort?

Daniel Kawczynski: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. I want to take this opportunity to say that, as a fluent Polish speaker—or attempting to be fluent; it is a very difficult language—when I go to Poland and speak to people in English, what they say is quite different from what they say when I talk to them in Polish. They are very friendly to the British—they love them and want to work with them—but that is still a source of real pain for the Poles. He touches on a very important issue: how do we repair what happened in 1946? How do we engage and work with the Polish diaspora here in the United Kingdom to create a new monument, or do something to ensure that their unique contribution is highlighted? We have a Polish war memorial in Northolt, but in the run-up to many anniversaries can we do something in addition, yet again to celebrate the contribution of Poles and educate the younger generations about their unique contribution?

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Daniel Kawczynski: I will, to a fellow Pole—half-Pole—from the Labour party.

Paula Sherriff: Dziękuję. As the hon. Gentleman knows, my paternal grandfather was Polish; he served in the Polish merchant navy, which is what brought him to the UK. I would love to work with the hon. Gentleman on creating a lasting memorial to all the Poles who contributed so much. My grandfather, Mięczysław Bańki, was very proud to be Polish to his fingertips. Equally, he thought the UK had given him a wonderful life; he brought up his children here, had a career and was incredibly grateful for everything that Britain and the Queen had done for him. A lasting memorial would be very appropriate.

Daniel Kawczynski: We Poles have to stick together. I would be delighted to work with the hon. Lady and anybody else who is cognisant of the unique contribution of Poles to our country, and who wants to demonstrate to the 1 million Poles living in the United Kingdom that we value them, cherish their contribution to our country and are determined to work together to remember these things, even in the modern age. We may be leaving the European Union, but we are not leaving Europe. It is very important to remember that Poland will continue to be an important ally for us in NATO.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has done an excellent job detailing the contribution made across the services in every year of the war. That often is not appreciated, although it certainly is in my constituency, which houses the Polish social and cultural organisation POSK, to which all Members are welcome. I thought he was a little sectarian by talking about the Attlee Government; I am sure he would pay tribute to that Government for passing the Polish Resettlement Act 1947, which was the first mass migration Act that enabled citizenship for about 200,000 Poles who fought in the war.

Daniel Kawczynski: I very much acknowledge that, and I assure the hon. Gentleman that I was not trying to make a party political point. I deliberately said “Attlee Government,” rather than “Labour Government,” but I acknowledge his point about their subsequent achievements to protect the rights of Polish people to remain and settle here.

The first thing I gave to Jonathan Knott, the British ambassador to Warsaw, when he came to visit us was a copy of a book outlining Operation Unthinkable, which was Churchill’s plan basically to do the unthinkable: to carry on by beyond Berlin and liberate Warsaw. Of course, we had declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939 because of our treaty obligations to Poland. The Poles were sad and concerned that a second front against Germany was not possible in 1939 and early 1940 by the French and the British. At that juncture, the Poles were left to defend themselves, fighting the Germans on one side and the Russians on the other. Towards the end of the war, Churchill wanted to promote those plans to liberate Warsaw, but unfortunately he was thwarted by Roosevelt, Stalin and others. Poland was then subjugated to 50 years of brutal tyrannical communist regime.

I believe I am the only Conservative MP who was born in a communist country. I know what communism is, what it looks like and how it feels. I used to go back every year to see my beloved grandfather, Roman Kawczynski, under communism. What our fellow Europeans went through, being subjugated to a politically Orwellian and economically illiterate system, is beyond comprehension. One reason why the Polish have needed help in the post-communist era to rebuild their country, their industries and their infrastructure is the appalling impact that communism had on their country.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): At the beginning of my hon. Friend’s speech he referred to the terrible pact between Hitler and Stalin that paved the way for the second world war. I think he also ought to make some reference to the fact that when the underground army rose up in 1944, and we wished to supply them with air drops and munitions, the Russians refused to allow our transport aircraft to operate from their bases to help support the Poles in that uprising. I know that my hon. Friend is mainly concerned with the Polish contribution to the effort in Britain, but we should not forget those people in Poland who saved the remnants of families such as mine from extermination by hiding Jewish people at the risk of their own lives.

Daniel Kawczynski: I chair the all-party parliamentary group on Poland—if any hon. Members have not joined, they had better do so, and I very much invite them to. I think we have 62 Members, making us one of the larger all-party groups. When we take regular delegations of British MPs to Poland, we go to see a memorial in Warsaw where one of those British planes crashed in a park while trying to supply food and weapons to the underground fighters in the Warsaw uprising. They were taking on the Germans in the summer of 1944 while the Russians stayed on the other side of the river, allowing the slaughter to take place on an unprecedented scale. I would like my
right hon. Friend to know that we laid flowers at the monument in the park where the British plane crashed. He is absolutely right; Stalin refused to allow the British planes, flying from Italy—I think Ancona or somewhere on the coast—to land in Warsaw. They had to fly all the way there, drop the equipment and fly back.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend’s reference to the sacrifices of Poles in helping their Jewish friends and neighbours during the second world war. Members of my family were shot by the Germans for hiding Jews on our estate in western Poland. Poland was the only country in occupied Europe with the death penalty for helping Jewish people. People knew exactly what they were doing when they hid and protected Jews. In my family’s case, the Germans made my relative watch as they shot his 12-year-old daughter first, then his wife, and then him. His crime was hiding Jewish friends and neighbours. That is something we will never forget and will always pass on to our children and the next generation.

The alliance with Poland today is very strong. We have 1 million Poles living, working and contributing to our country. In a post-Brexit world, their rights will be afforded.

When we go to Poland, we meet soldiers who are working on a rotational basis in north-east Poland. We already have 150 British soldiers in the Suwałki gap; I hope that is a prelude to a permanent NATO base—or maybe even a permanent British base—in eastern Poland. The Americans are already talking to their Polish counterparts about an American base in Poland, so I hope that we will follow suit.

I have received a two-page letter from the Royal British Legion; I am not sure whether representatives have managed to come here today. It outlines what its Remember Together campaign is doing to engage with our country. In a post-Brexit world, their rights will be afforded.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. I am not going to put a formal time limit on speeches at the moment—it is still fluid—but if Members could keep to five minutes, that would be great.

3.1 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It is customary on these occasions to say what a pleasure it is to serve under the chairmanship of whoever happens to be in the Chair, and, Mr Pritchard, in this particular case it is a real pleasure as you have a true knowledge, understanding and sympathy for this subject and for the point we are discussing. I congratulate the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on securing the debate. Many a time we have stood opposite each other, divided by politics but united by our affection, respect and admiration for the heroic Poles of yesterday and today.

You may ask, Mr Pritchard, why it is necessary for us to repeat this litany of heroism. It has been done before and it may be done again. It is essential that we do so. First, I cannot think of any other example in British history where so small a group of people achieved so much. I will not quote Churchill—he was talking of something different—but in all honesty we owe so much to those few Poles who came here.

Secondly, we have come to acknowledge, respect and understand the contributions that the Poles make comparatively recently. When I was a young man growing up in Hammersmith, I remember friends who were actually called Malgosia described themselves as Margaret and every Pawel called himself Paul. Everybody seemed to conceal their Polishness; we did not understand that they were Polish. Polish history was something we did not know about or understand. It was only with the Polish millennium in 1966—which coincided with the World cup, in which the Poles supported us when we were playing against Germany—that the Poles started to emerge as a people. Even then, we did not understand about Polish history.

I am from west London, born and bred; I know the Katyn memorial and the Northolt Polish war memorial. There are still people, such as our excellent Polish ambassador, who will always wear the red and white insignia of 303 Squadron; I see some people in the Gallery are wearing it today. The contribution that that Polish squadron, based at RAF Northolt, made has been adumbrated by the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham; it was extraordinary. We need say no more, except to say that anyone who knows anything about the conduct of the darkest days of the second world war will hang their head in shame if the heroic contribution and the blood sacrifice made by those Polish fighter pilots is not acknowledged.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is speaking with his customary force and eloquence. He is right to say that those living in west London might immediately have that understanding, but does he agree that we need to ensure that that acknowledgment is felt throughout our country? In my constituency, I have been pleased to go along to Polish days where I have been at pains to emphasise that. We need a way of ensuring that everyone in our country can fully understand the sacrifice of those brave Polish airmen and women.

Stephen Pound: That is an excellent point. It is almost as if I had asked the hon. Gentleman to ask that question, but it has been a long time since I have been in the Whips Office. That is an important point. I will talk about Scotland particularly, in a moment.

We need say no more about the Polish contribution to the RAF—it has been said before and it must be said again—but I turn to the heroism of the Polish army. Those who fought with General Anders walked, marched and, in some cases, crawled from Siberia through the
whole of Iran to north Africa, to turn the tide in El Alamein. As we have heard, they fought from Tobruk up through Sicily and into the impregnable mountain fortress and Benedictine monastery that could not be broken, Monte Cassino, which was occupied by a crack division of German paratroopers—in fact, the crack division of the Luftwaffe.

Those paratroopers held out against one of the biggest combined armies that has ever been assembled. There was a New Zealand regiment made up entirely of Māori, as well as people from north Africa, France, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and the United States; but there was one group of people—the Poles—who fought their way from hilltop to hilltop, up that precipitous mound, and planted the red and white flag in the still-smoking ruins of Monte Cassino. With the nobility that typifies those people, General Anders’s army then planted the Union flag. I have climbed that hill and seen how difficult it must have been, but my memory is not just of the beautiful and newly restored Benedictine monastery; it is of the graveyard at the foot of Monte Cassino. There is an allied graveyard and a Polish graveyard. Why? There were so many Poles who died that they could not be incorporated into the allied graveyard.

At the base of that graveyard is one grave that stands alone; it is always covered in flowers, either red roses or poppies—poppies, for the poppies in the snow. It is the grave of General Anders, one of the great heroes. Like the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham, I recently had the honour of meeting Senator Anders and to briefly discuss those days. There are three sets of headstones in that graveyard: some with the Orthodox cross; some with the Star of David, because Jewish Poles fought in that graveyard: some with the Christian cross.

One of the utter tragedies is that while General Mark Clark was racing towards Rome, where the photographers were waiting for him, General Anders was told by the Supreme Commander of the British forces that there would be no return to Poland. He was told that for all the Poles had done, that was it. Because of the pact with the brutal dictator we have heard about, there would not be a British supported return to Poland. As a human being and a hero, General Anders could have done what many of us would have done; he could have said, “In that case we are going home. We are throwing down our rifles, we are taking off our packs and we are leaving.” Anders did not do that. He said, “We fight on,” and fight on they did. That typifies the strength and determination of the Polish people.

I want to touch on an area that has not been toughed on in any detail, and that is the extraordinary contribution of the Polish naval forces. In 1939, the Polish navy was in quite good condition. It was a modern navy, with submarines. It managed to escape from Gdansk and the seaports in north Poland to Leith, the port of Edinburgh, where the flagship, the Piorun—which is Polish for submarine—was laid down in the John Brown shipyard as the HMS Narissa. She was renamed and crewed entirely by Poles. These Polish ships, which came under the command of the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, made an incredible contribution in theatres of war from Narvik, Dunkirk, the Lofoten Islands and Tobruk, as well as the Murmansk convoys, where the grandfather of my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) sailed with them, to the Normandy landings.

In two particular areas, the Polish navy made an incredible contribution; I beg your indulgence, Mr Pritchard, in allowing me to mention them briefly. The first was the awful night of 13 March 1941, when more than 1,000 people in Glasgow were killed. It was called the Clydebank Blitz. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) who introduced a debate on the Floor of the House about that subject. John Brown’s shipyard and the Singer factory next to it were bombed ruthlessly, and Clydebank and Hardgate, and virtually that whole part of Glasgow, were destroyed. The opposition to the Luftwaffe was led by the Piorun. She was in harbour, undergoing repairs. She had six anti-aircraft guns and some old refitted Bofors guns—which we used to call pom-poms. She fought off the second wave of the Luftwaffe. How many lives she saved I cannot even begin to think. It is extraordinary to think that Piorun was laid down in the very shipyard that she then defended, having sailed from there to Poland and back again. It is almost as if she was born to defend her birthplace, as many a Pole would say.

The second thing is the extraordinary occurrences of May 1941 when the hinge of history was turning. The Germans had massive naval superiority. They had the two best ocean raiders in the world: Bismarck and Tirpitz. They also had the best heavy cruisers: Gneisenau and Scharnhorst. Had they got out into the north Atlantic, our supply routes from Canada and America would have been finished. There would have been no opportunity whatever for us to continue the war at sea. Tirpitz, as we know, was destroyed in the fjords of Norway by the RAF, but Bismarck had earlier that year, in the battle of the Denmark strait, not only destroyed the British taskforce, but sunk the pride of the Royal Navy: the mighty Hood. Many matelots of my father’s generation still say the old “Andrew” died with the Hood. She was the pride of our Navy and Bismarck sunk her and moved on.

In May, Admiral Tovey and taskforce H were sent, under the instructions of Churchill, to the area off the Norwegian coast to sink the Bismarck. Who was there at the front of that? Not just Rodney and Repulse, but Piorun, the Polish destroyer that steamed ahead as fast as she could, and, it is said, did not even wait for embarkation orders. She left Scotland and headed straight for the battlefield. Then, as we know, Bismarck had her steering gear crippled by a Fairey Swordfish torpedo and was slightly reduced in her manoeuvrability, but she still had powerful weapons: eight 15-inch guns in four turrets. Piorun was one of the ships in that taskforce that on 25 May 1941 received probably the most significant message received in the sea war in the last war, and it came from Bletchley. It came from a Polish interpreter who had managed to break the codes, and it told precisely what the German admiral was doing. Even though Piorun was then straddled at 12,000 metres by a complete bombardment from Bismarck, she carried on. Some say she delivered the coup de grace; some say she was the last torpedo fired into Bismarck.

I will close by saying two things. Betrayal is an ugly word, but I think that in some ways the Poles were betrayed at the end of the war. We compensated with the 1947 legislation, but in some ways we let the Poles down. I would say that the Poles never, ever let us down. It is not for me to make an obvious pro-European pro-EU statement, but it is not wonderful what we can
achieve when we fight together in a common cause? If ever I have to fight anyone anywhere at any time, let it be with our brothers and sisters of the free republic of Poland, some of the bravest and most heroic people it has ever been my honour to know.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): We were going to go down to four-minute speeches, but the Minister has kindly given up five minutes of Front-Bench time, so we are back up to five minutes. Can we stick to five minutes, please?

3.13 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on securing the debate and on his excellent and moving speech. It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) and his wonderful speech.

I want to contribute for two reasons. First, because RAF Tangmere in my constituency played such a pivotal role during the Battle of Britain, and secondly, to thank the Polish pilots, many of whom took to the skies to defend our country and fight for theirs. Their efforts in the second world war were vital and must never be forgotten.

RAF Tangmere and Westhampnett was the most southerly RAF fighter command base during the battle of Britain. It played an historic role in the defence of our country during our darkest hour over the summer of 1940. Many of “the few”, as they became known, including revered pilots such as Douglas Bader and Billy Fiske, flew from Tangmere. The Polish 302 and 303 Squadrons did not fly from Tangmere, but today their contribution has been marked by the Tangmere Military Aviation Museum, which stands on the site of the old RAF airfield.

Last summer the museum held an exhibition focused solely on the contribution made by Polish and Czech air crews: their pilots and their highly skilled crews who came to our country to fight the Nazis after their homeland had been invaded and occupied. More than 4,000 people visited the exhibition over a six-week period, and I was very pleased to meet veterans who had served, and several young people from Poland who were keen to research the roles that their grandfathers and uncles had played in world war two.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Lady refers to young people attending, but does she agree with me that although it is exceptionally important that the generations would we represent here are made aware and reminded of the bravery and sacrifices that were made, it is even more important that future generations remember it so that the mistakes of the past are not repeated?

Gillian Keegan: I completely agree, and that means that this debate and the continuation of memorials, exhibitions, museums and celebrations will always be important for future generations.

The Imperial War Museum records that 145 Polish men fought alongside our pilots during that fateful time, and that period they destroyed 204 enemy aircraft. The people of Britain owe their liberty in part to their heroism. I am proud that in Chichester we play our part in continuing to remember them. As many Members have mentioned, Poland’s contribution to our war effort goes far beyond the battle of Britain. The Nazi occupation of Poland was one of the most brutal of the war. Poland was carved up with Stalin under the German-Soviet non-aggression pact and the German-occupied zone became known as the General Government, which was placed under the control of Hitler’s lawyer, a ruthless Nazi called Hans Frank, who was later hanged at Nuremberg.

Although divided, occupied, brutalised and stripped of their identity, the Poles fought on and continued to resist, and 1943 saw the heroic Warsaw uprising by the Jewish community. Later in 1944, the entire population of Warsaw did the same in a heroic effort to liberate their capital city from the Nazi tyranny.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Lady for recognising the Jewish efforts in the war. In September 1939, there were 150,000 Jews serving in the Polish army in that campaign. Many went to fight in the Polish Free Army in France and in the United Kingdom. Just as many fought as partisans and in the Warsaw uprising. My own grandfather, Maksymilian Sobel, fought on the German front as part of the Polish army on the eastern front and commanded the independent motor battalion during the battle of Dresden. I want to put that on the record.

Gillian Keegan: I am glad the hon. Gentleman—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. A couple of people have come in late and I have been flexible and allowed them to intervene, but coming in pretty much halfway through the debate pushes the envelope, so may I remind all hon. Members to please attend from the beginning of the debate? We all run slightly late, but to come in halfway through and expect to speak is, as I say, pushing the envelope, however good the contribution might be.

Gillian Keegan: The heroism of the two uprisings by the Polish are the greatest acts of resistance against tyranny that the world has ever seen. It is an enduring stain on the record of the Soviet Union’s wartime history that Stalin ordered his troops encircling Warsaw to do nothing while the Nazis put down the uprising and destroyed much of the city.

It is important to highlight the cruel fact that the majority of the Nazi death camps were built in Poland. Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor and Majdanek were all in Poland. Those camps are believed to be where 3 million people were murdered. Over the course of the war, Poland lost 6 million of its citizens, half of whom were Jewish. We remembered them on international Holocaust Memorial Day this year in Speaker’s House, where I was proud that a Chichester choir performed the holocaust opera, “Push”, to Members of both Houses of Parliament.

There can be no doubt whatever that Poland played a huge part in the war effort both in the UK and in resisting at home. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham for securing the debate and I assure him that in Chichester we will never forget the bravery of our Polish friends and allies.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. May I first thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for obtaining it? He said that he found some Polish words challenging. In the area that I come from, we have a strong tradition of service with the Polish during the second world war, and if we added the Polish language to Ulster Scots, he would really be challenged. As an Ulster Scot, I will try not to say anything in Polish because it will all come over the wrong way.

I am something of a history buff—my boys would say that I am more of a history geek. On the years when I am able to take a holiday, I read perhaps eight biographies or history books, and I have recently enjoyed learning more about the Battle of Britain, during which the Poles truly excelled. Right hon. and hon. Members have spoken of memorials across the United Kingdom. The first such memorial was built by Ards and North Down Borough Council, with some crowdfunding and working with For Your Freedom and Ours, to celebrate 100 years of Polish independence, as well as the Royal Air Force and Polish Air Force centenaries. A permanent monument has been erected at the Cenotaph in Newtownards, in the middle of Strangford. It was unveiled by the daughters of Polish airmen who were stationed in Ballyhalbert and who met and married local girls and raised their children there.

We have a strong association with Poland in the constituency that I am privileged to represent. That is why there is such interest in the Polish Air Force in particular and its marvellous contribution. The monument is dedicated to the memory of the Polish airmen who lost their lives in the Battle of Britain and other theatres of the second world war. It is in remembrance of 303 Squadron and 315 Squadron—Polish fighter squadrons that were stationed at RAF Ballyhalbert—and all the members of the Polish forces buried in Northern Ireland. The sacrifices and courage of the Polish Air Force during the second world war were instrumental in our victory. Many have said it, and I can say it in all honesty because I know what happened and the contribution made in my constituency. Indeed, Air Vice Marshal David Niven informed us at the memorial unveiling that the Battle of Britain might well have ended very differently without the practical knowhow and courage of the Polish Air Force station in Ballyhalbert. The contribution was significant, and made a big difference. As we leave the EU, the bonds that bring us together through military service and now NATO will last well beyond Brexit. Other hon. Members have said it, and it will not change. The bonds remain strong, and we have a lot to be thankful for, which is why I am thankful for today’s motion, which seeks to recognise the part played by the Polish in our ultimate victory. We owe them so much.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for securing this important debate.

The United Kingdom is indebted to the Polish service personnel who fought in various campaigns on the ground, in the air and at sea during world war two. Their assistance proved invaluable to the allied war effort. Polish navy vessels and sailors augmented the British fleet. Polish service personnel served proudly, not only alongside the Royal Navy but with the Royal Air Force. It is worth noting that 5% of pilots in the Battle of Britain were Polish and it is said that they were responsible for at least 12% of total victories. 303 (Polish) Fighter Squadron was recognised as the most successful of any allied squadron and four Polish officers were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

I have to declare a personal interest in the contribution of the Polish people in supporting the British Army. My late uncle Frederick Kaiser, commonly known as Freddie, was born in Ruda Słaska, Poland, on the Germany-Poland border, and had to leave his homeland at 17 years of age, when war broke out in 1939—never to see his mother again. Uncle Freddie fought in the Polish Army and was injured in the Ardennes forest in Belgium, where he suffered shrapnel wounds to both legs. He was more fortunate than one of his fellow soldiers, who died that day in the bunker they shared. Uncle Freddie was flown to a Polish Army hospital at Invergordon in Scotland and, once recovered, he was based at the Castle Army Camp in Johnstone, Renfrewshire, which I understand housed an infantry battalion. That was one of many camps throughout Scotland where members of the Polish Army were hosted.

Major P. R. Reid MBE, in his Colditz trilogy, acknowledges the assistance of the Polish people and the Polish Red Cross with his research. His accounts of world war two include references to the collaboration between British and Polish service personnel. In the final book, “Colditz: The Full Story”, Major Reid records
the numbers of the various contingents interned in the castle, listing approximately 222 members of the Polish military, and notes the successful escape by a Polish serviceman in 1941. Although my uncle was not subjected to the rigours of internment in a prisoner of war camp in Germany, it is believed—although he never spoke much at all about the events of the war—that he may have suffered a similar or perhaps worse fate at an earlier stage in his life, having been held in a Siberian prisoner of war camp and freed when the Russians changed sides.

While he was based at Johnstone, Uncle Freddie met and fell in love with my mother’s sister Margaret—so there is a good-news story. They married in August 1947. Like many Polish service personnel, he chose to stay in the United Kingdom. He entered coal mining, first at Holdsworth pit in Patna, East Ayrshire. Then, as many miners did, he moved to Leicestershire in 1964, to continue work at Bagworth colliery near Coalville. He was simply taking his family there for continued work, having exchanged the dangers of conflict for the risks of the mining industry.

Freddie Kaiser passed away in 1988 but fortunately, prior to his passing, managed to visit his former homeland and family. He has one remaining sister, Elfyda, aged 91. To this day Scotland still has close ties with the Polish community. Our shared history is reflected in places of worship and recorded on memorials, such as St Simons Church in Glasgow, the Polish war memorial at the Royal Air Forces Association Club in Prestwick and the recently refurbished Invergordon Polish war memorial. I trust that the UK Government will also continue to remember the contributions not only of those such as my uncle who served and survived, but of the countless Polish lives lost so that we might live.

3.28 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) mentioned the attitude of the Attlee Government to Stalin. I am very pleased that last week we did not show that same attitude to the Russians. At the Council of Europe we stood up with the Poles to try valiantly to prevent the Russians from coming back. We may have lost, but it was a fight worth having.

My hon. Friend also mentioned—I think prompted by my intervention—the role that the Poles played in intelligence. He mentioned the three mathematicians—he gave their names, so I will not repeat them—who helped valiantly to crack Enigma and shorten the war by at least two years. That illustrates an important point: that Poland had the largest intelligence service in the second world war. It covered many countries right across Europe, and beyond. It was responsible for a number of activities, including guiding the allied landings in Morocco and Algeria. Just think of that: the Polish intelligence force guided those allied landings.

In 1943, the British intelligence service received more than 10,000 messages from Polish intelligence—an enormous number. More importantly, the Polish intelligence force managed to capture a complete V2 rocket and send details of it back to the UK so that we could analyse them and help to prevent that rocket from creating any more devastation. That is a fantastic achievement for any intelligence service, and we should pay full tribute to it. We have spoken about the experience of the pilots, and we should not forget those Polish fighter pilots who served alongside our own. We must remember, and be thankful, for the real sacrifice that was made by the Polish people during the second world war. If we can do something with them to make them more available and prominent, I will happily join that campaign to ensure that it happens.

3.31 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on securing the debate. As he is the first ever Polish-born Member of this Parliament, the debate is on a matter of great personal importance to him, and he always speaks with great passion about his Polish heritage. I must look into joining the all-party parliamentary group on Poland.

I hope I can complement the hon. Gentleman’s contribution, and those of other hon. Members, by providing a Scottish perspective on the Polish contribution to the UK effort during the second world war. One fact that caught me a little by surprise was that the First Polish soldiers who were stationed in the United Kingdom during the war were based in Scotland. Initially, around 17,000 Polish troops were sent to Scotland, where they set up camp temporarily in Biggar, Crawford, Douglas and Peebles, and the First Polish Army Corps was quickly formed under the command of Generals Stanislaw Macezek and Marian Kukiel. Polish soldiers later went on to establish more permanent bases in Fife, Angus and Perthshire, and by 1944 around 26,500 Polish soldiers were based in Scotland.

Those men were tasked with defending a stretch of the east coast between Arbroath in Angus and Burntisland near my constituency in Fife. They built anti-invasion defences at places such as Lossiemouth and Tentsmuir—locations that were seen as being at risk of invasion from German-occupied Norway. The remains of those defences are still visible at Tentsmuir forest to this day.

Polish naval forces worked alongside the Royal Navy throughout the war, strengthening our sea defences immeasurably. On the day that Germany invaded Poland, 1 September 1939, four Polish destroyers that made up the Polish destroyer squadron sailed into the Firth and were escorted to the port of Leith—the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) alluded to that. Polish ships docked at a number of other Scottish ports, including Port Glasgow, Greenock, Dundee and Rosyth in my constituency. A plaque on a Polish monument in Prestwick in Ayrshire commemorates those Polish sailors who died in the battle of the Atlantic. The Polish contribution in Scotland was huge.

In the RAF, squadrons 304, 309, 307 and 315 were located at airfields in Scotland. Between 1941 and 1943, Polish Spitfire pilots were trained at operational training units located near Grangemouth in Stirlingshire and St Andrews. Edinburgh University supported Polish soldiers to continue their studies while in Scotland, and
as a result the Polish School of Medicine was born. That faculty operated between 1941 and 1949 and was the only Polish institution of higher education in the UK during the war years—a great testament to the continuing effort made by Polish soldiers in those years.

Dunfermline in my constituency was home to the headquarters of the 7th Brigade Cadre, and for the past few years the Defend Fife event has commemorated the history of world war two through battle re-enactments, film, music and dance. In 2017 the Defend Dunfermline world war two festival was themed around the special relationship between the people of Dunfermline and the Polish soldiers who helped to protect our town during the war. Last year festival volunteers unearthed confidential maps and plans drawn up by the allied Polish armies to enforce roadblocks, checkpoints and positions created by the Dunfermline Home Guard. Delivered by social enterprise Forth Pilgrim Ltd, the festival aimed to attract up to 5,000 people, reflecting the importance placed on the local contribution of the Polish community to the war effort by the people of Dunfermline and Fife. This year the theme is air raids on the firth of Forth and the Polish navy in Rosyth. I look forward to celebrating the contribution made by Polish soldiers during the war in my home town with the people of Dunfermline. I am sure that the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham would be made very welcome should he wish to join us.

A few lasting markers have been left across Scotland, and one that caught my eye is the statue of Wojtek the bear that stands in the Princes Street gardens. Wojtek was a 230 kg Syrian brown bear who became the mascot of Polish II Corps. He was made a corporal to secure him passage on a British troop ship bound for the Italian campaign. Beloved by his human comrades in arms, Wojtek learned to drink beer—I think Polish soldiers do that sometimes—smoke cigarettes, and carry artillery shells, which was a role he performed during the Battle of Monte Cassino. Wojtek became a local celebrity in his new home of Hutton in Berwickshire, but in 1947 he was re-homed in Edinburgh Zoo where he lived until his death in 1963. He was regularly visited by Polish soldiers.

As we know, after the war many Poles settled in the UK. The Polish Resettlement Act 1947 was Parliament’s first ever legislation for mass immigration, offering British citizenship to hundreds of thousands of displaced Polish soldiers. According to our national records, in 2017 around 99,000 Polish residents were still living in Scotland.

We in Scotland are particularly proud of our connection with our Polish population, both past and present. That is evident in events and monuments that we continue to hold dear to this day, commemorating what the Poles did for us during the war and the way they have been part of the fabric of our society ever since. I welcome this opportunity to add to that celebration of Polish nationals in the UK. We must continue to talk about their legacy and educate the generations to come so that their efforts and contribution are never forgotten.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for highlighting this important issue. That he has done so not just now but on a number of occasions shows the importance of this debate to him, particularly because members of his family were murdered by the Nazis. Those included the hon. Gentleman’s great uncle, whose daughter and wife were also killed and placed in the grave that he had dug. I pay tribute to him and to all the hon. Gentleman’s family who played a role in the second world war.

In June 1940 the Polish Government in exile in the UK signed an agreement with the British Government to form an independent Polish army, air force and navy in the UK. Some 5% of the Polish army were involved in the battle of Britain, numbering 145 in total, but they were responsible for 12% of the victories and the 303 Polish Squadron was recognised as the most successful allied squadron. Twenty-nine Polish pilots lost their lives in the battle of Britain, and four Polish officers were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. By the end of the war, 19,400 Poles were serving in the RAF and other commands. During the war, 2,408 Polish airmen were killed, and 300 Polish squadron, serving in the Bomber Command, suffered the highest number of deaths of any Bomber Command in the second world war. Of the 4,000 Polish personnel who served in the Polish navy during the war, 450 lost their lives. Of course, the Enigma code breakers shortened the war by at least two years. Their contribution is hugely recognised and should continue to be so.

As always, the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham made a significant contribution. He mentioned the role of 303 Squadron, the navy and the contribution of soldiers at the battle of El Alamein. He also discussed the interesting issue of heritage. We must not forget the contribution of those airmen, soldiers and naval personnel who served in the war. It is important for us to be reminded of that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) made an intervention on celebrating the contribution of Polish people here. A number of others, including the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), made similar contributions. It would be fitting to have a memorial, perhaps an everlasting one. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the records that have been kept, which could form the basis of that. I ask the Minister to look at those requests.

We must remember the huge role played in Birmingham by Polish servicemen, in particular airmen. The role of 303 Squadron has been well recognised in relation to the Spitfires, which were built in Erdington in Birmingham. Many based themselves in Erdington and are still there. However, we sometimes forget the engineers who serviced the Spitfires. As the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham said, the people who came here were hugely skilled, and those who serviced and repaired the Spitfires were hugely important to the service, because the sooner they were serviced and back in operation, the bigger the contribution they could make. We sometimes forget those people on the ground who worked in engineering, but they must be recognised.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who made a fabulous contribution, was heroic and passionate as he always is. Every word he said was meant. What he said about General Anders needed to be said, and he did so passionately. We must recognise and remember the sacrifice of the Polish soldiers. He mentioned the orthodox Christians, the Jewish Polish contribution and the general contribution made by Christians, which was phenomenal and deserves recognition.
Dr Julian Lewis: I am grateful to my friend the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) for giving way. May I add one more name to that list? General Sosabowski was in command of the 1st Independent Parachute Brigade, which fought so gallantly at Arnhem. We keep remembering the contribution of Poles to British victories. That was not a British victory, but no one contributed to it more gallantly than the Poles, the parachutists and those who came in the gliders, in that fateful battle at the Arnhem bridge.

Mr Mahmood: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. who is also my friend. That shows the determination of the Polish soldiers and personnel who fought in the war to treat it as their own as they defended Poland. The courage of the Polish soldiers has been recognised across the Chamber, and it must continue to be recognised and understood.

The hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) made a good contribution relating to her constituency. She talked about how important it was for the Polish community to play a role in the fighting, which again reminds us of the great sacrifices they made. My friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pushed the sacrifices and contributions made in Northern Ireland, particularly in the Navy. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) spoke of the contribution made by his family, which must be recognised.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North said, many people changed their names after the war to integrate. Some might have felt that necessary, but it is now time for people to re-establish those names and understand. The hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) made a good contribution relating to her constituency. She talked about how important it was for the Polish community to play a role in the fighting, which again reminds us of the great sacrifices they made. My friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pushed the sacrifices and contributions made in Northern Ireland, particularly in the Navy. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) spoke of the contribution made by his family, which must be recognised.

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As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North said, many people changed their names after the war to integrate. Some might have felt that necessary, but it is now time for people to re-establish those names and recognise their heritage. The hon. Member for Henley mentioned the work of the intelligence services in capturing the V-2. It was a devastating weapon, so it was a phenomenal achievement by the Polish personnel serving with us in the second world war to get hold of it, reverse-engineer it and see what it did.

The hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) talked about the contribution made in Scotland, particularly to the Navy. As we look across the United Kingdom, we see that people in every single area know where the Polish servicepeople made a contribution, and that is recognised to this day. We must now really push that recognition forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury and the hon. Member for Henley mentioned the creation of a permanent memorial. Will the Minister look at how such a memorial can include a real learning element so that schoolchildren and other people can visit and understand the heritage of those who came here and the support they gave us? While we had much support from the Commonwealth, with people coming across to help during the second world war—my maternal great-grandfather served in Burma—which was gratefully received, the particular contribution made by the Polish people was much welcomed.

3.48 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Mr Pritchard, I thank you on behalf of us all for chairing our debate. I genuinely commend my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczyński) on once again securing a debate on the vital contribution made by Poland to the allied victory in the second world war. I have no hesitation in again paying tribute to all those who served so bravely. I would also like to reflect on the strength of our partnership with Poland today.

Polish service personnel served with distinction in world war two on land, at sea and in the air. They fought in some of the most pivotal battles of the war. At Monte Cassino 75 years ago, it was, as we have heard, the Polish army that broke through Nazi defences and paved the way for US forces to secure Rome. The Poles paid a very heavy price for that victory, with almost 1,000 soldiers killed and 3,000 injured. The Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), paid tribute to the fallen in May when he visited the scene of the battle as part of the 75th anniversary commemorations.

The Polish navy played a significant role, as we heard in the remarkable speech by the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), in protecting the Atlantic convoys and supporting the D-day landings. Last month in Portsmouth, the Polish Prime Minister joined Her Majesty the Queen, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the leaders of 14 other countries in remembering those who took part in the D-day landings.

Who could forget the 16 Polish squadrons that served in the Royal Air Force, making up the largest foreign contingent? Their bravery helped to turn the tide of the war at a critical moment. Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, head of RAF Fighter Command at the time, later wrote:

“Had it not been for the...Polish squadrons and their unsurpassed gallantry, I hesitate to say that the outcome of the Battle would have been the same.”

Arguably the most famous squadron, 303 Squadron, was stationed at RAF Northolt. In March last year, when he was Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) visited the Battle of Britain bunker there with his Polish counterpart Jacek Czaputowicz to pay their respects.

There is a special House of Commons link with the Poles who fought in the Battle of Britain. There was only one serving RAF officer in the House of Commons at the time, Squadron Leader Robert Grant-Ferris, later Deputy Speaker and then Lord Harvington. After the Battle of Britain, Winston Churchill asked him to move the Loyal Address—in Church House, because our Chamber had been bombed. Harold Nicolson came up to him and said, “I have the perfect poem for your speech,” but he found it only the day after the opening of Parliament. That poem was Thomas Gray’s 18th-century prophecy, which forecast flight and, some might argue, the Battle of Britain. It says:

“The time will come, when thou shalt lift thine eyes
To watch a long-drawn battle in the skies,
While aged peasants, too amazed for words,
Stare at the flying fleets of wondrous birds,
England, so long the mistress of the sea,
Where wind and waves confess her sovereignty,
Her ancient triumphs yet on high shall bear,
And reign the sovereign of the conquered air.”

Robert Grant-Ferris kept that poem—the best speech he never made—in his pocket for the rest of his life. Every time he told the story, he paid tribute to the Polish pilots who fought in the Battle of Britain. May that...
poem be a tribute to Polish pilots. After 75 years, I am delighted that I, the son of an RAF officer, have been able to read it into the record of the House of Commons.

I have little time, so I will skip over many things that I would like to say about the strong relationship between the United Kingdom and Poland today. We work on many levels, and when we do, we look back 75 years and beyond at the marvellous relationship between our countries. I wish to leave time for my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham to say a few more words, so I will just say to all Poles that we in this House offer them our appreciation. To the generations of Poles before them, who fought bravely alongside the UK and our allies to rid Europe of the Nazis, we all offer our deep and enduring gratitude. To our Polish allies and friends today, I reaffirm our commitment to our vibrant modern partnership.

3.54 pm

Daniel Kawczyński: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Minister for his words, particularly that moving poem. I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in this important debate, members of the Polish diaspora who are in the Gallery, and the many Poles around the United Kingdom who are watching on television.

When we go to Warsaw on parliamentary delegations, we do not go just to the Polish Parliament and the Senate. We take hon. Members to the Warsaw Rising Museum, so they can see for themselves, through films and photographs, the complete destruction of the city. Some 95% or 96% of Warsaw was destroyed in 1944. Adolf Hitler was so enraged, even at the end of the war, that the Poles were determined to push out the Nazis that he said that he wanted Warsaw to be completely expunged from the map of Europe.

Warsaw was absolutely obliterated in 1944, but despite the terrible oppression of the communists, the Poles rebuilt the city. Today, Poland has the fastest-growing economy in Europe at 4.6% per annum. It is becoming an economic engine in the Visegrad group and in central and eastern Europe.

Poland will be an important partner for us as we pull out of the European Union. Whatever our views on the European Union—the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) and I have polarised views—we will need strong, strategic, bilateral partners that are also in NATO and members of the European Union. Warsaw will be one of our most important interlocutors as we continue to engage with the European Union and work together for the common benefit of our continent. I thank everybody for coming, and I thank you, Mr Pritchard, my Shropshire neighbour, for the professional and kind way in which you have chaired the debate, as always.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Polish contribution to the UK war effort in World War Two.
The Mayor of London updated his final London food strategy in December 2018, and specifically commented on the need for “highly efficient supply chains” for the city of London. He committed to:

“Champion business support to food entrepreneurs and start-ups, and support London’s markets to increase their supply of fresh, local and seasonal produce to meet all Londoners’ cultural needs through the London Markets Board.”

New Covent Garden Market plays a huge part in filling those requirements.

From my conversations with the Minister, I know he understands how important the continuing existence and success of New Covent Garden Market is to the food supply chain for London and the south-east, and indeed the whole of England. He knows that there is a dispute between the market authority and the tenants of the market over its redevelopment. The Covent Garden Tenants Association was incorporated in April 1922. Its members are the traders on the market, and it has represented their interests for nearly 100 years. It represented my interests when I was a tenant on the market with What4. There is now the possibility of action, based on the infringement of traders’ rights under the terms of their agreements to occupy space in the market. That could easily be substantially expanded to incorporate claims that the market authority is acting in breach of its statutory duties.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Given what my hon. Friend said about the current state of things for the tenants, I wonder whether this is an opportunity to go back and look at the idea of the tenants taking ownership of the market.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am sure the tenants would be delighted to have such an opportunity, but there would obviously have to be some sort of procurement process. That is not a possibility or a probability at this time because there are already contacts signed for the redevelopment of the market. It is a very good piece of real estate in London, where fantastic businesses are sited.

The market’s moves over the years have been driven by congestion more than almost anything else. On each occasion, the market’s success has meant that it needs more space. Ultimately, it moved to its current site because of the lack of space and because of the congestion in the area in the 1960s. Its redevelopment will mean that, for the first time in its 800-year history, in a growing market environment, its size will be reduced substantially.

Marsha de Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. I was not aware that he was a former tenant of the New Covent Garden Market. It is great that there is somebody here who has extensive knowledge and experience of this issue. He makes a really interesting point. New Covent Garden Market plays a huge role in my constituency of Battersea: it brings economic advantages to the local area and employs 2,000 people. Given that it has been growing and the income it generates has been increasing, does he agree that a new development that reduces its size is going backwards? It will not allow the market to thrive and go forward.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I agree. I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution and the way she represents the market in this place. I regularly speak to various of my old friends—I think they are friends; lots of them were customers or people I bought things from, so perhaps they are business associates—and I know that she is a very good representative of the market who talks to the tenants a great deal and represents their concerns wisely.

We are squeezing a big, successful business into a smaller space. The market had a massive footprint, and when I was trading there a lot of it was not used effectively, so it is possible to understand some sort of consolidation, but the scale we are talking about now makes that an interesting prospect. At a time when the turnover of the businesses in the market is growing, it seems odd to reduce the market’s footprint. Although the tenants are not over-happy with the overall reduction in size, they have tried their best to make it work. Various pieces of land have already been sold off, and in some instances they are sold on again. The market area is to be reduced even more. Among other changes, the temporary flower market site will be incorporated into the main site. In essence, we are squeezing a quart into a pint pot and hoping that the businesses inside the pot do not get squeezed.

Over the years, the tenants have repeatedly raised concerns through their association that the proposed end-state configuration of the market that the authority is now engaged in building will not be able to operate successfully because the proposed layout and footprint simply will not accommodate the vehicle movements needed for the market to operate effectively and efficiently. The tenants of the market are very knowledgeable—and, indeed, vocal—about how the business of the market works, and their opinions about whether what is proposed will work should carry significant weight. They have retained the services of a specialist transport consultant, who advises that there are significant failings in the transport analysis and planning undertaken by the market authority. The Minister is well aware that the market authority is a public body that has a statutory duty to provide functioning market facilities and prevent traffic congestion on the market land.

The market authority is currently redeveloping the market under a contract entered into with the developer, Vinci and St Modwen Properties, in 2015. The developer commenced the main works in October 2018. Since then, an independent logistics consultant, instructed by the tenants association, has confirmed that, as designed, the market will not be operationally viable in parking and loading/unloading terms, and will therefore constrain the businesses it contains. The market authority has allowed the developer to start the construction works, but there are problems, because the tenants say that that has happened without the authority having taken the tenants’ logistics consultant’s advice about the design, and without its waiting to see the final report prepared by Arup, a logistics consultant instructed by the developer, which confirmed that the new market, as presently designed, would not be operationally viable. Arup’s final report said that to make it viable certain measures identified in a list contained in that report would need to be adopted. I am told that Arup had been asked by the market authority to use transport data that was known to be out of date and inaccurate when assessing the viability of the options, but it still came to that quite drastic conclusion.
The market authority has power under its contract with the developer to require changes to be made to the design of the market, but it has yet to decide to follow up Arup’s advice. Instead, the developer presses on with the works as they stand. I wonder whether my hon. Friend the Minister is comfortable with that decision. I also wonder whether the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has been provided with a report from a logistics consultant—or any report—confirming that, contrary to the view of either the tenants association’s logistics consultant or Arup itself, the current design will be operationally viable. If so, would it be possible for the tenants to see it, to give them some comfort that these changes will work?

This is where my old life as a tenant of the market comes into its own, because battles over rent were legendary back in the day when I worked in the market: in April this year, the market authority sent notices to terminate the tenancies of market tenants and threatened, in a letter from its solicitors, that if tenants did not immediately agree to give up their statutory right to apply for a new tenancy and agree to vacate their units at the expiry of the notice, they would not be offered tenancy of a unit in the newly developed market and would have to depart the market instead.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is my understanding that one of the key roles of the Covent Garden Market Authority is to nurture good relations with tenants. How do such actions nurture good relations?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I know that changes at the top of the market authority have been welcomed by the tenants, and that much better conversations are being had now than have been had for many a year, but I do not believe that this is an appropriate way for a public authority to behave.

Additionally, the new draft leases issued by the Covent Garden Market Authority are removing the rights of the wholesale tenants to operate in the critical and traditional way on the bit of the market that everybody loves so much, the buyers walk or trading floor, turning that essential space into a corridor rather than a market. I can honestly tell the Minister that removing that space will almost completely remove the heart, soul and character of the market.

In the new leases, the market authority has also changed the rent negotiation process and general service charge calculations, as it has now declared that it is in fact a commercial landlord. Those actions will inevitably result in many of the smaller companies based at the market closing as the site becomes unaffordable.

Since the whole process started, there have been vast changes in how the market operates. Goods are now mostly chilled instead of being stored at ambient temperatures, and businesses’ being able to unload big lorries, repick orders and deliver in quick time continues to reduce the number of large vehicle movements required on London’s roads. However, that makes the traffic studies more important than most people believe. There is yet to be a traffic study conducted that says the future design of this important food distribution hub for London will work; indeed, all those that have been done, or at least those that are in the public domain, say that it will not. If it does not work, the market will eventually die.

All the catering outlets, restaurants and food businesses currently served by the market will not go away; they will simply be catered for by businesses that travel many more miles to get into London, further adding traffic and pollution in this great city of ours.

I do not think we can ignore the facts, stand back and allow the developer and the market authority to build a market that is functionally inoperable. Action must be taken. I hope that the Government have given due consideration to the effect on tenants, businesses and the wider economy if the market were to go into decline or fail altogether. There is no need for that to happen.

I would like to think that the Minister, whose knowledge of and commitment to solving these issues is both impressive and welcome, will continue to ask those on all sides of this debate to come together to find a mutually agreeable and workable solution—all sides meaning the market authority, the tenants, the developer and the Department itself. This needs to be sorted before millions of pounds are wasted in court and one of the most vibrant parts of London’s market culture possibly ceases to be.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) on securing the debate. I know him well; we have discussed the matter on several occasions, and I could not think of a better person to bring the debate to the Chamber today.

I note that the local MP, the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), is also here and understandably shares many of the same concerns, but I think it is fair to say that, given my hon. Friend’s time spent working at the market, his knowledge and experience are second to none here, so we are delighted that he is with us. It must have been a real privilege for him to follow in his family’s footsteps and run that business so successfully for that period of time.

My hon. Friend can be reassured that the Government are committed to ensuring that this iconic market continues to thrive at Nine Elms, both during the development and into the future. We are in absolute agreement that that means it must be a profitable market that works logistically and operates fairly and transparently for both landlord and tenants, and that we need to get on and build it at pace. I am as concerned as he is about the current situation. It is simply untenable for the market authority and the tenants to be in disagreement on such important details. I am clear that both sides should be spending whatever time it takes to resolve these issues, and quickly.

Marsha De Cordova: The Minister is absolutely right that the matter needs to be resolved and that we cannot continue like this. The hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) has already asked this, but I want to ask it again: will the Minister commit to meeting tenants and the market authority, and any other relevant persons who need to be around the table, to begin to move things forward? I know that he has already had meetings, but we need to get something nailed down to ensure that we can begin to resolve this. As he rightly points out, we must get the market to a place where it is fit for purpose, but that has to be done right.
David Rutley: Of course I will help to facilitate that. As I think the hon. Lady knows, we have already had a roundtable meeting, but we can have more in the future. The next step is to ensure that we have a second meeting of the experts on both sides of the debate to move things forward, but if further facilitation is required, I will do it.

My personal view is that there are enough experts on both sides of the table, both the tenants, who are formidable traders, and the market authority. We must bring the two together with their experts. If I were in charge of the situation, I would probably put the key in a very safe place and let the two sides just get on with it, because, as I will go on to say, this has gone on longer than Brexit and, as complicated as it is, it is not as complicated as that.

Hon. Members here are all speaking with a similar voice. Certainly I, as the Minister responsible for this fantastic and iconic institution, echo the sentiment that we need to get on. These are difficult issues, but they are not insurmountable. It is clear that the market is a national treasure. Anybody who is interested in food only has to go along and see this amazing institution, smell it and soak up the atmosphere, because it is unbelievable.

I am fortunate that my second job, after my newspaper round, was working in a greengrocer’s shop every day after school—except for Wednesday, which was early closing, if anybody remembers that—and then all day Saturday. I was pretty good at stacking the oranges and enjoying the seasonal smells of those russet apples—food at its best. I was fortunate enough then to go on and work in Asda, running its home shopping business, as well as doing various other things in the food sector. The market should be cherished, and anybody wanting to go along should do so at 2 o’clock in the morning, as I was fortunate enough to do myself, just to feel that buzz. There is a huge amount of experience and a wealth of knowledge there, and some fantastic activities going on. It supplies the food—the very best fruit, vegetables and cut flowers available—to London, the south-east and the country.

However, the area needs to be transformed. It has an ageing infrastructure and needs to move to a more modern and flexible place to do business, fit for the 21st century. The old business structures and facilities are 45 years old now, and although my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry looks young—sorry; perhaps I should not have said that, because he has been here a long time—even he would agree that the infrastructure needs to be improved, a bit like the facilities here in Parliament. However, the difference is that although we can decant, that is not possible for the market, given the space constraints.

There are big opportunities at the site, and we want to ensure that the market has a bright future for many generations to come. There are second and third-generation traders there, and it is part of their lives as well as their livelihoods, and we know that it is important for them to be able to carry on that important work. Refurbishing the site was looked at but did not offer good value for money, not least as the infrastructure would have to be replaced at some point in the future anyway, so there was a view that we needed to move on. The fact that the Government chose to invest in the market’s redevelopment is clear evidence of the value we place on it. A far easier option would have been simply to sell the land, but we chose not to do so because of our commitment to the market’s mission and its place in the food economy.

There are challenges for the market authority and the traders alike, and sadly it is not possible to rebuild the busiest wholesale horticultural market in the country while it continues to operate and not expect some disruption for all the players involved. That is unfortunate. It is true that the new market will occupy a smaller site when complete, as my hon. Friend highlighted. Smaller does not mean that it cannot be as profitable and effective in the future—indeed, it is vital that it is—but it does mean that it needs to change, not only in how the market is laid out but in how it operates.

I have every confidence that, working together, the market authority and the tenants can find a way to make sure that the market will thrive in its new design. This is not a question of whether it will work, but how. That means looking at both the operational design of the market and how the tenants operate within it. Between them, the market authority and the tenants—representatives of both are here today; they are outstanding people—know the market better than anyone else and must surely be best placed to solve the issue together.

None of this is insurmountable. An earlier challenge arose when the market authority, in discussion with the tenants, became concerned about how the developers would ensure that construction would not disrupt trading. It responded by stopping construction and insisting on more detailed plans from the developer to tackle this. Construction then recommenced, with work starting on the first of the main new market buildings last October.

All of this, along with some unexpected ground conditions, means that the project will take much longer than anyone envisaged or wanted—possibly up to three years longer. That is hard for the tenants, the market authority and everyone who comes to the market for business or pleasure. However, when things are tough, strong leadership is vital. In February I appointed a new chair of the market authority, and I am delighted that we have, in David Frankish, a chair who truly understands the business of the market, having built his own highly successful business in the food logistics industry. I am in regular dialogue with David and know that he shares my desire to do all that is necessary to resolve the current difficulties. Indeed, I am seeing him again in a week’s time, and we will absolutely focus on his plans to make urgent progress on these issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Daventry made a number of specific points about logistics that I will respond to in the time available. The market authority tells me that it shared the Arup report on logistics that he referred to with the tenants association and its solicitors last November. That report was based on a comprehensive new traffic survey that Arup conducted in December 2017. Arup also installed automatic traffic counters, which are still in place, to provide an ongoing ability to monitor vehicle flows. The data is continually shared with the tenants association’s own traffic experts, and I recognise that this data is part of the ongoing discussions. I hope that is helping the situation. If it is not, clearly we need to find other ways to share the data and to make it more meaningful.

I also understand that, while the Arup report raised a number of logistical issues with the final design that needed to be addressed, it did not conclude that the new
market would be unviable. The report shortlisted 12 proposals to resolve operational issues. The market authority, in discussion with the tenants, has already adopted some of those, including making changes to road layouts and adding a second exit slip road to provide better operational flexibility at peak times. The market authority advises that none of the other proposals have been dismissed; some will be implemented later on in the redevelopment, and others will need further review, depending on how the market adapts to the changes already made. Although I understand that there is work still to do, it is important to recognise that changes have been made, and that the market authority has the flexibility to continue to adapt the design as the build progresses.

My hon. Friend raised questions about the market authority’s actions as a landlord. Even he indicated that, during his time as a tenant, there were some frictions and tensions, as there often are between landlord and tenant. However, we are committed to running a market that operates as a business and is fair for both the tenants and the landlord. The market authority is a public corporation that operates as a business with a high degree of autonomy from the Government and has a statutory duty to break even. We also need to ensure that taxpayers get a fair return for the public investment in the market.

Clearly the tenant-landlord relationship is a legal one, but it is not just about following the letter of law; it is also about working fairly and transparently together. It is not possible for me to go into the detail of individual tenant’s situations today, but the market authority has sought to assure me that it has worked to move tenants on to new leases in a fair way. Indeed, it has highlighted that, as part of the move, it has offered a landlord compensation package over and above any statutory compensation due, amounting to an equivalent of between three and half and four years’ rent at current levels.

I do not underestimate the complexity of the issues here and the strain that the current situation is putting on relationships. The stakes are high and the frustration is all too evident—again, it sounds a bit like Brexit. I am as disappointed as anyone that the market authority and the tenants have so far failed to reach a shared understanding of how the new market will operate successfully, but surely legal action is not the way to get there. I utterly agree that is a waste of everybody’s time, energy and money—except the lawyers’. I know that my hon. Friend does not want their pockets further lined.

I firmly believe that sitting down together and working through the issues is the only way to find solutions, avoid legal disputes and move on, and there needs to be more of it—more sitting down together, more listening, more communicating, more understanding and absolutely more pace. I am sure that every challenge that this project presents can be overcome by continuous, open and respectful communication and a sincere approach to collaborative working. I am fully committed to helping to make that happen in any way I can, to reiterate the point I made to the hon. Member for Battersea.

The next meeting with traffic experts is planned for 10 July, and DEFRA officials will absolutely be there. I urge both sides to use that meeting to make real progress. They should use the whole day or the rest of the week if needs be—whatever time it takes—but they should not leave that room until they have found ways to move things forward.

We have serious players on both sides, and we all—the market authority, the tenants and absolutely all across Government—want the same thing: a thriving market now and into the future, where logistics work smoothly and both tenants and landlord work together fairly and transparently to create a profitable market where these vital businesses can grow. The best way to secure that is through working constructively together. I know that is the call that my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry wants to hear, and I think that all of us in the House feel that, so let us get on with it.

Question put and agreed to.
Rural Areas in Scotland: Additional Delivery Charges

4.29 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (L.D.): I beg to move, that this House has considered additional delivery charges in rural areas in Scotland.

In the time-honoured phrase, Mr Hollobone, it is a pleasure to serve under your Chairmanship. This is a huge issue for my constituents and many others living in remote parts of Scotland and elsewhere in the UK. It has been around for a long time and, despite the best of intentions and sympathetic hearings in the past, it is hard for me, as a constituency MP, to see light at the end of the tunnel.

Let me set the scene, which I am sure will be familiar to hon. Members, by giving two examples. First, I will quote Mr Charles Macfarlane living in Shinness near Lairg in Sutherland, who gave written evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Scottish Affairs. He referred to “the behaviour of businesses, most particularly couriers, in either refusing to deliver to the Highlands and Islands, or else doing so charging rates so grossly inflated as to be completely unrealistic.” He gave two examples. The first was that delivery for an eBay item costing £10 would cost £4.80 if delivery was in the UK, but when the business hears that it is for the postcode IV27 in Sutherland, the cost goes up to £15.47. Mr Macfarlane also quoted, rather charmingly, the cost of four chair castors being delivered. The cost was £11.41 to buy the four chair castors, and the cost of UK delivery was £6, but when the business heard that it was to the highlands of Scotland, the cost went up to £15. As Mr Macfarlane says, “click ‘Buy’ on a product on the web, put in a Highland postcode, and at a guess about 75% of the time a significant delivery surcharge will be applied, very often even when the product was advertised as ‘free UK delivery’...Then, to add to injury to insult, the overcharged service from such couriers is slow and unreliable—often two or three times slower than sending it by second class post, and during this time the product may have been jolting around the Highlands in a van for up to a week before finally being delivered—I’ve had a computer hard drive be Dead On Arrival as a result, and had to wait a further time for it to be returned and replaced.”

Considering the number of emails and letters that I have received about this issue since being elected as an MP, I could fill up the entirety of my allotted time quoting, but I shall give just one more example, which particularly stands out to me. A constituent has written to me about ordering a sheet of perspex from a London company. My constituent says: “They wanted £16 for delivery, until I told them the postcode, when the charge was revised to £212.” That absolutely stopped me in my tracks.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. I know that this issue affects his constituency more than that of most of us here. The Scottish Affairs Committee looked at the issue in 2017 and we found lots of examples of just what he has been referring to, including people placing orders and then being contacted after the fact, when the order had already been accepted, to be asked to pay an exorbitant delivery charge. Do we not have to address the issue so that when people go online to buy a product, the delivery charge is there for all to see, and the website does not say “Free mainland delivery” if that is not the case?

Jamie Stone: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I want to take this opportunity to thank all hon. Members from both sides of the House who take this issue seriously. The fact that it is taken seriously means a lot to my constituents.

Surely, if a consumer sees delivery advertised as to the “UK”, it should be to the UK. Surely these companies are failing to realise that the highlands are every bit as much part of the UK as Wales or Yorkshire. It could be suggested that delivery to the highlands might be cheaper were the goods going only as far as Inverness, at which point the buyer could drive down to get them, but when we consider that for many of my constituents the return journey to and from Inverness is 200 miles and we think about the cost of petrol and the wear and tear on the vehicle, we see that these extra costs are most unwelcome.

I want to touch on Amazon, because there is a worrying new development. In the past, Amazon has, very honourably, had most of its retailers advertise a set rate for delivery to all parts of the UK, and it had a good reputation for that. However, Amazon has recently suggested intentions to move away from standard charges and allow marketplace sellers to surcharge for the first time. That would be seriously bad news and yet another financial burden on my constituents.

As I said at the outset, this issue has been around for a long time. Many of my constituents say to me that the charges are nothing more than a geography tax—one that they can ill afford. Living in my remote part of the UK already entails a high cost of living that simply cannot be avoided. I am sure that everyone that has heard now and again that Altnaharro, in the middle of Sutherland, is the coldest place in the UK. There is, in particular, the cost of winter heating, while the cost of the distance of basic incomes are having to pay far more for many consumer items than their friends and relations have to take this issue seriously. The fact that it is taken seriously all hon. Members from both sides of the House who

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a tragedy to return to the bad old times of the past. Those empty schools are a sight that none of us wants to see again.

There is a good historical example. When the penny post was introduced in 1839, it was based on the fundamental principle that a letter or parcel would cost the same to be delivered to an address in, say, Ealing or Westminster, or Wick or Dunoon in Caithness and Sutherland. That is why the Post Office and the Royal Mail are so dear to our hearts and why this is as popular an institution today as it ever was. It was seen to be fair, and that was seen to be good. I put it to hon. Members that today, alas, we have moved rather far from that early 19th-century concept of what was basically a right of ordinary people.

If people read, as I am sure the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) has, today’s edition of the Aberdeen Press and Journal, they will see my erstwhile colleague and former member of the Scottish Government, Mr Richard Lochhead, talking about this issue. In particular, he mentions something called consumeradvice.scot, an initiative launched a couple of months ago. It offers free advice on delivery law and urges shoppers to report misleading practices, and it tells companies what would be best practice for them. I applaud Mr Lochhead. He speaks of “rip-off” delivery charges and I commend his words.

However, there is a hitch, and that is really why I am making this speech. The Scottish Government are indeed to be praised for grasping the issue, and so too is the Highland Council, which I am bound to mention—I was a member until two years ago. The Highland Council certainly understands the issue of delivery charges in the highlands. However, the awkward truth remains that although there is a mechanism whereby complaints are logged and best practice is suggested to retail companies, there is no power, with teeth, to change the way that the companies operate. That, for all the best intentions of the Scottish Government, the Highland Council and others, means that we are not going to get to the nub of the problem.

It is my deeply held belief that with this Government or, indeed, a future Government, we do not know what is ahead of us; we are peering into a dark glass at the moment. I think that all of us, on both sides of the Chamber of the House of Commons, would agree with that, but I do think that the Government in the future, whoever they may be, would do well to look at putting in place proper legislation to bring the system into some sort of order whereby fairness is built in for people.

I am bound to put it on the record also that members of the UK Government and this Minister herself have given me a sympathetic hearing in the past and that that is appreciated. There is food for thought here, and if we could come to a constructive dialogue about how we could put in place some sort of legislation, that would be helpful.

There is a second and final warning—I think I have taken up my allotted time. If we fail to tackle this issue, which makes my constituents and many others living in remote parts of Scotland and elsewhere in the UK slightly second-class citizens, we will be failing them. There is an example from history. In the 1960s, the then Labour Government recognised the needs of the highlands and islands, recognised that the highlands and islands, in the phrase of the time, were on the UK’s conscience, and took the bold step of establishing the Highlands and Islands Development Board. That altruistic move brought great good to the highlands and islands. It was very much to the credit of that Government. I very much hope that a similar generosity of spirit and attention will be taken up by the leaders of our nation today and tomorrow. We have waited a very long time for real action. If something can be done and serious consideration given to this issue, on a personal level that would mean a great deal to my constituents.

4.40 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I give my genuine and heartfelt thanks to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for securing this debate. I am both delighted and frustrated that we are here again to debate this matter—delighted because a Minister will respond to the concerns of MPs representing their constituencies across much of the north of Scotland, and frustrated because it is not the first time the hon. Gentleman has raised this issue, nor is it the first time I have raised it.

Since mentioning this matter in my maiden speech two years ago, I have mentioned it at Prime Minister’s questions, held a 90-minute Westminster Hall debate, raised it at Business questions and suggested that the Scottish Affairs Committee hold an inquiry into it, which it did. This matter has been raised many times, on the Floor of the House, in Westminster Hall and in our Committee Rooms. I have also met with the Minister a number of times to discuss this matter.

The issue of excessive and rip-off delivery charges affects not just the highlands of Scotland, but the whole of my Moray constituency. It is absolutely incredible that in 2019—in this day and age—couriers and companies still say that Moray and the highlands are not part of mainland United Kingdom. I do not know how many times we have to say this to get the message through, but they seem blind to the fact that Moray, the highlands, the north-east and other parts of Scotland are part of the mainland United Kingdom. One does not need to take a plane to get to Elgin or Caithness; it is all joined together as part of mainland UK and it should be treated the same.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): At this point I want to congratulate the postmen and parcel people who work for Royal Mail and deliver six days a week to all areas, in all kinds of weather. All we are asking for in Royal Mail is a level playing field. Some of these couriers are charging ridiculous prices. We can do it; all we ask for is a level playing field for everyone. I congratulate all the postmen who do their work there.

Douglas Ross: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman might need to correct the record. As a former postman, he should have declared his interest to the House. He is clearly still a part of that, as twice in a short intervention he said “we”. I say that in jest, because he brings great experience as a postman from before he was elected to this place. It is useful to have his contribution, because those workers undoubtedly do a service. However, we are really challenging the couriers’ add-on prices, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross set out clearly in his opening remarks. Someone might go online, view a product, decide that they want it
and agree the price, only to find an additional cost on top of that simply because the company believes that they live too far away to deliver the product easily.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): As a fellow Member of Parliament for the north-east of Scotland, I thank our friend, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for raising this important issue. I share my hon. Friend’s frustration at having to bring this issue up again. On the point that he has just made, I wonder whether he has had the same experience that I and others have had at the final checkout point online. I was ordering a sofa, which happened to be for my flat in London, but at the last minute the website said, “Not available for delivery in Scotland”—nowhere in Scotland, never mind AB or IV postcodes. I nearly refused to order it on principle, but I needed a sofa. There are great frustrations with getting deliveries to the north of Scotland, for example to Moray. I received an email last week from a constituent with a business in Peterhead, in my constituency. He was concerned that deliveries are going to Elgin and Aberdeen, but they are missing out what seems to be thought of as the extreme north-east corner.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue. He did not cancel his sofa on principle, but if he ever invites me round to his flat, I will not sit on the sofa on principle, such is the extent to which—

David Duguid: It was a sofa bed.

Douglas Ross: That is even worse! In all seriousness, my hon. Friend raises a valid point. He can get something delivered to London, but not to his constituency of Banff and Buchan. I will mention some examples that have been raised with me since I last held a debate on this matter, because there are some anomalies with the practice that these companies use. It is frustrating that the charge is added on at the end of the purchase.

I want to give a couple of examples. The first one was really remarkable. A constituent of mine in Fochabers went online and found the product they wanted. Their postcode for Fochabers in Moray is IV, like the rest of the highlands. When they put their postcode in, they immediately incurred a greater charge. He phoned up the company, which said, “We put this charge on all IV postcodes, but not AB postcodes.” My constituent happens to have another address in Clochan, which is three or four miles from Fochabers, but has an AB postcode. When he put in that address, there was no delivery charge.

What makes this even more remarkable is that the product was delivered by Parcelforce from its depot in Inverness, and to get from Inverness to Clochan, one has to go through Fochabers, to go further down the road to Clochan. There my constituent had free delivery, but had he wanted the product delivered closer to the Parcelforce depot, he would be charged extra simply because of his postcode. Not only do the couriers not understand that Moray and the highlands are part of mainland Scotland: they do not even understand the local geography and will deliver something further away at no cost, as compared with delivering something to a different postcode.

A constituent has emailed me another example, which I have written to the Advertising Standards Authority about. This constituent is a charity fundraiser. She wanted to purchase five tips to collect money for her charity. The tins cost £2.98 each. She was happy with that price and was going to purchase them for the charity. However, there was a £10.50 charge to deliver those five tins, because the charity, Outfit Moray, is based in Moray and has an IV postcode for its headquarters in Lossiemouth. The price to deliver the product was equivalent to the cost of three and half charity tins. It is simply wrong that charities, individuals, consumers and constituents are being punished in this way.

I want to give some examples of action taken in response to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross and other Members from all parties having raised this matter. Every time I get a case regarding this—I get many—I write to the Minister, with whom I am in regular correspondence, and I write to the Advertising Standards Authority, because it is wrong and unacceptable that the charge is added only after the purchase is made.

I have had two examples in the last couple of months where the Advertising Standards Authority has written back to say that it agrees. The first case involved chums.co.uk, which said it was offering free standard UK delivery for orders over £50. However, when the ASA received my complaint it investigated and agreed that IV postcodes appear to be charged a delivery fee. As well as that, “The delivery information section of the website states that there is a standard postage fee for the UK mainland and that is clearly not the case.” The ASA continues: “The delivery information on the company’s website looks like it is misleading and our compliance team are taking action by sending an enforcement notice.”

Another case came up last month, this time involving amenity.co.uk. The ASA said that it agreed there was a problem with its delivery claims, and it too will be sent an enforcement notice.

I use those examples not because I condone what was happening, but to show what happens when we raise the matter and get in touch with the companies—I always write to the company and say that I am reporting it to the Advertising Standards Authority. It is encouraging that the ASA is now taking enforcement action to deal with this. However, we are only picking at the surface. Of all the constituents who contact me and those in the hon. Gentleman’s geographically vast constituency, which are being punished in this way.

That charities, individuals, consumers and constituents are being punished in this way is simply wrong. The ASA continu es: “The delivery information on the company’s website states that there is a standard postage fee for the UK mainland and that is clearly not the case.” The ASA continues: “The delivery information on the company’s website looks like it is misleading and our compliance team are taking action by sending an enforcement notice.”

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That charities, individuals, consumers and constituents are being punished in this way is simply wrong.
Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for securing this important debate. I am delighted to participate in it, although I wish it were not necessary, because it has a pressing relevance not just to people in the north-east, but to my constituents—particularly those who have the great pleasure of living on the islands of Arran and Cumbrae. Like a million other consumers across Scotland, they face the challenges of coping with unfair delivery surcharges and late deliveries, or are even excluded from delivery services altogether when shopping online.

We must be under no illusion, because this is more than an inconvenience; it has a genuinely negative impact on rural businesses as well as consumers. Citizens Advice research tells us that the UK parcels market has grown by more than 50% since 2010, and much of that growth has been driven by parcels sent to consumers who shop online. The Scottish Parliament information centre has costed additional parcel delivery surcharges for Scottish consumers, in comparison with the rest of the UK, at approximately £38 million per year, which is completely unacceptable. A shocking £11.4 million of that is spent by consumers over the Christmas period, simply because of where they live.

Despite a fair delivery charges campaign, the figures are rising, and at a time when more and more of us are shopping online, for a variety of reasons. That is self-evidently and necessarily the case for those who live in rural areas. Some of us pay what can only be described as a postcode tax, which is often imposed randomly by some retailers, although not all. Such charges are discriminatory and hit consumers and rural businesses in fragile areas very hard indeed. The problem is deeply concerning for my constituents and other rural constituents. The penalising of the delivery of goods bought online and the consumer exclusion are such that 10.9% of retailers exclude some Scottish islands from a delivery service altogether.

The statement of principles on parcel deliveries has had little effect on the problem. The UK statement of principles is designed to assist retailers in their policies on the delivery of goods purchased over the internet by individual consumers. It sets out best practice principles for how retailers can ensure that their delivery services meet the needs of consumers. The UK-wide statement of principles builds on the Scottish guidelines that were launched in November 2013. The principles have arisen following agreement between representatives of the UK and Scottish Governments, online retailers, parcel delivery operators and consumer organisations. The logic is that having companies follow the course of actions outlined in the principles is helpful in ensuring that the UK parcels delivery market works in the interests of consumers and businesses. However, the last time I checked—perhaps the Minister has more recent figures—only four out of 449 businesses had even heard of the principles.

There is no doubt that the UK Government need to use the Consumer Rights Act 2015 to support education for businesses about the requirements under the Consumer Contracts (Information, Cancellation and Additional Charges) Regulations 2013. There also needs to be support for education for consumers about the information that they should be provided with and the minimum standards defined in the regulations. The principles were designed to secure a better, fairer deal for consumers in our rural areas, but not enough work has been done to increase delivery operator and retailer buy-in to the principles with a plan of action to promote the scheme.

There is no doubt that the Scottish Government’s road equivalent tariff ferry fare structure should have helped to reduce the costs of delivering goods to islands such as Arran and Cumbrae, but I am afraid that the reductions seem not to have been passed on to consumers. More work must be undertaken with delivery operators for our rural and island consumers across Scotland. We need to ensure that customers on islands and in rural areas can access a full range of delivery options to their local post office, local shop or any other place that is convenient to them and may reduce costs.

The Scottish Government have done all they can about the issue with the very limited powers they have, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross pointed out, but not a great deal has changed in reality. The Scottish Government have unveiled the “Fairer Deliveries For All” plan to protect rural consumers and businesses and empower online shoppers to recognise and act on unfair and misleading delivery costs. The Scottish Government’s work on a voluntary code is also important, but the real power to put the matter right lies with the UK Government, who need
to act. Our rural consumers and businesses need them to use their powers to regulate and do the right thing, so that they can access a fair deal.

I want a better deal for my island constituents on Arran and Cumbrae, and for rural constituents across Scotland and the UK. That is why I support a people’s delivery guarantee to pull together all aspects of delivery charges and guarantees, and to ensure that consumers are getting the fair deal that they deserve—not being misled by claims that delivery will be free, only to be told during or after purchase that that is not the case. The Minister may tell us that the Advertising Standards Authority launched a crackdown last year on misleading claims about rural delivery charges to consumers, but that has not really delivered the change that rural communities need.

Douglas Ross: I understand the hon. Lady’s argument and her point that more could be done, but I have given concrete examples of the ASA taking action. We should at least recognise that companies are now receiving enforcement notices, which was not happening in recent months and years.

Patricia Gibson: I am aware that the hon. Gentleman mentioned that the Advertising Standards Authority has been launching initiatives to crack down on such practices, but my point is that the kind of real change that he and I hope for has not come about.

A million consumers in rural Scotland face punitive surcharges. That has to stop. There needs to be better and greater dialogue between the UK Government and the delivery operators. The UK Government can and should regulate charges. Concrete and decisive action is needed to ensure that consumers in large areas of Scotland do not face higher delivery charges or even have their orders refused.

I first spoke out on this issue four years ago, weeks after first being elected as an MP, and in that time I have seen the Scottish Government do what they can to improve a bad situation over which they have no real power. This Parliament and this Government have the power to deliver the fairness and the inclusion that is needed. I urge the Minister to use her good offices to deliver change at long last. For the most part, self-regulation has failed. I really hope that we will not still be debating this injustice four years from now. We know what the issue is and we know that it can be remedied, so I hope that we can stop endlessly debating it and instead act. It really is time that my constituents on Arran and Cumbrae, and rural consumers right across Scotland and the UK, are no longer disadvantaged by this postcode tax.

5 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on securing this important debate. I recall his excellent contribution in a debate on broadly similar themes that was secured by the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) around 18 months ago.

However, it is disappointing to see that there has been so little progress in tackling this unfairness since that previous debate. The Minister responsible at the time, the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), assured us that the consumer Green Paper would be the start of the process of finding an answer, but the Green Paper did not mention the issue at all. We are still awaiting the response to the Green Paper consultation, and by later this week we will have been waiting for one year. Can the Minister here today say when we can expect the response?

It has been valuable today to learn about not only the problems that consumers continue to face, but the actions that have been taken since the previous debate. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross has already referred to the Scottish Parliament’s actions, and hopefully there will soon be some clarity on many of these issues, including misleading delivery charges. However, I take on board both his comments and those of the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who also issued a plea to the UK Government to assist them in this matter, because it is Government action that is needed. I was interested to hear the hon. Lady talk about the people’s delivery guarantee, which I think is an excellent idea. I hope that the Minister will take that up and tell us more about it later. There should be more work with delivery companies, and more information and reporting, but those things are useful only up to a point. The evidence that we have heard today has shown that the core problem—the hugely inflated delivery prices that many people face—still exists.

The universal service obligation ensures that firms that use the Royal Mail for deliveries are able to charge precisely the same amount for the highlands as for any other UK address. Regrettably, however, many UK online retailers have moved away from using the Royal Mail. The Government must consider how, in the deregulated postal market, the universal service obligation protects consumers in rural Scotland. Will the Minister examine and assess the effectiveness of the universal service when it comes to protecting rural customers?

The Postal Services Act 2011 sets out the universal service obligation as a service that must simply be available, rather than guaranteeing a consumer the right to access a universal service when a third party, such as an online retailer, is contracting the delivery. The obligation means that for anyone sending post below 20 kg, there is a fixed price to any UK address. That is all well and good in protecting citizens’ rights when people send items themselves, but the majority of online deliveries are by retailers that operate across the UK.

A retailer’s commercial motive will lead it towards wanting to offer incredibly cheap or free delivery to the majority of its customers. In recent years we have seen nearly every online retailer splash an offer of free delivery on their homepage. In fact, led by Amazon, same-day delivery is being pushed as the new ultimate convenience. However, Members will know that not only is that promise rarely universally available, but the desire of online sites to offer delivery leads them to move away from the somewhat higher price of the universal service offered by Royal Mail and towards competitors who can offer cheaper services. Clearly, that is at the cost of consumers in the highlands and islands, who have to pay the exorbitant rates that we have heard about today.

In the previous debate, I said that Ofcom needs to be empowered to take action to ensure that this geographic discrimination is tackled. The then Minister disagreed, on the basis that some delivery firms do not charge
additional retailers in Scotland. That is true, and I encourage all retailers to choose one of these firms to deliver their goods, if they do not use Royal Mail. However, the Government’s position completely misses the point that consumer choice should naturally be about choosing the best quality and value products. Other than by using a few select retailers, consumers cannot choose to go with Royal Mail as an option, so in this environment a universal service does not really exist.

Ofcom continues to report a fall in the cost of parcel postage, due to increased competition. That is good news for the majority of UK consumers, but with margins becoming tighter it represents quite the opposite for consumers in rural locations, as it makes it increasingly unlikely that the highlands and islands will be included at equal rates. I fear that without genuine action the outlook for many Scottish families is bleak. The market is moving at pace towards a low-cost convenience model, and it is difficult to imagine that rural Scotland will be a beneficiary of the change.

It is clear that there is a market failure that must be corrected. I believe that Ofcom can make that correction, if it is correctly instructed. There are two approaches that the Government should consider. First, when there is an option to select Royal Mail delivery, there is a degree of protection available to consumers. The Government should consider how they can ensure that as large a part of the delivery market as possible has an option for Royal Mail delivery, either by a voluntary agreement or, if necessary, by regulation.

Secondly, Ofcom could add geographic delivery to its list of regulated prices. That could certainly curb the worst examples of overcharging faced by rural Scottish communities. Ofcom has used its regulatory powers to cap broadband and phone prices. Therefore, given the evidence of overcharging for delivery, it is logical to cap parcel delivery costs too.

In conclusion, will the Minister recognise that the Government must move beyond guidance and warm words, and instead take real action to ensure that hundreds of thousands of people do not continue to suffer this unfair penalty?

5.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on securing this important debate on an issue that continues to be important for his constituents and those of other Members. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions and the passion with which they represent consumers in their communities.

As the hon. Gentleman will remember, we met last November to discuss his concerns about this issue and we have since corresponded, including my recent responses to the parliamentary questions that he has tabled. I understand the concerns that he and others who are here today have raised that consumers in some parts of Scotland are being charged more for delivery than those in other parts of the UK. I also recognise that similar issues exist for consumers in Northern Ireland.

I am pleased to take part in the debate and to outline the progress that has been made since this issue was last debated in Westminster Hall in a debate responded to by a previous Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), back in December 2017. The Government are committed to promoting growth in the UK economy. The growth in online shopping is increasingly important in achieving that and it is of particular importance to rural communities, where access to physical retail outlets is limited. As hon. Members have said, it is crucial that retailers are up front about their delivery charges, including where they deliver to, what they charge and when premiums apply. Consumers will then know where they stand and can make an informed decision before they purchase. That is what the law requires.

The Government strongly encourage businesses to provide consumers, as far as possible, with a range of affordable delivery options. To help to achieve that, the Government have ensured that everybody, including retailers, has access to an affordable postal service for deliveries across the UK under the universal service obligation, which has been mentioned in the debate. Through the universal service obligation, Royal Mail delivers parcels up to 20 kg, five days a week, at uniform rates throughout the UK. Let me make it clear that it is for businesses themselves to determine what is the appropriate delivery option for the consumers of their products. There are no rules to prevent differential charging between businesses for deliveries, and I do not believe that, for example, imposing a price cap is a practical answer. We should not seek to force retailers to use a specific supplier, such as Royal Mail, because competition in the delivery market is an important driver of efficiency. A competitive market should be a sufficient incentive to put pressure on charges applied by retailers and delivery operators.

There are positive signs that things are changing and businesses are listening. Wayfair took the decision earlier this year to scrap delivery charges for orders over £40 to anywhere in the UK and to charge a standard rate of £4.99 for orders below that threshold. That type of commercial decision will set the company apart from its competitors, drive competition and lead to lower costs. On the delivery side, Menzies Parcels launched a highland parcels service last year, which enables delivery to a virtual address for onward delivery at a fixed price.

Provided that consumers have the information they need at the point of purchase and the ability to shop around, shopping around is effective. Research from December 2017 shows that 59% of those faced with a surcharge often, or always, find the item elsewhere online. However, I can reassure hon. Members that the Government are not complacent. The Consumer Protection Partnership, chaired by my officials in the Department, has recognised the issue as a priority that needs to be addressed.

As hon. Members know, the CPP has been looking over the past year to improve online retailers’ compliance with consumer protection law and considering concerns raised about the level and fairness of parcel surcharging. Its work has involved partners including Citizens Advice Scotland, the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland, the Advertising Standards Authority, and the Competition and Markets Authority. The partners have been working with both the parcel and retail industries and other external organisations, including Ofcom. The work has included liaising with bodies representing both operators and retailers to try to understand the pricing models and structures that influence pricing decisions. The aim
is to help industry—both parcel operators and retailers—to find a solution that works for all parties, including consumers.

We have also been liaising with officials in the Scottish Government, who launched a fair delivery action plan last November that maps both delivery hotspots in Scotland and what might constitute a fair charge. The CPP work will be informed by the outcomes and conclusions of that action. The CPP also worked with highland trading standards, the Citizens Advice consumer service and Advice Direct Scotland to launch the delivery law portal last year, which will gather information about delivery charges and parcel surcharging to inform the work and support enforcement. In the past year, the portal has received up to 1,000 hits per day. Referring potential breaches and unfair practices to the site will help enforcement agencies to ensure that retailers meet their legal obligations.

Significant work has been undertaken by the ASA and the CMA to ensure that businesses comply with the legislation, and both have acted swiftly where that has not happened. The ASA, which is responsible for ensuring compliance with the British code of advertising, sales promotion and direct marketing, has issued more than 200 enforcement notices to online retailers regarding their parcel surcharging practices and has achieved a compliance rate of more than 95%.

The CMA has issued a number of advisory notices to major retail platforms and, as a result, eBay and Amazon have reviewed and improved their policies and guidance for retailers who sell via their platforms. However, on the back of this debate, and the intelligence mentioned by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross that suggests that Amazon may be taking a retrograde step in what it allows its online retailers to do with delivery charges, I would be happy to raise the matter directly with Amazon. I would be very grateful for any information that could be provided to me as the Minister, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue.

I reiterate that the advisory notices are making companies such as eBay and other online platforms look at their practices and review them. The CMA continues to work through primary authorities to ensure continued improvement in this area. On the legal compliance side, significant progress has been made and our enforcement partners will continue to monitor and take action where necessary.

I want to touch on a few of the issues hon. Members have raised, beginning with the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross. He is right to highlight that we expect more of our online retailers and that they should be up front and transparent with their consumers. Applying large surcharges after a purchase has taken place is therefore something we take seriously on the enforcement side. I concur with what my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) said about when he has had issues and has been able to get the ASA involved to carry out enforcement. That is highlighted by the number of enforcement notices the ASA has levied over the past year.

I highlight again that the CMA has issued, and will continue to issue, advisory notices where it sees fit. My hon. Friend the Member for Moray was absolutely right to raise a concern about postcodes. Such issues need to be raised directly with retailers. I co-chair the Retail Sector Council with Richard Pennycook and, although this is not a workstream within the council, I commit here today to mention it at the next meeting as an issue that particularly affects Scottish consumers. At least then we can ensure that from a knowledge and a lobbying point of view those retailers understand that there are problems for their Scottish customers.

Companies are missing out on business when they choose to employ couriers that charge large surcharges for deliveries into the highlands. If the information is transparent, the consumer has the opportunity to shop around, and we have seen from research that 60% of consumers will do that and will find a cheaper price or a different supplier. Retailers need to understand that they are potentially missing out on a very valuable market by being restrictive with the Scottish market. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) is absolutely right about Scottish consumers.

The evidence suggests that people in Scotland pay 30% more for their deliveries, and in the highlands the figure can go up to 50%. That is why the CPP’s work has yet to be finished; we are still monitoring the matter and will continue to engage with the industry and retailers.

I am not sure whether I have stood with the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) and spoken about Scottish surcharges, but we have spoken about most things consumer. She is absolutely right about Scottish consumers. She is absolutely right to challenge me on when the potential White Paper will be launched. I can assure her that I have been particularly interested in and working on the enforcement side and, although I cannot guarantee a date today, we hope to introduce it as soon as possible. She is right to highlight the beauty of our universal service, which offers 20 kg at a fixed price to anywhere in the UK, and it is a shame that some retailers have moved away from using it.

We can never forget that the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), who is no longer in his place, is a postman. Every opportunity he gets, he bangs the drum on behalf of Royal Mail, our posties and the great service they provide. It is correct that businesses can choose to use different couriers. Some businesses will argue that in certain cases, further costs are incurred for delivering within Scotland and the highlands, which need to be passed on to the consumer. However, we are committed to continue working on that.

Douglas Ross: On the point that the Minister has made about further costs sometimes being involved, I take her back to my example, in which companies are not looking at the costs involved; they are simply looking at a postcode. In Moray, when they deliver further because the address has a different postcode, some companies charge no more for delivery than they do for an address that is closer to the depot. If companies were looking at it strategically, based on their costs, I could maybe understand it, but they are not; they are taking a blanket approach for any IV postcodes, and that is not right.

Kelly Tolhurst: I agree; my hon. Friend has highlighted a particular example. Since he has been elected, he has spoken with me many times, and he is known as a champion in this area. He has been pushing me as much
as any constituency MP to take action. He has raised the issue of postcodes with me, and he is right that in that particular circumstance, there seems to be an absolute unfairness for the Scottish consumer. That is why one of the most important things is that we are working with couriers and highlighting the unfairness of that example.

We are putting pressure on businesses to make sure that when they instruct a courier with a contract, they do so with the best interests of their Scottish and Northern Irish consumers at heart. In some cases, we are talking about large retailers that have buying power, and they have the ability to go into negotiation with those couriers and negotiate better prices and services. I am particularly concerned about the small online retailers that do not have buying power with the couriers and, because of the number of parcels they send out in a day, cannot negotiate with them to perhaps get those surcharges reduced. My hon. Friend the Member for Moray is absolutely right: we need to continue to move forward and get more transparency.

I welcome the work that the Scottish Government have been doing on this, because they are close to this area. We in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the CPP will keep engaged with the Scottish Government, and a lot of their work and its results will inform what we are doing with the CPP. I understand hon. Members’ frustration about what they perceive as a lack of progress, but I believe we have made progress, although it may not have been along the lines they would have liked to see. We have taken enforcement action; we are looking at this area, and it is being monitored. It is also right that we continue to do our best to make retailers consider their consumers who are being disadvantaged, because in not being able to supply products to those Scottish consumers, those retailers are ultimately the ones that are missing out. I congratulate the CPP on its work to ensure that when consumers purchase goods online, information is up front and transparent, and to take action swiftly when that is not the case.

Although there might be no quick fix on this issue, and although I am unconvinced at this moment about the need for further legislation, that does not mean that the issue is being ignored. I look forward to hearing about further progress through the CPP’s work and the Scottish Government’s initiatives. I am happy to update Members about progress as that work continues, and I thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross for having secured the debate.

I understand the concerns of Members. After the next meeting of the Retail Sector Council, I commit that I will write to Members present today to outline what I was able to raise there. This is about a two-pronged attack: dealing with the couriers, but also making the retailers recognise that their decision making has an impact on consumers in Scotland and Northern Ireland. As the consumer Minister, I of course want there to be fairness and transparency for consumers throughout the United Kingdom, including those in the Scottish highlands and mainland Scotland.

5.24 pm

Jamie Stone: It falls to me to thank each and every one of the hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. In contrast to Westminster 25 or 30 years ago, a lot of people these days watch these events, thanks to the internet and the televising of Parliament. I know my constituents will be pleased that such thought has been given to an issue that matters greatly to them.

Secondly, I will spare the blushes of the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney)—who is no longer with us—but it is true that the Royal Mail is held in very high esteem. If we look at the level of esteem of various professions, I am afraid that postmen and postladies are held in much higher esteem than politicians.

The answer, when we reach it, has to be thorough and to work for consumers, and I very much hope that it will involve the Royal Mail. I do not want to over-dramatise the issue, because using language that is too strong will not help the cause. The Minister has taken on board the points made, and I am grateful for that. In brief, it seems to me that it would be a terrible thing if the sheer cost of living for people who live in remote straths and glens in the highlands led to their considering moving away. People moving south was the old curse of the highlands, so I hope we will never see that day. When the public good is in all of our hearts, I am sure we can avoid that situation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered additional delivery charges in rural areas in Scotland.

5.25 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered potential red squirrel extinction.

“This is a tale about a tail—a tail that belonged to a little red squirrel, and his name was Nutkin. He had a brother called Twinkleberry, and a great many cousins: they lived in a wood at the edge of a lake.”

That is from “The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin” by Beatrix Potter, written in 1903. The lake and the island that Beatrix Potter described are of course St Herbert’s Island on Derwentwater in my Copeland constituency. Sadly, the abundance of red squirrels that Beatrix Potter described—or sciurus vulgaris, to give our only native tree squirrel its Latin name—could never be enjoyed today. I believe that the decline of the red squirrel is a national tragedy. Its numbers across the UK have declined from an estimated 2.5 million, as recorded over 100 years ago, to the latest count of just 140,000, with only 15,000 left in England. It is a harrowing tale of human intervention, bounties, woodland destruction, predation and disease, but there is hope.

In Cumbria, we are just about retaining our red squirrel stronghold, thanks to the dedication of volunteer conservation groups such as the West Lakes Squirrel Initiative, which I have been proud to support.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing forward this matter, which I have been proud to support. My constituency of Strangford—particularly in Mount Stewart, which is run by the National Trust—there is a red squirrel conservation project, which is ably supported and very successful. Alongside that, there are the red squirrel projects at Rosemount in Grey Abbey and on the Ballywalter estate, which are two shooting estates. Does she agree that when it comes to preserving the red squirrel, the eradication or removal of the grey squirrel is important, because of the pox that it carries, and that to do that we need the co-operation of landowners, shooting organisations and rural pursuit organisations? If so, does she feel that perhaps the Government should encourage those groups to be involved in efforts to save the red squirrel?

Trudy Harrison: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent intervention and pre-empts much of what I want to say today. I share his sentiment entirely. The threats from squirrel pox and deforestation in the form of clear felling, and the difficulty in accessing land to control grey squirrels, mean that the task of red squirrel conservation is far from easy.

“The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin” was written in 1903 by a wonderful author and illustrator who obviously adored red squirrels. However, in that same year, and for decades afterwards, a bounty on red squirrels would lead to more than 100,000 being killed in the Scottish highlands alone. Rewards were paid for their bushy tails for over 43 years. If only those gamekeepers, foresters and country folk could have had a crystal ball. Man has a lot to answer for.

In 1876 some bright spark thought that it would be a good idea to introduce the larger and more prolifically breeding grey squirrel from North America to Cheshire. The grey squirrel out-competes our native reds for habitat, food and reproduction, and grey squirrels carry, but are not affected by, the fatal virus of squirrel pox. It is estimated that there are now 3.5 million grey squirrels living in the UK, compared with just 140,000 red squirrels, and it is widely agreed by scientists, Government Departments, wildlife trusts and conservationists that grey squirrels and red squirrels cannot cohabit. Without exception, where there are live greys, there will be dead reds.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am sorry that I am unable to stay and listen to the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), as I have red squirrels in my garden on the Island. Does my hon. Friend agree that the real point is that besides having more trees and the right trees—I speak as a life member of the Woodland Trust—we need to move the boundaries, so that red squirrels get more land area and grey squirrels get squeezed out? It is not a question of eliminating grey squirrels from the whole country; it is a question of expanding the area where red squirrels can thrive and prosper.

Trudy Harrison: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Creating such a ring of steel around the red squirrel strongholds is absolutely imperative. This debate is not about a national effort to control greys and secure the reds; we have to concentrate on stronghold areas if we are to win the battle.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. She will be aware of the pioneering work on the Isle of Anglesey by the well-known Red Squirrels Trust and by Dr Craig Shuttleworth. Being an island, we have natural boundaries and we have preserved them. However, an important point was made about woodland. We need the correct
woodland, and in the forests of Newborough and Pentraeth the number of breeding pairs of squirrels has gone up from none to more than 350. That is a success story, where we have natural boundaries as well as the proper woodland and habitat. With the onset of the debate on climate change, surely now is the time to plant the right trees in the right places to help the environment and squirrels’ habitats?

**Trudy Harrison:** The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. This is a really worthwhile debate and I think that, perhaps with the exception of the comment from the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), we are aligned on what must be done.

**John Woodcock:** It was a probing amendment.

**Trudy Harrison:** Planting the right kind of trees is absolutely imperative, but we must also be careful of unintended consequences, because allowing trees to be planted that can create a wildlife corridor for grey squirrels to infiltrate red squirrel strongholds would be disastrous. It takes just one grey squirrel to infiltrate a red squirrel community, and then the squirrel pox virus will tear through the entire population, with devastating consequences.

“Belinda: The Forest How Red Squirrel” is another book that I find utterly enchanting. Red squirrels from the Forest How guest house in Eskdale are brought to life by Peter Trimming, who I am pleased to say is in the Public Gallery today. The bushy-tailed, tufted-eared, bright-eyed visitors to the garden feed tables are portrayed as tame creatures, with brilliant and detailed photography. However, the book goes on to tell the story of red squirrel suffering, as one by one there are fatalities until the last red squirrel, affectionately known as Belinda, sadly dies.

The first signs of squirrel pox are that the squirrel is lethargic and lacking in co-ordination, and the sick squirrels will develop open lesions on their eyes, mouth, ears and paws. The little tufty ears wither, leaving the blind and helpless animal to die a painful, slow death of hypothermia, starvation and, inevitably, predation. Squirrel pox does not discriminate between an old red or a lactating mother, and an infected female with young in her ears and paws. The little tufty ears wither, leaving the blind and helpless animal to die a painful, slow death of hypothermia, starvation and, inevitably, predation. Squirrel pox does not discriminate between an old red or a lactating mother, and an infected female with young in the drey would probably leave her kittens to perish, too, through hypothermia, starvation or predation. It is highly unlikely that a red squirrel will recover from squirrel pox—in over 90% of cases they die. Some say that only 5% survive. Indeed, some say that it is unheard of for a red squirrel ever to recover from squirrel pox.

Given the current rate of decline, if we are agreed that our children and grandchildren should, like us, be inspired by Beatrix Potter’s books and see for themselves our most iconic native British wildlife in the wild, we must act quickly. It has been said that the fight for red squirrel survival will be futile, but thankfully in life, although there are those who say things cannot be done, there are also people who refuse to accept defeat. There are people who give up hours, days, weeks and years of their own time and spend their own money because they are determined to be part of this greatest revival—people such as Peter Armstrong and Steve Tyson, who work throughout the year in my Copeland constituency in the name of red squirrel conservation with a committed team of supporters. I commend their efforts, and those of all volunteers who go out in all weathers, across rough terrain, in wind and rain against the odds to save the reds.

Red squirrel conservation requires many factors, including the permission of landowners, the skills of a marksman or markswoman, and the bulk purchase of nuts and corn, feeders, trail cameras and traps. It is a costly hobby; it requires risk assessment, quality control, promotion and fundraising, bid-writing, account-keeping, and driving for miles and miles. It requires monitoring and collaboration, dealing with countless setbacks, and relentless commitment. The revival of the reds is possible—perhaps not right across this great nation, but in areas of the north of England, Devon, Anglesey, Scotland, and in the glens of Northern Ireland and on the Isle of Wight, we can effectively keep areas of our countryside free from grey squirrels and therefore avoid unhelpful competition for habitat and food and the awful, painful, deadly squirrel pox virus.

I ask the Minister to consider the asks of those volunteers and conservation groups ahead of the development of a strategy for red squirrels in England. During my research for this debate, what really struck me was the extent of consensus and collaboration. Nobody—no organisation or wildlife trust that I have spoken with—disagrees that where there are live grey squirrels, there will be dead red squirrels. The North American grey squirrels will always outcompete our native reds, and there is currently no vaccination or cure for the deadly virus that will be spread throughout a red squirrel community.

There are some solutions in the pipeline, from the release of predatory pine martens to infertility potions being administered to grey squirrels in Nutella chocolate and hazelnut spread. In the name of red squirrel conservation, a pile of research is being invested in, but those solutions will all take time to develop and may not be deemed viable in all areas. It is extra tricky in the few areas of the UK that currently enjoy a red squirrel population. Although the pine marten release project may work well in areas void of red squirrels, and it may be that the pine marten would struggle to capture the lighter, more nimble red squirrel, the same could not be said for a drey of young red kittens, which would surely make a tasty, easy meal for such a voracious carnivore.

Pine martens may have their place in the great grey challenge, but introducing a predator when a population is already on the edge of survival does not seem like the best idea. There have been reported sightings of pine martens carrying dead red squirrels, which confirm my concern. It is also important to note that the red squirrel is one of many mammals and birds that are threatened in our countryside. The pine marten, a member of the weasel family, became extinct in England over 150 years ago because we humans decided that it was eating too many birds’ eggs and small mammals. However, it is thriving in North America, where its main source of food is the grey squirrel.

The concept of a contraception or infertility potion is being developed by the Animal and Plant Health Agency. It requires a method of administration that is targeted only at grey squirrels, because the compound is not specific to squirrels and would, if ingested, cause other mammals to become infertile. Research on a contraceptive
Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady not only on securing the debate, but on her enduring interest in the matter, which I and many others share. Does she agree that we need to hear from the Minister, and from the various other Ministers across the United Kingdom, about a project or plan for the next 15 or 20 years? A written answer that I got from the Minister indicates that in England alone there are 150 greys for every single red, so there needs to be a 15 to 20-year project that would ensure not just the survival but the flourishing of the reds.

Trudy Harrison: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He is absolutely correct; the issue requires a long-term strategy of collaboration that is appropriately resourced. That is the only way we will ensure that our children and grandchildren will enjoy the benefits, as we have, of our native British wildlife.

Albert Owen: The hon. Lady is talking about funding, which is important. One important source for conservation in the UK has been European structural funds, particularly in relation to public land owners and the community working together to preserve and increase the number of red squirrels. Will she join me in pressing the Minister to use the shared prosperity fund post Brexit in the same positive way when it comes to wildlife and the preservation of species such as the red squirrel?

Trudy Harrison: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I join him in making that point to the Minister. As we lose some funding, we must ensure that alternative funding pots become available for this worthwhile and urgent project.

I thank the many individuals and organisations who have contributed very helpful and detailed briefings, including Dr Craig Shuttleworth, Jackie Foorit, the National Trust, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Red Squirrels United and the UK Squirrel Accord, which is a UK-wide partnership of 37 leading conservation and woodland organisations, Government agencies and companies, founded by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

The key asks from all those organisations focus on: ensuring long-term, sustainable funding; amending the Forestry Act 1967 to ensure that key vulnerable flora and fauna are protected in the licensing process; ensuring that the 1967 Act contains a requirement to consider the landscape level of impacts of continuous tree felling licences; and, most importantly, effectively enforcing the Invasive Non-native Species (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019. I also thank the Wildlife Trust, which shared a photograph of a litter of four red squirrels orphaned after a tree hosting their drey was felled, and the Woodland Trust, which rightly points out that grey squirrel control is not at all effective unless control is undertaken by the majority of neighbouring landowners, whose combined efforts improve viability and effectiveness.

I commend, celebrate and thank the thousands of people who work all year round to protect our wildlife in the fight against decline. I hope that the Minister and colleagues across the House will join me in appreciating the selfless effort required.
Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing this debate. Formby in my constituency is regarded as the mainland’s southernmost stronghold for red squirrels. We have red squirrels on the Isle of Wight, Brownsea Island and Anglesey, but Formby is the furthest south on the mainland. Reds are found elsewhere in the Liverpool city region too. My wife and I enjoy walking our dog in the pine woods by Formby beach, where we find red squirrels. The National Trust has done superb work over many years to ensure that the woods, the dunes and the habitat there are maintained and that the red squirrel population is looked after. That red squirrel wood at Formby is a real treat for anyone visiting the area and is a place to find red squirrels in good numbers.

Conservation is going on in a strong way in Formby. It follows the foresight of the Weld-Blundell family in planting pine woods on the dunes at Formby in the late 1800s, which created the ideal habitat for red squirrels and many other species. The trees provide a valuable windbreak for the asparagus fields and the neighbouring residential area. The next-door dunes are also home to the tiger beetle and birds including skylarks and willow warblers. It is a fine place of nature conservation.

In Formby, other neighbouring villages and some of the smaller towns, the red squirrels have a place of affection among the public. People are fully aware of the precarious position that the red squirrel is in and how endangered the species really is. People are extremely fond of them and are encouraged by the National Trust and other conservation organisations to look out for grey squirrels and to alert the authorities when they come across them. They are also encouraged to look for signs, particularly in late summer and the autumn, of potential squirrel pox. As the hon. Lady said, it is almost certainly fatal to all reds, whereas greys have acquired immunity to it.

The reds are extremely tame. They are happy to approach humans and are generally not put off by humans being nearby, although I think my dog is probably a bit too much for them on the occasions when we walk him near the squirrels. He is always on a lead, I hasten to add, in case anyone has concerns, although I am not sure what he would do if the opportunity arose. I think he would be more curious than a threat to them. The squirrels can be found in gardens, although when I told some of my constituents that this debate was taking place, one of them pointed out that when she was encouraged as a child to feed red squirrels, she was bitten. We had one discordant voice, but that was the only such piece of feedback that I received. They are genuinely very popular, and with good reason, too. I filmed a red squirrel that decided to dart between my legs in the course of what he was doing. He was quite happy to be close to me. That was actually in Cumbria. Cumbrian red squirrels are very friendly, but they are very friendly in Formby and across the Liverpool city region too.

The hon. Lady spoke about the impact of greys. They impact not only on red squirrels, but on trees, which are the habitat for the reds. The damage that greys cause is widespread. I am tempted to wander into a debate on climate change at this point, because when trees are damaged, it reduces their effectiveness at removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Greys certainly cause damage that undermines the habitat for red squirrels and the other species I have mentioned. It is extremely important that we protect native species, and this debate contrasts the importance of native species against those that have come from overseas.

I am grateful to the National Trust in Formby and the national organisation for their briefings on climate change at this point, because when trees are damaged, it reduces their effectiveness at removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Greys certainly cause damage that undermines the habitat for red squirrels and the other species I have mentioned. It is extremely important that we protect native species, and this debate contrasts the importance of native species against those that have come from overseas.

I am grateful to the National Trust in Formby and the national organisation for their briefings about the good work done at Formby. I am also grateful to the Woodland Trust. All the briefings stressed the importance of controlling the numbers of greys. The National Trust also stressed to me the importance of the funding it receives and of having greater funding to maintain and enhance the landscape—the habitat and the trees. There have been concerns about the thinning out of trees at Formby, for example. Important work has been carried out by the Lancashire Wildlife Trust, including on the Merseyside red squirrel project. It is also part of the national Red Squirrels United project, which is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Those projects are extremely important. The hon. Lady mentioned the importance of supporting the existing strongholds, and she is right about that as a strategy, but we can never take it for granted. We have to be extremely alert and work extremely hard to maintain that work. Funding is extremely important. I hope the Minister can confirm that the Government intend to maintain and potentially enhance funding in this area.

Albert Owen: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention the strongholds of Formby, the Isle of Wight, Cumbria and my constituency of Anglesey. The money to conserve this important species and habitat also creates an economic benefit from tourism coming to the area. He knows that the Anglesey beaches, with the woodlands in close proximity, are a great example of that, so does he agree that this is about giving money not only to conservation groups, but to the local economy and community to invest for the future?

Bill Esterson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I was heartened to hear from his previous interventions and in my research for this debate about the work in Anglesey and the impressive way in which the red squirrel population has been defended and the greys pushed back. Certainly in Formby, the investment promotes tourism and we get many visitors, but that also brings challenges, as he will know. Sometimes too many visitors try to get into a small area with limited roads and parking, but that is for another debate.

The Woodland Trust briefing made the point that the introduction of pine martens as a natural predator against the greys has seen early signs of success. I understand that that is also the case around the country. Because the greys are slower, the pine martens are more likely to attack and catch them. As the reds are faster, nimbler and smaller, they are more likely to escape, so natural predation is effectively being used to control the greys and protect the reds. I am interested in the Minister’s analysis of the evidence on that point, which the hon. Member for Copeland mentioned. We could do with some clarification, so let us look at the evidence and at what works.

Control of greys is a real problem. In Formby in 2007-08, squirrel pox led to the deaths of 85% of red squirrels in the area. Thanks to the brilliant work of the
National Trust and the many local volunteers, there has been a good recovery, but I am sad to report what has been described as an “intense burst” of red squirrel deaths in Formby recently. The Wildlife Trust is currently testing to see whether squirrel pox is the cause.

Finally, I want to turn to the environment Bill. Protections of habitat are crucial, as we have discussed. The proposed office for environmental protection will have responsibility for monitoring, and it is vital that the regulatory framework is fit for purpose once we leave the EU. Currently, the European Commission exercises influence and power in an effective way. The current proposals suggest that the office for environmental protection will sit with the Government and will not have the independence that the European regulatory arrangements give. Concerns have been raised about that level of independence and whether the regime will be sufficiently robust to maintain the necessary oversight. We need a little more detail from the Minister and the Secretary of State in the part of the Bill that is yet to be published, with tangible and clear targets for restoring the natural environment to support red squirrels and other species.

I have two asks in this debate. The first is for funding for control and protection work, including spreading the word about red squirrels. They do not often bite. They are a fabulous part of our natural world in the UK. We need to raise awareness and provide support to prevent the spread of grey squirrels and disease. Secondly, we need a robust framework in the environment Bill. There are 17 strongholds for this iconic British animal. The red squirrel deserves our full support, but it needs action, not words.

10.5 am

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con):
I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing this important debate. I declare an interest: my family own and manage woodland property in my constituency. It is a wonderful house and garden to visit. It is a huge part of our awareness of the need for conservation. Wallington is a National Trust property in my constituency. It is a wonderful house and garden to visit. It is a huge part of our awareness of the need for conservation. Wallington is a National Trust property in my constituency. It is a wonderful house and garden to visit. It is a huge part of our awareness of the need for conservation. Wallington is a National Trust property in my constituency. It is a wonderful house and garden to visit. It is a huge part of our awareness of the need for conservation. Wallington is a National Trust property in my constituency. It is a wonderful house and garden to visit. It is a huge part of our awareness of the need for conservation. Wallington is a National Trust property in my constituency. It is a wonderful house and garden to visit. It is a huge part of our awareness of the need for conservation. Wallington is a National Trust property in my constituency. It is a wonderful house and garden to visit. It is a huge part of our awareness of the need for conservation. Wallington is a National Trust property in my constituency. It is a wonderful house and garden to visit. It is a huge part of our awareness of the need for conservation. Wallington is a National Trust property in my constituency. It is a wonderful house and garden to visit. It is a huge part of our awareness of the need for conservation. Wallington is a National Trust property in my constituency. It is a wonderful house and garden to visit. It is a huge part of our awareness of the need for conservation. Wallington is a National Trust property in my constituency. It is a wonderful house and garden to visit.

My son took in the musty old book, which did not match the internet submissions that other parents had dug out late at night to support the project of the day, but it led to a school trip to Wallington Hall, a National Trust property in my constituency. It is a wonderful place with 13,000 acres of farm and woodland that now has a vibrant community of red squirrels, thanks to the conservation efforts after near extinction in 2011. When the schoolchildren went to visit in 2008, the red squirrel population had almost disappeared. They went with their exciting project in mind and were told by those working at Wallington that there was a real problem. It was fascinating to watch that next generation become aware of the need for conservation. Wallington is a wonderful house and garden to visit. It is a huge part of the Northumberland tourism industry and provides an opportunity to bring people out from Newcastle to enjoy a beautiful rural existence.

The National Trust has led in investing in finding ways to preserve and restore the red squirrel population. At Wallington, we have our very own red squirrel ranger, Glen Graham, a wonderful man, who has led the way in supporting and protecting our native squirrel population, and working out the best ways to do that in what is, helpfully, a relatively contained woodland environment. He provides food, because the greys eat more than the reds, and he keeps predators away with a lot of humane trapping. He also tries to keep the humans away.

We have wonderful traffic signs on the roads that say, “Squirrels crossing here—please slow down”. Realising how much we all need to do has been a really interesting part of the community’s involvement in the red squirrel project. Every time people drive into town, they drive past those signs and slow down, sometimes so that they can peer over the hedge to see the red squirrel who might just be crossing. The National Trust has been profoundly involved, and was a founder member of the UK Squirrel Accord. Across Northumberland and the rest of the UK, landowners and farmers are committing time and resource to trapping grey squirrels. The only way is to rebalance the numbers. The greys will just take over the woodland space if they can.

There are three real threats, one of which is clearly disease. We have discussed the squirrel pox, for which the grey is a carrier and by which the red is almost always fatally affected. That is a technical problem,
which we need to continue to work on. We must find a vaccine against it so that the red has a chance to compete, at least on that level, in a fair and balanced way. Competition for food is also clearly a huge challenge, simply because the grey eats more in a day and has more of an impact on trees. The reds just cannot keep up.

A fundamental part of that is the question of the amount of woodland habitat that we need. The grey poses a greater threat to our woodlands, as they strip bark from the broadleaf trees for food and for building dreys. That can leave a tree vulnerable to disease, creating weaker, disfigured trees, and that can reduce seed production through crown loss and then depressed timber values. There is an all-round negative impact on the woodland, which requires long-term investment.

We need to plant more broadleaf woodland to create more areas of potential home for our native red squirrel. I raise again with the Minister the logistical challenges put before any landowner wanting to plant new woodland. Our manifesto commitment to 11 million new trees through this Parliament is proving far from likely to be achieved. The Forestry Commission and Natural England seem intent on thwarting progress, with endless internal battles that leave the private investor at a loss regarding how to make any progress.

The Minister will recall the interventions, for which we are still grateful, that she had to make to help the Doddington forest project to get under way. She will be pleased to know that it is now planted, despite years of effort to slow its progress. Local children helped to plant it. The Northumbrian red squirrel population is now waiting for those trees to grow into a new home for them and their families in the decades ahead. In the meantime, because trees grow very slowly, I call on the Government to increase their support for and investment in grey squirrel reduction projects, in order to leave space for our Squirrel Nutkins.

10.13 am

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing this important debate. It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and thank you for interpreting the rules generously enough to allow me to speak. I will be brief, but I think the debate would benefit from having an opinion from the Isle of Wight, where we have a sizeable red squirrel population.

As we have heard, red squirrels are the only squirrel native to the British Isles. They are disappearing from the mainland at an alarming rate, having been replaced by the American grey squirrel. Looking at a map of England, what is truly upsetting for people who love the reds, as I do, is that there are only two red squirrel hot spots south of the Mersey: one is in Anglesey, of which the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) just spoke; the other is on the Isle of Wight.

Out of a red squirrel population of 140,000 in the United Kingdom, between 3,000 and 3,500 at its height are on the Isle of Wight. We know that thanks to excellent work done by the Wight Squirrel Project and the Isle of Wight Red Squirrel Trust. We also produce some fantastic T-shirts and hoodies with red squirrels holding up a 30 mph speed limit sign, like those my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) mentioned. I have, on a couple of occasions in the last few years, seen the bodies of red squirrels on the road. It always angers me when they wind up dead on the road, because we do not have enough of them.

The Isle of Wight is a stronghold for red squirrels because we are an island. The Solent is thankfully a barrier to grey squirrels. I was told recently—I am not sure whether it is an urban myth—that we once turned back a ferry, not because it had mainlanders on it, who are very welcome to visit, but because there was a grey squirrel on it. The ferry was held up, we found the grey squirrel, and it got off—it probably did not have a ticket anyway. We do not want greys on the Isle of Wight. As we know, it takes only one grey to spread disease among the population of reds. It is illegal to bring a grey squirrel into red squirrel territory and the penalty is two years’ imprisonment or a £5,000 fine.

Red squirrels are truly beautiful animals. About five years ago, I was living in an even more remote place than I am now. It was a mile and a half down a single-track lane, and as I drove back in the evening buzzards would fly overhead, and badgers and the occasional red squirrel would run across the road. I drove very slowly. A red squirrel came and sat on my porch once and ate some nuts. It was no further away from me than my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed is now. It was the most beautiful and special animal, and we need to ensure that we protect their habitats.

The Island is about 10% woodland, and that is increasing slowly. What we have not done, and what we probably need to do nationally, is ensure that where possible we link woodland environments together to enable the reds to have greater space in which to flourish and reproduce, because reds have a lower living density than grey squirrels. They need more woodland and undergrowth to support the same population, because they are slightly more solitary animals than grey squirrels.

We do not have many deer on the Isle of Wight, so I think an environmental expert would say that our understory trees and our young shoots are in better condition than those in parts of Britain with a deer population that tends to eat shoots and harm the growth of understory trees. However, I would be delighted to hear from the Minister what more the Government can do to support projects to reforest parts of the United Kingdom with broadleaf trees—not conifers, which acidify the soil and do not do enough to support insect, bird life, and red squirrel and other mammal life.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I have been listening to the points made by my hon. Friend and others about the connection between red squirrels and greys, red squirrels and predators, and red squirrels and trees. There is a connection between all those different elements of wildlife management. We have some red squirrels on the island of Caldey, in my patch. In order to get them there, we had to eradicate rats, which led to a revival in ground-nesting birds. Is not the point that the Government should take a holistic approach—not picking on one species and one method of enhancing or controlling it, but looking at wildlife, and the way in which we manage it, in the round to make it a success?
Mr Seely: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly valuable point: what is good for red squirrels is generally good for most native species. As we know, three varieties of tree—oak, hawthorn and English willow—are the habitat that the native South Georgian population needs. It has been interesting to hear the description of the Isle of Wight this morning; I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely). We also heard of an island I did not know about in Wales from my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart), and the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) spoke of Anglesey.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister about all the good work that the Government are doing to support red squirrel populations and other wildlife populations in Britain.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I had not intended to speak but, there being a little time available, I will do so briefly, largely because I serve on the Environmental Audit Committee, which is currently carrying out an investigation into invasive species. Of course, the grey squirrel is a classic example of what can happen when an invasive species arrives on these islands.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing this extremely important debate, and I listened very carefully to the contributions of other Members. We are unanimous in thinking that the red squirrel is a wonderful native creature, which we must do what we can to preserve. There is no question about that at all. I do not think that a single person would disagree, although I must admit that I rather agree with the flattering remarks made about the greys all through the debate—that we are stronger, more aggressive and bigger—but that is on a personal level, rather than on a squirrel level. I mention in passing an interesting point that so far no one has mentioned this morning. The House will be interested to know that Germans cannot pronounce the word squirrel; it is the only word in the English language that no German can pronounce. Rather curiously, we cannot pronounce the German word for squirrel either. That is a curious little fact that the House ought to know!

The Environmental Audit Committee is studying invasive species at the moment, including such exotic things as the floating pennywort, the American crayfish and all sorts of Asian wasps, as well as the grey squirrel. They all have one thing in common: once they are here, it is almost impossible to get rid of them. In the Environmental Audit Committee, we are looking at the degree to which we can control such species—for example, keeping them in one area—or whether extermination is better.

I had a very interesting time last year when I visited the island of South Georgia in Antarctica, where there has been an immensely successful operation to remove rats. Rats and mice were brought there by whalers over the centuries. Over the last couple of years, the South Georgia Heritage Trust has invested in the order of £10 million in using aerial dispersal of rat poison to eradicate the rat population entirely. As a result, we have seen a significant improvement in the pipit and other native species on the island of South Georgia. They also eradicated 10,000 reindeer, which were devastating the habitat that the native South Georgian population needed.

It has been interesting to hear the description of the Isle of Wight this morning; I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely). We also heard of an island I did not know about in Wales.
Precisely the same applies here. The interesting and worthy projects that we have heard about are great, but we cannot be certain that they will work. There is only one way to be certain that we are going to keep the red squirrel for generations to come, and that is through finding means for the final eradication of the grey squirrel from these islands.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing the debate, and on her opening remarks, the originality of which was commendable. Her knowledge of squirrels and the management of their habitat was very impressive and certainly superior to mine. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on his short intervention, and other Members for their points and concerns. Apart from one, most points have been very well made. Like the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray), I sit on the Environmental Audit Committee and agree that invasive species are a problem for this country and its biosecurity. A recent visit to Cambridge University revealed challenges we all face that are way beyond our ken, as far as I could see. I hope that we will learn more about how to deal with those challenges over the next few weeks.

Scotland is home to 75% of the UK’s 140,000 red squirrels. Although they are one of the most popular mammal species in the country, they are facing a number of ecological challenges, which have reduced the population. Scottish Forestry, the Scottish Government’s responsible body for forestry policy and regulation, is working with a number of partners, including Scottish Natural Heritage, to save the red squirrel for future generations.

The red squirrel is a priority species under the species action framework, which sets out a five-year plan for managing species in Scotland so that effort and resources are targeted to offer the greatest benefit. The Scottish squirrel group was established in 1996 to oversee conservation efforts and, in 2006, published the Scottish red squirrel action plan for 2006 to 2011. The plan integrates grey squirrel control, survey and monitoring with measures to combat the threat of squirrel pox, and the Saving Scotland’s Red Squirrels project has been putting the strategy into action since 2007. Its present priorities include defending red-only areas in the northern Highlands by the targeted control of grey squirrel populations, controlling grey squirrels in north-east Scotland to reduce their distribution and abundance, defending the areas where the food sources and the environment favour red squirrels from grey squirrel incursion, and controlling grey squirrels in priority areas within the grey squirrel range in certain areas of southern Scotland, as well as the island woodland habitat of Arran.

Thanks to those conservation initiatives, and unlike in England, where there is a possibility that the red squirrel could become extinct within the next 10 years—we need to face up to that possibility—red squirrel numbers stabilised in Scotland in 2017 and grey squirrel numbers have declined. In fact, there has been a significant boost in red squirrel numbers in Aberdeenshire and they are holding their ground in the central lowlands, recolonising areas they previously abandoned. Unfortunately, however, red squirrel numbers are still falling in parts of the Scottish borders, especially where squirrel pox is present.

Since 2018, efforts to stop grey squirrels moving north of the highland line appear to be succeeding and we are all delighted. Red squirrels are now thriving in areas where they have been reintroduced into the northern highlands. There have even been suggestions of an expansion of the range of red squirrels into my own area of Falkirk and Stirlingshire, I hope those sightings are well founded.

There are many groups helping with red squirrel conservation. Men’s Shed members in Gala, Dalbeattie and Hawick made feeder boxes for this year’s Saving Scotland’s Red Squirrels annual survey. The boxes have a small piece of sticky plastic—I do not know if we should be using plastic; I hope it is recyclable—that traps hair from visiting animals, which enables the presence of different species to be recorded. That is a good example of red squirrels bringing communities together, as was mentioned earlier.

The Forestry Commission of Scotland has five principles for managing a red squirrel stronghold. I will not go into the detail, but I will lay them out. The first is to manage the forest to maintain a dependable food supply. The second is to resolve conflicts with other management objectives without compromising the success of red squirrel strongholds. The third is to have a plan for red squirrels at the landscape scale. The fourth is to plan forest operations to reduce short-term impacts on populations and sustain long-term resilience. The fifth is to establish a monitoring system, which is extremely important, and a review process. That is sound advice, and we in Scotland hope this good practice will continue to show positive results for all our communities, to endure for all future generations.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), my constituency neighbour, on securing the debate. I am grateful for the excellent contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) and for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), and from the hon. Members for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) and for North Wiltshire (James Gray). I thank the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) for giving us the Scottish perspective.

I am not only Labour’s shadow Environment Secretary; I am also hugely privileged to have red squirrels in my garden. When we have visitors from outside the area, I notice that their seeing a red squirrel is an extraordinary experience. My father-in-law had wanted to see a red squirrel all his life, and it was not until he came to stay with us that he managed to do so. There is huge affection, and it demonstrates how rare they are across Britain.

My comments apply mainly to the situation in Cumbria, because I have first-hand experience of it. As we heard, everybody knows just how serious the plight of Britain’s red squirrels is. They are afforded the highest protection possible but are still hugely threatened. Sadly, they have suffered serious population decline despite our best efforts. According to the Cumbria Wildlife Trust, however,
People rightly think of Cumbria as a very green county, but only 10% of it is covered by woodland. That is 3% lower than the UK average, and well below the EU average of 38%. Protection and enhancement of our woodland is absolutely paramount. The Government have talked a lot about tree planting—we heard from the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed that it is becoming very challenging for a number of reasons. Can the Minister tell us what assessment has been made of targeted tree planting in areas where it would benefit our red squirrel populations?

In May the House declared a state of environmental emergency. Many of our animal species are facing extinction, and the UK is set to miss our 2020 biodiversity targets. Tackling climate change and restoring our precious natural habitats go hand in hand. Restoring ecosystems not only makes significant contributions to carbon sequestration, but can safeguard populations of iconic British wildlife species such as the red squirrel.

The hon. Member for Copeland mentioned the Forestry Act 1967, and I support her request to the Minister to ensure that red squirrels are protected as part of the tree felling licensing process. Can the Minister tell us whether the Act could contain a requirement to consider the landscape-level impacts of continuous tree felling licences? Does she agree that a red squirrel conservation strategy is required to help co-ordinate and prioritise their protection and recovery across England? If we want future generations in Britain to be able to enjoy species such as the red squirrel, we need the Government to take serious action to protect and enhance the populations and their precious habitats.

10.38 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) on securing the debate.

I am concerned that the squirrel is at risk of dying out. Several of the hon. Members who contributed today have left the debate. We need to be warriors if we want to protect red squirrels, and that includes staying to listen to all of the debate, which has been excellent and shows people’s passion for protecting this iconic native species. As my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland mentioned, Squirrel Nutkin has gone down in history, and I am just about old enough to remember Tufty from the road safety films that were shown in the ’70s. I believe Tufty has already reached the age of 65, so popular was he at pushing forward road safety—at some point he was replaced by the Green Cross Code Man.

The red squirrel is certainly a very special species. The hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) is unfortunately no longer in his place, but he knows the importance of the species. I grew up in Formby and, to be candid, I did not realise that grey squirrels existed. I grew up in Formby and, to be candid, I did not realise that grey squirrels existed until I came to London as a student—I could not see a single red squirrel anywhere, and there were grey squirrels all over the place. That is when I learned of the terrible impact that grey squirrels have had on our native species.

As has been pointed out, the red squirrel is protected by domestic legislation and is currently found in a number of strongholds across England, including the
north of England and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely). The red squirrel is also present in larger numbers in Scotland, and the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) quite rightly set out the great success of protection north of the border. There is also a limited population on Anglesey in Wales, and the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), who is no longer in his place, highlighted the projects undertaken there to increase the number of red squirrels. That is a devolved matter, but I am sure that hon. Members will recognise the contributions that we can make, which is why, as the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) pointed out, it was important that all four nations came together for the UK Squirrel Accord and to work with many non-governmental organisations, landowners and so on.

The red squirrel is under attack; not from humans, but from the grey squirrel. The grey squirrel is an invasive species from North America that has a significant impact on our native trees—broadleaves in particular—by stripping bark and eating bulbs, and on our protected species, including the red squirrel. The Government are committed to protecting and expanding red squirrel populations, and to tackling the threat that grey squirrels pose to them, particularly the tendency to spread squirrel pox, to which red squirrels are far more susceptible. Preserving biosecurity, including the elimination of non-native species, especially those that jeopardise our native species, is very important to us. My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) rightly mentioned the Environmental Audit Committee’s inquiry, and I assure him that this Government are absolutely committed to doing what we can to eradicate such species.

I fear that that point was missed by the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), who tried to accuse us of being racist about squirrels. I have never heard such nonsense. I really think that he needs to go on an education tour in Cumbria to understand the importance of red squirrels and why they are so special to our nature.

**James Gray:** The Minister may move on to this so I might be picking up unreasonably on a slip of the tongue, but she talked about the “eradication” of invasive species, no doubt in the context of our current inquiry on the Environmental Audit Committee. Will she suggest that we might find ways not just of controlling but of eradicating the grey squirrel?

**Dr Coffey:** I think that I used the word “elimination,” which is the same. I agree that has to be our target, rather than just control.

We have made sure that strict protections are in place for those species. Regulations are in place and we need to ensure that they are effectively enforced in England and Wales, as well as at the UK border and in the offshore marine area. Similar legislation is being prepared by the Scottish and Northern Ireland Governments.

The Invasive Alien Species (Enforcement and Permitting) Order 2019 requires us to put in place management measures for widely spread invasive species, including the grey squirrel, that have been risk-assessed and found to be highly damaging. Management measures must be aimed at the eradication, population control or containment of the species concerned. Under the order, releasing listed invasive species back into the environment will be prohibited unless it is part of further control efforts authorised by a licence, although that is effectively already domestic law.

Grey squirrels have attracted much attention. As I said in response to a recent petition, rescue centres may continue to rescue and treat grey squirrels; they are not obliged to kill grey squirrels, but they cannot release them into the wild without a licence. When the order comes into force in the coming months, it will bring England’s approach to controlling the release of grey squirrels into line with that of the devolved Administrations, who also acknowledge the impact of the species.

The population decline of red squirrels, a species that was once common in England, is of significant concern to the Government and we want to continue to find ways to address it. The Forestry Commission undertakes a number of actions to protect red squirrels from the impact of grey squirrels, as outlined in the grey squirrel action plan for England. DEFRA, in partnership with the UK Squirrel Accord, has provided funding for work by the Animal and Plant Health Agency to develop a fertility control method for grey squirrels. Although I am assured by officials that the research continues to show promise as a potentially effective and humane method of controlling grey squirrel numbers in the long term, I am conscious that it has been worked on for several years, and I do not want us to keep relying on it as the only way to tackle grey squirrel numbers.

On bolstering the populations of pine martens, I am conscious of what my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland said about the impact on red kittens. The pine marten is a natural predator of grey squirrels, and its reintroduction in places such as the Forest of Dean and Northumberland is expected to have an impact on grey squirrel populations in those areas, reducing their threat. Red squirrels co-evolved with pine martens, which they evade by scurrying to the tips of branches, where the larger pine martens cannot reach them. The greys do not know this trick and as a result are predated upon in higher numbers by pine martens.

My hon. Friend the Member for Copeland also referred to felling licences. They simply authorise the felling of growing trees and do not absolve landowners of compliance with the legislation in place to protect wildlife, including red squirrels, as set out in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The Forestry Commission considers whether to grant felling licences against the UK forestry standard, which covers the impact on biodiversity, including the habitat of red squirrels. The Forestry Commission checks all applications against a large number of records, including red squirrel reserves. That allows the Commission to highlight any potential issues and advise the applicant on how to avoid the disturbance or damage of protected species.

I am pleased to say that later this year there will be a consultation on an English tree strategy, which will provide the opportunity to consider the need for further strengthening of wildlife protections during forestry operations. In the preparation of the environment Bill, we are considering extra powers for the Forestry Commission in some regards, and there may still be an opportunity to consider clauses to strengthen those powers.
The environment improvement and recovery networks will be a key part of fulfilling the 25-year environment plan. One does not always need specific legislation targeting one species; as my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) pointed out, it is important to have a holistic approach. Although we need to focus on our iconic native species and the elimination of invasive non-native species, it is absolutely right to take that wider approach. With the development of local nature improvement plans, more focus can be given to those iconic species in areas where they are particularly important, rather than having a one-size-fits-all plan.

Dr Coffey: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend on that important point, and I recognise the importance of what is now called “citizen science” in ensuring that data is available to local authorities and Governments, to inform policy and decision making so that policies are properly implemented.

There has been a lot of discussion about trees. In the wider discussion about biodiversity, it is important to remember that habitat degradation is one of the major reasons for the global biodiversity challenge. On the kinds of trees that we have, my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight spoke specifically about the need to plant more broadleaves, but we actually need a balanced biodiversity and a balanced tree strategy to take that forward. Both conifers and broadleaves will work for red squirrel habitats but, as has been pointed out, they thrive mostly in areas where there are conifers. Largely, greys do less well there, because there are not the same kinds of nutrients as in broadleaf woodland, so there is less competition for the reds.

It is important to recognise the multi-purpose of trees. As we have discussed many times in this Chamber, the right tree in the right place offers multiple benefits, for flood situations, for habitats, for protection from heat in urban areas and for all sorts of other things, as well as being a general force for good. The hon. Member for Workington mentioned the 10% woodland coverage in Cumbria, and I agree that Cumbria is absolutely under-forested. A year last December, I too planted a tree up in Cumbria—I cannot recall the constituency, but it was on the Lowther estate—in what is one of the largest such developments, alongside Doddington moor on the other side of the country, I encourage my hon. Friends from Cumbria to speak to the national park authority about what it will do to encourage the planting of more woodlands and forests, because that can make a difference.

Countryside stewardship schemes will support landowners who want to develop habitats specifically for species such as the red squirrel. As we develop the design of the environmental land management scheme for when we leave the European Union, it will in effect turn the existing common agricultural policy on its head so that we pay for public benefits. Those schemes will attract more and more attention from landowners, rather than them just considering commercial forestry.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: In Cumbria, the first forestry investment zone, or FIZ, is a small test of that, but what else are the Government doing to encourage such activity? As I said, the challenge for landowners is the active support of the Forestry Commission to make something happen.

Dr Coffey: The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), is now responsible for domestic forestry and the Forestry Commission, so I no longer have day-to-day contact in that regard. I hope that the tree strategy will be a way to make progress.

I suggest that some of the biggest forest and woodland planning applications had particular issues. We have to balance compliance with the habitats directive and the different assessments that have to be made, and I know how expensive those can be. Applications for financial support from the Government need to ensure that they are not only absolutely compliant with UK forestry standards, but taking wider environmental regulations into account. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), however, that lessons could have been learned from some of those major applications, and I hope that they will be for future developments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Copeland asked why the Forestry Commission does not allow more shooting. Shooting, or culling, of grey squirrels is an important driver in their elimination. The Forestry Commission has asked me to point out that it has responsibility for public access and public safety on its estate. However—I will be open about this—I do not think that the commission does a very good job of tackling non-native invasive species. We have the wild boar problem down in the Forest of Dean, and other such problems across the country. I would like to see a more proactive approach, such as the deer initiative, in which people who are not Forestry Commission employees work in partnership to tackle the deer problem. I would like to see more of that happen with some other non-native species.

In speaking about other elements of the issue, many hon. Members paid tribute to the important role played by volunteers in the protection of our domestic red squirrel populations. As they said, a variety of charities up in Cumbria raise public awareness of the threats to red squirrels, engage directly with local landowners, and created a citizen science system in which members of the public record red and grey squirrel sightings. Pockets of improvement could happen elsewhere. My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight talked about the nature networks and the woodland and habitat links in his constituency. I see that as something we could take forward in the environmental improvement plans that we expect across the country.

As for grey squirrels being a carrier of pox, I have already tried to address some things, such as dealing with grey squirrel pox recreation success—I think that is
the best way of putting it. We also have to be open about this: for red squirrels to survive for the next 500 years—although none of us will be alive then to keep that guarantee to my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire—we must significantly or entirely reduce the threat from the grey squirrel and its diseases. We must also ensure that any future introductions of species align with international guidelines. Such threats have to be tackled head on.

I have already referred to the fact that landowners, if they wish to do more and possibly designate reserves, may apply for countryside stewardship scheme funding. That is open to them. Many different challenges will of course continue but, in response to other questions about funding, it is available. Natural England still funds a variety of activities such as species recovery programmes, which are very much alive. There is also what we will do with the shared prosperity fund. The choices about future funding in Wales are a decision for the Welsh Government, but certainly the environmental land management scheme will be a real opportunity for farmers and landowners to consider carefully where, in the right place, we can continue to invest significantly in a species.

In conclusion, the passion to protect our red squirrels touches many right hon. and hon. Members. It is important to keep our focus on ensuring that iconic native species, whether fauna or flora, remain important in the future. That is a key part of our 25-year environment plan. I am confident that some of the measures in the forthcoming environment Bill will help, but equally important is direct action through the nature improvement and recovery networks that we will establish.

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): For the record, I point out that Members who have made a speech ought to listen to the following two speeches and to be present to hear the wind-ups. That does not apply to those Members who have only intervened.

10.56 am

Trudy Harrison: Thank you, Sir David. It has been a pleasure to serve under you today. I thank the Minister for her robust response. I am pleased that she agrees that the Forestry Commission could do more. In answer to the point about public safety, of course that is a paramount consideration, but when the shooting of wood pigeon, pheasant and deer already happens, I fail to see the argument against considering similar controls, under licence, of the grey squirrel.

I thank the many Members who have made speeches and interventions. We have a real consensus. The hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) referenced the importance of tourism. The Lake District national park, where my constituency is, has 18 million visitors, and so many of them come to see and appreciate our wildlife, which is perilously in danger of extinction. I think of the hedgehogs—Mrs Tiggy-Winkle—or the Kewick hatchery project that I am involved with to ensure that we still have salmon and sea trout in the rivers of Cumbria. We learned the awful fact that the Formby stronghold has lost 85% of its red squirrels. I am pleased that they are making some recovery, although there has been the recent outbreak of squirrel pox.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) had told me her enchanting story in the Tea Room, but just think that some time ago books about red squirrels referred to them simply as “squirrels” because that is all we had in the British Isles. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) for looking after and promoting his stronghold. It was the best tourism advert—I am really looking forward to a trip to the Isle of Wight.

We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) and from the hon. Members for Falkirk (John McNally) and for Workington (Sue Hayman)—how lucky is the hon. Member for Workington to have red squirrels adorning feed tables in her own garden. I commend her husband for looking after our wonderful native reds. My hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) referred to the importance of a holistic ecosystem approach. I talked about the salmon and sea trout, but we also worry about the pearl mussel in our area, which needs to lay its eggs in the gills of a salmonoid—so without the salmon and the sea trout, the pearl mussel would also suffer.

I am pleased to hear from the Minister that the consultation on further strengthening forestry protection will indeed happen, and I encourage all Members across the House to urge their conservation groups to get involved. Thank you, Sir David, for paying attention to us speaking about such an urgent issue, and for allowing me to speak in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered potential red squirrel extinction.
NHS Dentists: Cumbria

11 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the provision of NHS dentists in Cumbria.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise an issue of enormous importance to my constituents and many others around Cumbria.

NHS dentistry in Cumbria has reached breaking point. More than half of all adults in our county have not had access to an NHS dentist in the last two years, while one in three of our children does not even have a place with an NHS dentist. In rural areas such as ours, lack of access to an NHS dentist results in families having to make laboriously long journeys to reach the nearest surgery with an available NHS place. Often, people are not able to make, and simply cannot afford, those journeys for a simple check-up.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman refers to his constituency, but the problems occur across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Does he agree that the lack of dentists in rural areas is incredibly disconcerting? Perhaps we need to look at bigger incentives for those willing to open a rural practice, and incentivise those training in dental surgery, since one in five has to wait three months to have dental surgery. In other words, a rural strategy is needed.

Tim Farron: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point; in a moment I will come to some answers to those problems. The challenge is especially acute in rural communities when it comes to attracting and retaining dentists to work in NHS practices in places that are relatively close to people’s homes.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate on all our behalves. The problem affects not just rural areas but more remote urban areas such as Barrow. Does he share my huge concern that people in Barrow face a 90-mile trip to Whitehaven if they want access to a new NHS dentist? That is the longest trip in England, for a town where more a third of young people suffer tooth decay, compared with 5% in more affluent areas.

Tim Farron: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, which I will come to. He is absolutely right that the distance from the nearest available treatment affects urban as well as rural areas. It is a problem across the country that relates specifically to the NHS dental contract, which I will come to in a moment.

According to the most recent data available, taking a child living in Windermere to their nearest NHS dentist will involve a 60-mile round trip to Morecambe in Lancashire. That will mean a three to four-hour journey by public transport, with multiple changes. However, poor signposting by the NHS—it was not easy to decipher—means that that place is not obviously available. The nearest place advertising for new child NHS patients is in Appleby, which is an 87-mile round trip—two hours in the car or a five to six-hour round trip by public transport. It was only with the help of the British Dental Association that we managed to identify availability at the far-distant yet ever so slightly closer practice in Morecambe.

I am sure hon. Members will agree that this is beyond ridiculous. NHS dentistry is a public service. It should not take scouring the internet forensically with a fine-toothed comb and with the expert help of a national professional body to find a space for a child with an NHS dentist. That space has already been paid for through our taxes. Let us imagine for a moment the outrage if it were similarly impossible for people to get access to a GP.

For adults, the situation in Cumbria is even worse. I was appalled to discover that the nearest practice with available NHS provision for a new adult patient in Windermere involves a 98-mile round trip by car to Wigton—a six-hour round trip by public transport, involving three different trains and bus rides. The nearest practice that is advertising is even further away and involves a 104-mile trip, there and back, to Alston, taking over six hours by public transport. After that, the next option listed involved going 123 miles there and back to Blackpool.

Despite those obstacles, families in our communities are still trying to secure places at dental practices but are refused. In Sedbergh, Windermere, Grange, Ambleside and Kendal, dentists are working to their full capacity and even beyond, and are doing a brilliant job, but they simply do not have the numbers or the funding to meet demand. The Government have, cleverly or accidentally, dodged confronting the extent of the problem by doing away with official waiting lists. For the last six years, the NHS has held no waiting lists locally or nationally, and patients cannot depend on their clinical commissioning group or NHS England to support them in their quest to find a dentist who will treat them or their children. Will the Minister rectify that and ensure that reliable and up-to-date waiting lists are kept from now on?

We took the matter into our own hands locally. The Westmorland Gazette and I rang round our local dental surgeries to see whether there was availability, and found that in Kendal, not one of the 10 dental practices in our biggest town had a single space available for an NHS patient. Some 33% of new patients tried and failed to get a dentist appointment in the wider Morecambe bay CCG area last year. That is the equivalent of nearly 16,000 people. When we include those already on the books with a dentist, that figure rises to 18,000 people, and they are just the ones who have tried. That is a disgrace, and the situation is only getting worse.

The consequences should not be underestimated. Children across Cumbria have some of the worst dental health in England, with one in three suffering tooth decay by the age of five. In some areas, almost 20% of children under three have tooth decay, and a fifth have tooth decay when they are still toddlers. Often, that does long-term damage to their oral health before they even have the opportunity to make decisions for themselves. If children cannot see a dentist in a regular and timely way, preventable conditions become emergency conditions and the pressure is piled on NHS services, along with all their other responsibilities.

Nationally, tooth decay is the leading reason for hospital admissions among young children, despite being almost entirely preventable. In 2017-18, over 45,000 children
were admitted to hospital to have multiple teeth extracted under general anaesthetic because of tooth decay. Children face completely unnecessary pain and distress, and the NHS faces a £36 million annual spend for that dental work. Dentistry in Cumbria is understaffed, underfunded and overstretched. Although this a local problem, it is a symptom of a systematic one, the effects of which are felt right across the country.

The primary cause of the increasing problems with dental access in Cumbria and across England is the way that this Government choose to commission dentistry. The NHS dental contract is completely perverse. Based on units of dental activity, it sets quotas on the number of patients an NHS dentist can see and the number of dental procedures they can perform in any given year. If a dentist delivers more than they have been commissioned to do, not only are they not remunerated for the extra work, but they have to bear the cost of any materials used, any necessary laboratory work or other overheads from their own pockets.

That is not the only issue. Last November, I managed to secure the agreement of health bosses to increase the contracts of local NHS dentists in Kendal, so that they could see and treat more patients. It was great news—I thought. However, when NHS England contacted our local dentists, it found that not one of them was able to take up its offer because, as it told me, “the practices are already working to capacity within the staffing resources they have available, reporting they are having difficulties recruiting additional staff.”

Additional resources were made available, but there were not the dentists to provide the service for local people.

The problem is at least in part the result of the contract, which pays a set amount for particular types of treatment, in some cases regardless of the number of teeth the dentist is treating. In practice, that means that a dentist gets paid an average of £75 for an entire course of treatment, including six fillings, three extractions and a root canal, but that is not enough to cover their overheads. They get paid exactly the same amount of money for a single filling. That acts as a serious disincentive for dentistry, full stop, but especially in more deprived areas, where evidence shows that more significant treatment is often required.

Perhaps the most significant issue with the current dental contract is that it totally fails to provide any serious recognition or budget for preventive work. The work of educating adults, parents and children to maintain good dental health receives no funding, despite the fact that that would significantly ease the burden on dentists and the NHS as a whole further down the line. Indeed, check-ups are the smallest and least-remunerated part of the unit of dental activity worksheet. As a consequence, there is no massive incentive to up the number that a dentist does.

None of that is helped by the Government’s decision to cut £500,000 in the last few months from Cumbria’s public health budget this year, undermining vital preventive work, especially in our schools. Nor does it help that we are currently in limbo when it comes to the future of emergency dental services under the soon to be defunct Cumbria Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. Will the Minister tell me which trust will be responsible for emergency dentistry in south Cumbria after October?

Morale among dentists practising in the NHS is at an all-time low. The latest British Dental Association membership survey shows that nearly three in five dental practitioners in England are planning to scale down or leave NHS work entirely in the next five years. Those with the highest NHS commitments are the most likely to want to leave. In recent months, I have received countless letters at an increasing rate from residents, many of them very elderly, asking whether they can go for dental treatment, as their current dentist has gone private and they have effectively been kicked off the list. A lot of parents have contacted me saying that they have been asked to pay now that they have been kicked off their local dentist’s NHS list. If they pay, the dentist might provide NHS provision for their children. It strikes me that that is a form of bribery. Many parents cannot afford to pay for themselves just so their children can get free care. That is not right.

The current system also fails to use the skills of all dental staff to their full potential. The NHS dentist contract restricts the initiation of a course of treatment to dentists alone. I met the British Association of Dental Therapists, which explained that dentists often refer the patient to a therapist to carry out the treatment if it is within the remit of their qualification. The fact that that can be begun only by a dentist creates a bottleneck that prevents patients from receiving the treatment that they need when they need it. The dental therapists made the case to me—and, I believe, to the Government—for reforming the system to allow them to initiate a course of treatment, ease some of the burden on dentists, and enable patients to be seen more quickly. I ask the Minister to action that request, or at least to look into it as a matter of urgency.

I welcome the Government’s steps to reform the system by beginning to carry out a few pilots and trials in different forms of commissioning, but the pilots have not gone far enough, there are not many of them, and the proposed systems do not provide a complete break from the old “unit of dental activity” system. Rather, they blend it with new systems. In the face of the crisis that we have on our hands, I am afraid that a piecemeal change is simply not enough for the people of Cumbria. We need total system reform. The Government need to sit up, take notice and change the contract so that people get the dental treatment they need. The current system is unjust, not fair to dentists and patients, and not fit for purpose. It is not good enough for Cumbria.

Urgent action is needed to roll out a system that fairly rewards dentists for the work they do, includes incentives for preventive work and allows all dental practitioners to use their skills to their full capacity. If we want our NHS dentists to feel that their vital work is valued and not to feel encouraged to move into working privately or give up the profession altogether, we need to take swift, far-reaching action. We need a funding system that does not feel like a treadmill, that rewards preventive care and that is not riddled with unfairness, idiosyncrasies and perverse incentives.

Those of us living in Cumbria are seeing the colossal impact of the current system on the health of children and adults alike, and we are further affected by the huge distances that we have to travel to get care, if we are
lucky enough to stumble across an NHS dentist with available space. My question to the Minister is this: what action will she take to provide my constituents with the NHS dental healthcare that they desperately need and that their taxes have already paid for?

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for securing this debate. He raised some important issues about dentistry, some of which are national problems that I have been looking at since I came into this role about three months ago, and some of which are pertinent to both the urban and rural areas of Cumbria—I know that there are problems in the constituency of the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) relating to geography and economics. I will talk a bit about what we are doing nationally, but of course there are some distinct issues to do with the geography in Cumbria.

Cumbria has struggled to attract dentists. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale has raised that issue, which I take very seriously, on many occasions. National access to NHS dentistry is high, but I know from my conversations with colleagues from across the House that there are hotspots, and that in isolated areas it is very difficult to get to a dentist. We are taking steps to address that issue to ensure that everyone has access to an NHS dentist. It is NHS England’s responsibility to commission dentist services to meet the needs of local people, and it has been actively looking into dental access issues in Cumbria. Its regional team covers my constituency, so it is looking at Lancashire and south Cumbria together. It has urgent work in hand to explore and implement schemes to improve local access.

In south Cumbria, NHS England will be working to help practices that are under-delivering on their contracted levels of dental services. If despite that support a practice remains unable to deliver its full contracted level of dental activity, the unused funds will be diverted into other local practices. NHS England believes that that could support care for about 3,000 patients. Alongside that, work is being taken forward across Lancashire and south Cumbria to integrate dental services within primary care networks. It is important that dentists are part of the integrated primary care network team, enabling oral health advice and prevention work to be offered across the primary care network. Oral health needs, including gaps in services and access difficulties, must be part of the wider health picture. The hon. Gentleman touched on that when he talked about access to GPs.

That is the local action. I want to touch on what we are doing nationally.

Tim Farron: The Minister made a very interesting point about people who under-deliver on their contract. It is important that we do not misunderstand what that means. A dental surgery can be working flat out, but if it is, for example, spending more of its time doing preventive work or reacting to people who want consultations and go on, it gets only one unit of dental activity for that. It could be absolutely full to the brim but be doing the lower-tier work just because that is how it is, reactively. That dental surgery is not failing or not working hard enough. It is doing the preventive stuff that we want it to do more of, but the UDA system, with its perverse incentives, does not reward that.

Seema Kennedy: The hon. Gentleman anticipates my speech: I will talk about contract reform later. He knows much better than me that the problem with the previous contract was that it was introduced with perhaps a bit too much haste, and we are now living with the consequences. We are mindful that we need a contract that works well and is sustainable for the future.

Nationally, we are introducing so-called flexible commissioning, which allows local NHS commissioners to commission a wider range of services from dental practices. That is expected to make NHS dentistry more attractive to new performers. Another key recruitment and retention challenge—of course, this is not confined to dentists; it applies to a whole range of healthcare and other professionals—is the growing demand among younger dentists for more varied portfolio careers. NHS England is working closely with Health Education England and a wide range of stakeholders to make portfolio careers a reality for dental professionals, allowing dentists to move between specialities such as prevention, restorative work, oral health and special care dentistry.

We want UK-trained dentists in the NHS, and we want them to stay in those careers, but dentists from overseas also play an important part in delivering NHS care. I am pleased that the NHS and the Government have taken steps through the launch of the EU settlement scheme to maintain that essential supply of dedicated and skilled workers, including European economic area-trained dentists, when we leave the EU. Last summer, doctors and nurses were removed from the tier 2 cap, leaving more places for other highly skilled professionals, including dentists.

The interim NHS people plan, which was published early last month, commits to creating a capable and motivated multidisciplinary dental workforce of a sufficient size to meet population health needs. The full people plan will be published later this year.

We are working closely with NHS England to reform the current dental contract. Feedback from dentists who are testing the prototype contract suggests it is a more satisfying way of delivering care. It supports a better skills mix, allowing dental care to be supported by a wider range of staff, such as therapists and hygienists. At a meeting a couple of weeks ago with a wide range of dental stakeholders, I announced that a further 28 dental practices had joined the programme, bringing to 102 the number of practices that are testing the new prevention-focused way of delivering care. NHS England is considering carefully when that approach can be rolled out more widely across the NHS. It is important that we get the new contract right, but I am hopeful that the roll-out will happen as soon as possible.

I want to touch briefly on three questions hon. Members asked. The first and most important was about children’s oral health. I heartily agree with the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale about the importance of children’s oral health and all the preventive measures the Department can take to protect children’s teeth. He rightly pointed out something that not all hon. Members are aware of: the biggest cause of emergency admission for children is poor oral health. Of course, that is...
entirely preventable. The Government are committed to that, particularly among deprived children. We have made the Starting Well approach available to other NHS England commissioners, and that is promoting increased access and early preventive care for very young children.

John Woodcock: That more than a third of children under five in Barrow have tooth decay is truly appalling. The Government need to make faster progress. I assume the Minister would vigorously oppose any attempt to weaken the sugar tax, which is designed to move people away from that harmful substance towards a healthier lifestyle.

Seema Kennedy: The hon. Gentleman makes a very timely intervention. We can see how successful the soft drinks industry levy has been in how it has helped to reformulate sugary drinks, the amount of money it has raised that has been recycled into school sports, and the fact that it is changing people’s tastes and behaviour. The prevention Green Paper is in train; let us hope that he is pleased with what is announced in it.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale mentioned emergency dentistry and I will have to write to him with specifics about the commissioning of services.

On the public health budget, I know from conversations with Members across the House that there are pressures on local government budgets. The ring-fenced public health budget will be a matter for the forthcoming spending review, when it will be assessed using all available evidence. The hon. Gentleman can be assured that I will take away all the evidence I gather from meetings with Members across the House and in my ministerial position to feed into the spending review process.

Tim Farron: Just so the Minister is fully aware of the facts—I know this predates her time in this role—the NHS talked in its long-term plan about its vision for early identification of conditions of all sorts, and about preventive care, and then literally a fortnight later, just before Christmas, the settlement for public health spending for Cumbria was reduced by £500,000. I would be grateful if the Minister intervened to ensure that that does not happen again, because it has a huge impact on our ability to keep children in good practice in their early years so they have good dental health.

Seema Kennedy: Of course, part of prevention comes from the public health budget. That now sits back with local authorities, which is where it was historically, and of course—the hon. Gentleman knows my constituency well, having grown up there—there are different needs in different areas. What the NHS does through the immunisation and screening programmes is also part of that aspect of preventive health, but I take on board his comments about the specific public health situation in south Cumbria.

I hope the hon. Gentleman is reassured that significant action is being taken locally in Cumbria and nationally, both now and for the future, to improve access to NHS dental services. The new prevention-focused dental contract in particular, which is a key part of our reforms, should attract people to and keep people in the dental profession, and make dentistry a more varied and rewarding career. It will ensure better access to dentistry in places such as Cumbria and across the country for all our constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.
English for Speakers of Other Languages

[Ms Nadine Dorries in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered funding for the provision of English for speakers of other languages.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I am grateful for the opportunity to open this debate, which is about a subject that is close to my heart and to my community; the urgent need to invest in English as a second language, particularly for refugees.

I am fortunate to represent a place that is diverse, inclusive and welcoming. I am proud to be from a city of sanctuary, because almost 500 people living in Birmingham have arrived since the beginning of the Syrian vulnerable person resettlement scheme. Last summer, I was fortunate to meet 12 people from Syria who have started new lives in Birmingham, supported by Refugee Action. They shared with me their experiences of life in the UK, and spoke about how respectful and kind those around them have been, how comfortably their children have settled into local schools and what a great place Birmingham has been to live in. The biggest problem that almost everyone wanted to raise with me was the lack of sufficient access to English language learning.

People had different reasons for wanting to improve their English. For one family, it was to ensure they could communicate properly with healthcare professionals to support their daughter with her complex health needs. For another, it was so that they could speak English well enough to pass their UK driving test. For another man, it was so that he could take up the profession he held back home in Syria as a football coach.

Earlier today I met Nour, a Syrian refugee living in Birmingham—he is in the Gallery listening to the debate. Nour is a passionate champion of the importance of learning English, and I want to share with Members his powerful words:

"When you start to speak English fluently, it means you can get a good job and make your dreams come true. I am working hard. I want to create a company like Microsoft. You will see—I will achieve my dreams and goals."

The experiences of this group of refugees is mirrored by many people of different backgrounds, who have different motivations but the same ambition to be able to communicate better with the community around them. We should support that ambition and be a country that is open and welcoming, but that requires providing people with support after they arrive here. Language classes are fundamental in building cohesive communities, yet many barriers exist for people to access classes and they struggle to find the opportunity to learn to speak English.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. It is clear that there is support from both the refugee community and the British public for having these classes. Does she agree that there are particular concerns that women with children are prevented from accessing these classes, because there is no provision for children?

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, and I will touch on that later in my speech.

Government cuts to English for speakers of other languages over the past decade have been ruthless; let us not pretend otherwise. Refugee Action's report, "Turning Words into Action", shows that Government funding for ESOL in England fell from £212.3 million in 2008 to £105 million in 2018. That is a shocking real-terms cut of almost 60% in a decade. Unsurprisingly, this decline in funding has been accompanied by a decline in adult participation in ESOL classes by nearly 40% over the same period.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate, which is about a subject many of us have been raising over the last nine years as we have seen the erosion of courses. Does she recognise that there is a new threat to funding for ESOL courses, because the European social fund has been a significant supporter of those courses? Does she hope that the Minister will today give a commitment to match, pound for pound, funding from the European social fund for ESOL courses in future?

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank my hon. Friend for that important intervention, and he is right. So many Members across the House have been campaigning for this over the past decade. I hope that the Minister will respond to his request.

Last month a report by the Government's social research team, using methodology agreed with the Department for Education, found that the demand for English language teaching was high, with almost three quarters of survey respondents reporting a “significant demand” for English language learning provision in the communities they serve. However, providers are struggling to meet that demand. Over half the respondents found it “fairly difficult” to meet demand, and one in eight found it “very difficult”. The overstretching of these providers hits learners hard, particularly the most vulnerable. New research carried out by Refugee Action found that 59% of refugees did not think they had received enough ESOL teaching hours and only 34% of respondents felt that their current level of English was enough to make them ready to work in the UK.

Third sector organisations are unable to fill these gaps because limited funding means they have little or no access to hardware and technology to support their teaching.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. She makes the point about third sector provision. In my constituency, First Step and the Angelou Centre provide ESOL classes, as well as Newcastle City Council and Newcastle College, but because of the devastating cuts they are in no way able to meet demand. My constituents and refugees in Newcastle often speak to me about the need to increase ESOL provision so that it is not just a lucky few who are able to receive the gift of the English language.

Preet Kaur Gill: It is important that we hear first-hand experiences from Members representing their communities about how difficult it has been and the impact of cuts.

Chi Onwurah: That is crucial, and I look forward to hearing from other Members about their experiences.

Preet Kaur Gill: It is vital to give Members an opportunity to share their stories about the impact that funding cuts have had on their constituents.
It is disingenuous for the Education Secretary to praise ESOL as a way towards social mobility and inclusion without providing much needed resources. Women are disproportionately impacted by barriers to ESOL and they miss out on the benefits that those who are able to learn English gain. More than three quarters of parents said that a lack of childcare had been a barrier to their ability to attend English lessons. For those on a low income, practical and logistical barriers exist. A quarter of refugee respondents, for example, had not been able to access any financial assistance to pay for travel to classes. That can mean people are forced to miss classes because they are unable to travel to them.

Some groups are excluded altogether from accessing English, such as asylum seekers, who in England become eligible for funding only if they have been waiting for a decision on their claim for six months or longer. That includes a broader issue with the current resettlement process that researchers from the University of Sussex found is leading to a tragic waste of refugees’ unfulfilled potential.

The Government frequently talk about the importance of ESOL provision for refugees. Back in 2016, after many years of ESOL cuts, pressure from the Opposition of ESOL provision for refugees. Back in 2016, after many years of ESOL cuts, pressure from the Opposition Benches, from charities and from civil society organisations forced the Government to give additional funding for people arriving under the Syrian vulnerable person resettlement scheme. Although welcome, this fairly modest pot of money supported only one group of people to learn English, and therefore cannot be seen as a solution to the wider problems of access to ESOL.

The Government’s 2018 integrated communities Green Paper acknowledged the vital importance of English for integration but gave no new money specifically for ESOL. In their 2018 immigration White Paper, the Government committed to an ambitious and well-funded English language strategy to ensure that everyone in this country, especially those with newly recognised refugee status, are supported to speak the same language. Once again, however, there was no new funding. The Government’s failure to act flies in the face of public opinion, which is strongly in favour of supporting people to learn English. For example, recent independent polling by YouGov shows that 91% of the British public believe it is important that refugees who come to the UK learn to speak English. If the Government are serious about allowing everyone the possibility to learn English, investment must be made, not empty promises.

Informal ESOL learning groups run by volunteers and community organisations across the country are a vital part of learning, and we know that they are often fantastic community assets. There is good work ongoing to help reach learners in segmented communities, and we should continue to work to ensure that such groups are joined up and co-ordinated.

There are other innovative forms of ESOL that should also be encouraged. In September, the adult education budget will be devolved to six combined authorities and the Greater London Authority, allowing for creative regional ways of delivering ESOL teaching. For example, the West Midlands Combined Authority is currently exploring ways of delivering more ESOL in workplaces, specific to certain sectors, to firm up the link between learning English and employment. Those new powers and responsibilities need to be matched with appropriate resources, so will the Minister tell us what they will be?

Thus far the Government have ignored the moral case, but perhaps they will listen to the economic one. Much of people’s passion to learn English comes from their desire to find work. Although it is certainly only part of the integration picture, for many it is the main motivation to learn. If people had access to eight hours of ESOL classes a week, the taxpayer would be fully reimbursed for two years of those classes after an individual’s first eight months of employment at the national average wage. In the case of supporting refugees to access ESOL, the cost of providing that volume of learning would be just £42 million a year.

Moreover, leaving people to flounder without the ability to speak the language can have a detrimental effect on their mental health and wellbeing, and lead to isolation and loneliness, all of which are extremely costly to the state and society. Investing in people who want to learn English is a smart thing to do.

Chi Onwurah: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Will she join me in suggesting that the Minister might do well to look at the German example? All refugees in Germany have access to a 600-hour language course, which enables them to learn to speak German. Clearly the German Government and the German economy see an economic return on that investment, as well as a social return in terms of mental wellbeing.

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank my hon. Friend for that important intervention. I was not aware of the German example, and I think that the Minister will be keen to look at it after this debate.

All political parties talk of the importance of helping people to become productive, equal partners in their communities, and supporting people such as Nour to achieve their goals. However, too often the cuts to ESOL that we have seen under the coalition and Conservative Governments have prevented that from happening.

Today I want to ask the Minister four questions. First, will she act now to ensure that everyone can learn English? Secondly, will she commit to producing a formal ESOL strategy for England? Thirdly, what steps is she taking to ensure that people who face particular barriers to learning, such as those with caring responsibilities or difficult travel arrangements, are given the resources they need to overcome them, and to ensure that ESOL provision is always accessible? Finally, in order to have an inclusive, welcoming country, additional investment is necessary to ensure that everyone who needs it is given the opportunity to access high-quality, sufficient English language teaching, so will she support my call and take these demands to the Treasury in advance of the forthcoming spending review?

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2.42 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I will start with a reference to the all-party parliamentary group on social integration, which correctly provided a statement that, to be successful at getting ESOL taught, we had to
recognise that we were up against cultural norms among the groups to whom we were trying to provide the language training. I remember 11 or 12 years ago, when I was a councillor in Oxford, seeing groups of women in particular who had been coming to English classes for five or six years, but whose English was no better than on the day they first went. It was an opportunity for them to get out of the house and have social interaction with other people on the course.

ESOL teaching can be useful for that purpose of providing social interaction, but that does take away from the purpose of providing the language tuition that we all think is important. Fortunately, most refugees do not fall into that category; they passionately want to learn English. There are many reasons for doing that: for talking to neighbours, for having that normal family social interaction, for studying and, most importantly, for work-related activities.

Much of the thinking about teaching English stresses the need for a community-based strategy. I am not sure that I understand what a community-based strategy is in this case, particularly given that so much of the English-language training is provided by large local government organisations that can hardly be described as community-based in the way they operate. At some point we will have to bottom that out when we talk about how these services should be delivered in the best possible way.

I have mentioned that it is essential to run language training courses for large refugee communities; it is essential to run them for all refugees, but particularly so where there are large refugee communities. My own constituency does not have any, so I can speak on this with a touch of objectivity, and look at that training to see how it proceeds. I have also already mentioned the importance of English language training for people getting a job, but that also leads to another question: what role should employers have in providing English language training for people to whom they offer jobs? That is much more than simply the social mixing that I talked about at the beginning.

The ability to teach the English language affects so many other areas. One area that it affects particularly is that of loneliness; if a refugee is lonely and does not have the right language skills, they will be even lonelier. It is essential to be able to address that. I remember reading the story of a refugee lawyer who spoke very little English, but who wanted to be able to continue to practise law when she came to the UK with her family. To be able to practise UK law in the UK, she had to take a conversion course. The stories that were told of the difficulties she faced in finding that sort of language training, just to be able to keep her family alive in the way to which they were normally accustomed, made for a sorrowful tale, and it is one I would recommend to all hon. Members.

Finally, I will mention, as I frequently do in this Chamber, the work of the Council of Europe. The UK is a member of the Council of Europe and it is rare that we take what it does into account. It has a programme called “Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants”, which is there specifically to ensure that member Governments of the Council provide the linguistic training that is essential for migrants to be able to improve themselves by learning the language so that they can do all the things that we take for granted.

2.48 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Ms Dorries. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) not only for securing this debate, but for her incredibly insightful opening speech, in which she very articulately made the case for ESOL funding.

Only a week ago, I had the pleasure of showing a group of ESOL learners from Halifax around Westminster, as part of a trip organised by Halifax Opportunities Trust to complement their studies. They were a wonderful group of people, each with a different story to tell, but all of them enthusiastic about the opportunity to gain a better understanding of their adopted Parliament, how it works and its relationship to their lives. While they are still studying English, it was their ability to ask questions and understand the answers that empowered them to truly experience Parliament as participants, rather than simply as observers along for the ride.

However, although almost everyone understands the value of being able to speak English, ESOL provision is harder to access than ever before. As we have heard, Government funding for ESOL in England fell from £212.3 million in 2008 to £105 million in 2018—a real-terms cut of almost 60%. Unsurprisingly, Calderdale College in my constituency has had to reduce its ESOL provision by 50%, despite an increase in the number of learners seeking it. We expect the publication of the national ESOL strategy in the autumn. With YouGov polling suggesting that 91% of the British public believe it important that refugees and others who come to the UK should learn to speak English, we know that there is overwhelming support for investment in ESOL as a means for that to happen.

Here in Westminster, I vice-chair the all-party parliamentary group on social integration, which the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) mentioned. In 2017, we published our “Integration not Demonisation” report, which argued that the ability to speak English is one of the key principles underpinning healthy and successful integration within communities. As part of the call for evidence for that report, it was a pleasure to welcome the all-party parliamentary group to Halifax, where the chair and I met with those involved in integration work.

Office for National Statistics research published in the report suggests that approximately 800,000 people living in the UK at the time of the 2011 census could not speak English—2% of the population. In some areas with large numbers of immigrants, including Newham, Brent, Tower Hamlets and Leicester, that can be as high as 9% of the population. Further to this, 22% of Muslim women in the UK self-report that they are unable to speak English well.

To address that, the report recommended that the Government should introduce a national strategy for the promotion of English language learning, which would unleash the economic potential of immigrants, enabling newcomers to participate fully in British life and ensuring that everyone in our society can benefit from meeting and mixing with others from different cultures. We went so far as to say that enrolment in English language classes should be compulsory, acknowledging the Casey review findings that, in some
communities, regressive cultural and family norms and practices can prevent the most vulnerable from learning English.

We also asserted that the ability to learn English should be as right extended to everyone. We argued that, while the Department for Education should lead that work, it should be delivered with input from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and other relevant Departments to ensure that it was as effective as possible.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and a lot of good points. The Government found £10 million in 2016 for Syrian refugees to undertake ESOL classes. If there is money for Syrian refugees, surely there is money for all the communities that need it.

Holly Lynch: My hon. Friend makes the important point that we recognised the importance of Syrian refugees being able to speak English, but we have not delivered the funding to extend that programme to other newcomers to our country. We should reflect on that.

Ahead of the publication of the national ESOL strategy in the autumn, I was glad to see that the Government’s immigration White Paper, published in December last year, commits to “an ambitious and well-funded English language strategy to ensure that everyone in this country, especially those with newly recognised refugee status, are supported to speak the same language.” However, these proposals contain no new funding for English language teaching, which the strategy will have to address later this year. The ability to speak English is important for many reasons, not least, as I have mentioned, because it is integral to integration. If someone cannot speak English, their ability to find work, meet and converse with people and access everyday services is severely restricted. For someone to be trapped in a world where they cannot interact with those around them will leave them desperately isolated and vulnerable.

There is strong public support for ESOL, not least because it would be a sensible investment. Research undertaken by Refugee Action—I am pleased to see members of the team in the Gallery—shows that it would cost £42 million a year to ensure two years’ tuition a week for their first two years in the UK, which, as I have mentioned, would cost £42 million a year, although that would be repaid within the first eight months of a refugee’s being in work. Alongside this, I lend my support to Refugee Action’s “Let Refugees Learn” campaign. Refugee Action has called for refugees to have a minimum of eight hours formal, accredited tuition a week for their first two years in the UK, which, as I have mentioned, would cost £42 million a year, although that would be repaid within the first eight months of a refugee’s being in work. Alongside this, I lend my support to Refugee Action’s “Lift the Ban” campaign, which seeks to promote integration and facilitate opportunities to improve language skills by allowing refugees to work while awaiting a decision on their status.

ESOL provision represents value for money. We know that the demand is there, but at the moment the provision is not. If we are looking for ways of ensuring, now more than ever, that we foster healthy, integrated communities, investing in ESOL would be a really constructive way of supporting those aims.

2.56 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries; many thanks for squeezing me in at the last minute. I put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) for introducing this important topic and for securing the debate.

It is only two weeks since Refugee Week, when Citizens UK came into Parliament with a young man from my constituency from Syria, Mouteb, who spoke for the first time in beautiful English, even though he had never been to school before because he was in a refugee camp. He appeared in a beautiful school uniform and looked so proud, which was such a wonderful tribute to the work done with refugees when things go well. The group that he is with is supported by Citizens UK but is part of the Government’s Syrian community sponsorship programme, which I am sure the Minister is aware of. That programme could stop in September 2020 if it is not renewed. I hope that the Minister will think about passing that on to Home Office colleagues, so that this important programme, which is a great example of community cohesion, can be maintained.

One local sponsor, who goes to the Methodist church in Muswell Hill, said:

“Community support leads to more successful, faster integration of new migrants than local authority support, and the involvement of people across communities in resettlement can, in time, change the way a whole society treats refugees.”
That is a real tribute to this group, from all different faith backgrounds, who have clubbed together to provide a sort of family around the family. If you like, for these Syrian refugees. Mouteb’s speaking in a meeting in Parliament is a great example of that.

The other group I pay tribute to on its teaching of English as a second language is the JAN Trust, a fantastic organisation in my constituency that particularly helps isolated women, a group that my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) mentioned. It helps women to escape the drudgery of housework and endless hours of childcare; much as one loves one’s children, those hours can go on and on. Getting in front of a whiteboard and being taught by a lovely teacher—ESOL teachers happen to be lovely people, on the whole; that is a terrible stereotype, but they are—provides a wonderful escape for those women.

Holly Lynch: My hon. Friend is making an important point. I have worked with older women in my community who stay in that age what they need regular medical appointments and support in the home, but because they are unable to communicate, not only do we deny them that escape, but they struggle to access basic services that the rest of us take for granted.

Catherine West: Absolutely: it provides a crucial line into a more purposeful existence as a member of the community. There is a real opportunity here, particularly for older women who might not necessarily have had education through to 18 or 21 in the way that many of our younger women do now. I often think about my own grandmother. She left school at 14 and had some quite unusual views, many of which we had clashes over. I often think that if she had had the opportunity to go to school to the age of 21, she would have made a fuller contribution in her different roles.

A lot of women, including those who escaped violence and conflict and who therefore stopped school very young, have this amazing lifeline through our colleges and places such as the JAN Trust, and with the support provided by Citizens UK. Further education colleges have been cut by 50% since 2010 and they are really struggling, but in my constituency, the College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London. They have been cut by 50% since 2010 and they are really

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I want briefly to mention the issue of teachers’ pay. Six months ago, a fantastic teacher of English as an additional language came in to lobby me. She is a constituent, but teaches at City and Islington College, which has now merged with Westminster Kingsway and the College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London. She said that if she taught in a school, she would be paid way more than for teaching ESL. I hope that the Minister will look carefully at the wage level, because in these difficult times it is important that we assist people to stay in these important roles in the public sector.

Those on a relatively low wage also have lower pension contributions, and sick leave and annual leave entitlements can also be different. In general, that two-tier approach to teaching must be stopped.

I reiterate the suggestion made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) that funding to support ESL be continued, or that the Government at least pledge to continue that important work. It would be terrible to lose that. There are important campaigns, such as “Lift the Ban”, which my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) mentioned, which aims to assist asylum seekers, once they have made their application, in being able to work more flexibly, and to start as quickly as possible. It would be a shame for English language classes not to go alongside that.

I moved a private Member’s Bill a couple of months back and was extremely impressed by the range of people I met who would love to be in work. As we are all aware, many refugees come from well-trained backgrounds, perhaps with a medicine degree, or have backgrounds in pharmacy, teaching or engineering, and they arrive in the UK without any English. If they could learn English as quickly as possible, they would be able to work. The “Lift the Ban” campaign calls for the Home Office’s occupation shortage list to be much more flexible and open.

I have raised that issue with the Home Secretary on two occasions in the House, and he said that it was under review. I also raised it with the Immigration Minister, who said that the Government were looking at it. In the way that our wonderful civil servants are used to passing on little notes to other Departments, I hope that the Home Office will look at this again with some urgency, particularly as we have people who are often very well qualified, but find it difficult to find work quickly.

Alex Sobel: Prior to entering Parliament, I helped the Cardigan Centre in my constituency to gain lottery funding for an ESOL café. Because they were asylum seekers, many of those people could not access ESOL elsewhere. They were learning English to try to enter work, but they could not, because of the ban. A lot of them had backgrounds from the occupation shortage list. There is a demand and there is this waiting. They cannot get statutory ESOL and have to use charitable ESOL. Those people face both those issues.

Catherine West: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. There is also a terrible issue with transport to colleges. For destitute asylum seekers, it is very difficult to manage on the current rate of £5.37 an hour. It is doubly difficult when they need to pay for expensive buses, particularly outside London. I understand from recent debates in the House that buses outside London are more expensive even than in our high-value city. There are costs associated with getting to lessons, and this all needs to be looked at in the round.

I thank you again, Ms Dorries, for allowing me to speak with very little notice. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston again, and all other colleagues who have made such fantastic contributions to the debate. I look forward to hearing the shadow spokespersons and the Minister’s response.

3.5 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): I am particularly grateful to you, Ms Dorries, for fitting me in, almost beyond the last minute. As I often am, I was inspired to speak by my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). Keighley often looks for
inspiration to Halifax—I say that as someone who was born in Halifax—and there are similarities between the communities.

In Bradford, there are 25,000 people who cannot speak English or do not speak it well. In Keighley, the figures are nearer 3,000. Together with Bradford Council, I hosted a conference on integration in line with the Government’s strategy earlier in the year. One of the top targets that we agreed on was to try to get that figure down in the next five years. We will never get it down to zero, but we will try to get everyone in Keighley speaking English, because it is a liberating and progressive thing to be able to speak English in our society.

We have heard the arguments about employability and loneliness and so on. Let me add one more that comes up, which I find works in the discussions I have with different communities: it is really up there if parents can to speak English. How can anyone possibly guide their children in towns such as Keighley, where many good things but also one or two bad things go on from time to time, and how can anyone make judgments about their children’s friends and the activities they take part in, without speaking English?

It is a wonderful thing that there are so many groups in Keighley. The Sangat Centre works very much with the Kashmiri community. There is the Good Shepherd Centre, a redundant church that was not needed by the Catholic Church that has now become a vibrant centre; English teaching is one of the things that goes on there. In all the centres, there is a big waiting list for the free English lessons, which are largely financed by the Catholic Church that has now become a vibrant centre; English teaching is one of the things that goes on there. I want to reiterate the point that someone often needs to be more skilled to teach in an FE setting than in a standard school setting. Does the sector will always manage to retain staff if they are paid appropriately.

There is also innovation in some of the schools in Keighley. In St Andrew’s, Holycroft and Victoria Primary Schools, English language lessons—and maths lessons as well—are held between 11 am and 1 pm, with a second session from 1 pm to 3 pm, so that parents can come along during the school day, knowing that their kids are at school.

Catherine West: Is my hon. Friend aware of Duncombe School, a school of excellence? It provides GCSEs in Turkish and other community languages, so that those who missed out—once again, it is particularly women—can complete qualifications in other languages, meaning that they are proficient in two languages?

John Grogan: That is an inspiration; that example is not from Halifax, but we can take inspiration from all round the country. Second chances are very important in learning.

I have little else to add, other than to say that we are grateful in Bradford and Keighley for the money that has come from the integrated communities programme, which I hope will last for more than the current period of three years, because by the time it gets up and running we are halfway into it. To really integrate communities and use the power of the English language to bring about cohesion takes a while, and it can take years, so I hope that in the coming months Ministers will give greater certainty about the future of funding. We are excited in Keighley and in West Yorkshire generally about trying to make sure that eventually everyone in our society can speak English and participate fully in our society.

3.10 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) on securing this important debate, and I congratulate all the others who were inspired to take part, even if they did so quite late on.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston spoke authoritatively about the problems faced by refugees struggling to learn English in England. She spoke fluently on an issue that she obviously cares passionately about and gave many relevant examples of why it is so important. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) spoke about the all-party group on social integration and was able to inject an objective view as there are not many refugees in Henley. He gave us good information about the Council of Europe and the linguistic integration of adult migrants programme. I was not aware of it per se, but it is something that we can all take from here.

The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) referred to the 60% drop in ESOL funding in England and talked about the work of her all-party group in trying to push Government Departments into doing better. The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) talked about funding for Syrian refugees and reminded us all that it is only two weeks since Refugee Week. I, too, was inspired by some of the refugees I met in Parliament during that time. She talked about funding, the JAN Trust and the wage levels of ESOL teachers. As a former further education lecturer, I can vouch for the fact that no one in FE is a slackers. You have to be nimble, light on your feet and able to do several jobs at once, but the sector will always manage to retain staff if they are paid appropriately.

Catherine West: I want to reiterate the point that someone often needs to be more skilled to teach in an FE setting than in a standard school setting. Does the hon. Lady agree?

Marion Fellows: I do indeed, based on my own long experience and that of my friend who is in the Gallery listening to this debate.

The hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) hosted a conference on integration and he talked about how the ability to speak English is liberating. I loved the idea of Keighley College doing a course in driving test theory with English. We often need a hook to draw people in and to get funding—again, another problem in further education—and that is a real winner.

The Scottish Government are committed to the principle that all Scottish residents for whom English is not a first language should have the opportunity to access high-quality
English language provision. Access to English language lessons allows people to acquire the language skills to enable them to participate in Scottish life: in the workplace, through further study, within the family, the local community and Scottish society, and through the economy. It is one of the joys of life to hear immigrants from all over the world speaking with a broad Scottish accent.

Language skills are central to giving people a democratic voice and supporting them to contribute to the society in which they live. Scotland’s population at the last census was recorded as 5,295,403. The census also showed that more than 310,000, or about 5%, of that population over the age of three spoke a language other than English in the home. ESOL learning is crucial in supporting residents in Scotland for whom English is not a first language. It equips those residents with the communication skills necessary to contribute and integrate economically, culturally and socially, as we have heard from all the speakers today.

To support the delivery of the ESOL programme in line with the national strategy, during 2016-17 funding of almost £1.5 million was allocated to community planning partnerships, which are wide ranging in Scotland. As a result, almost 13,000 learners were recorded as accessing provision, a 24% increase on the numbers recorded in the previous year. Funding is necessary and must be given to promote ESOL. Some 20% of those learners achieved a Scottish Qualifications Authority accreditation, which represents almost 21% of the total number of learning opportunities made available. A total of 129 projects were proposed for the fund and 116 are reported as being complete, giving a 90% completion rate, which is, from my own experience, extraordinary.

Society has changed since the 2007 adult ESOL strategy for Scotland was first launched. Social, political and economic factors have impacted on ESOL provision; these include a change in the profile of refugees and asylum seekers coming to Scotland, and migrants become part of settled communities. There have also been changes to the requirements for English language skills for immigration and welfare benefits and the reform of public services following the Christie commission on the future delivery of public services report. Public services in Scotland are adapting to cuts in funding under Tory austerity, while technology becomes increasingly prevalent and public services and personal lives are challenged to maximise the use of technology, which someone cannot access and use if they do not have the language skills.

We know more about the ESOL provision in Scotland, including who delivers it, how it is delivered and what is delivered. As a result, the Scottish Government refreshed the English for speakers of other languages strategy for adults in Scotland. The refresh provides an updated and informed context for the provision of publicly funded ESOL in Scotland. It sets it in the broad context of learning in Scotland with the expectation that providers will look at the broader context to inform the direction of provision.

We in the Scottish National party believe that refugees and asylum seekers should be welcomed, supported and integrated into our communities from day one. The New Scots refugee integration strategy for 2018 to 2022 sets out a vision for a welcoming Scotland where refugees and asylum seekers are able to rebuild their lives from the day they arrive. The strategy commits to better access to essential services such as education, housing, health and employment. It recognises the skills, knowledge and resilience that refugees bring, and aims to help people settle, become part of the community and pursue their ambitions. There is not a hostile environment for refugees in Scotland.

Catherine West: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for taking a second intervention. Would the Scottish National party join with others in the House to support the Lift the Ban campaign to lift the ban on asylum seekers working once they have done their paperwork?

Marion Fellows: Absolutely, because the ban undervalues people and the skills that they can bring into the UK. As has already been stated, many refugees bring really good skills with them. If they can then learn English, they can contribute a huge amount to the economy and our society.

In 2010, the literacy action plan emphasised the Scottish Government’s commitment to raising the literacy skills of Scotland’s citizens. The strategic guidance, “Adult Literacies in Scotland 2020”, notes the importance of literacy and language skills for ESOL learners:

“Some adults whose first language is not English may have reading, writing and number difficulties very similar to those encountered by ‘traditional’ literacies learners, due to limited schooling in their first language or because they come from a mainly oral culture.”

It is important to support people whose first language is not English to become full and active citizens. Those adults can make an important contribution to the economic success of Scotland, but to do so they must be able to read, write, speak and understand English. I talk a lot about Scotland, which is my role here, but much of what I am talking about could happen in England as well, with the political will.

For young adults, the 16-plus learning choices framework is a commitment in the senior phase of education that guarantees a place in learning for every eligible young person who wants it. It is the model for helping young people to stay in learning post-16. Provisions that support ESOL learners to find employment have great returns personally, socially and economically. Economic integration can help to reduce isolation in a new country. Increasing the opportunities for individuals to develop and use their skills as best they can is not just a strategy for improved economic performance. It is also an effective way of improving the satisfaction and security of work, promoting the health and wellbeing of individuals and enhancing the fabric of our communities.

Language learning remains an important curriculum area in schools and is supported by “Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach”. That policy is aimed at schools, but it notes the potential of language learning in general. Work-based ESOL and ESOL for employability can be considered in the context of the Government’s employability and economic strategies. Refreshing the employability framework for Scotland provides a framework that focuses on jobs and growth and recognises the importance of ESOL in helping to address inequality issues that impact on employability. Providers and practitioners report that migrant workers are now becoming part of settled communities in Scotland. ESOL learners in general are becoming less transient. In that regard, I thank those who work tirelessly to improve the lives of
Congolese and Syrian refugees who have settled in my constituency. Those people are welcome, and they contribute to our communities.

Refugee Action has made five recommendations for change and I think it important to restate them. It wants a fund to be created to allow all refugees to receive a minimum eight hours a week of formal, accredited English language teaching. It wants the Government to publish an ESOL strategy for England. It wants to ensure that all refugees have access to ESOL. It wants free English teaching to be provided to people seeking asylum in England from the point of their asylum claim. It wants a national framework for community-based language support to be facilitated. Community-based language support is so important. I have talked jokingly—but perhaps I was not joking too much—about asylum seekers and refugees speaking with a Scottish accent. That absolutely helps to empower them, and to embed them in their communities. When the weans start school at five the mothers know what is going on at the school gate.

All those asks are in line with the SNP Scottish Government strategy. Will the Minister commit to providing for them in England?

3.23 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. First I want to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), on a speech that not only was superbly constructed but got to the heart of the individual issues. It gave us information about how to address strategy more broadly than the Government have previously done. That breadth was particularly apparent when she listed the different types of refugees she had been dealing with in her constituency, and when she said that starting to speak English fluently means people can get a good job and make their dreams come true.

That applies not only in Birmingham; the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) may have seen what I thought was a moving piece on BBC Oxford the other day about an Afghan cricketer who came to this country as a refugee and asylum seeker and now plays in the city league in Australia. It was the support of the people of Cumnor, and particularly the cricket club there, that got him through the Home Office barriers. It is important to talk about structure, but we should never forget individuals, and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston did not do that. She rightly paid tribute to the report by Refugee Action and pointed out that there has been no new money. She also made the important point that informal ESOL learning groups are run by volunteers and community organisations. The Minister and I have often jointly supported adult education, but I recall her talking a couple of years ago, at the Learning and Work Institute, about the importance of informal learning and how to coax people into doing things that they might not otherwise do.

There is a moral as well as an economic case for the Government to address. I pay tribute to other Members for their comments and observations in interventions and speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) is of course the Labour Home Office spokesperson on such matters. He talked about how provision for children is a key element of the matter, and also a barrier. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) made the important point that the European social fund had been a significant contributor to ESOL and asked whether the Minister would guarantee to match that. As far as I am aware, that will probably come substantially from the shared prosperity fund that the Government have talked about.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) and other colleagues tried to get some detail about that from the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), in an excellent Westminster Hall debate two months ago—but detail came there none. I do not know whether the Minister today is in a position to say any more today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) talked about the importance of first steps and colleges. The hon. Member for Henley talked about the need to get people’s motivation right, and about issues of loneliness and participation. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) rightly paid tribute to the work being done in her constituency, and also the work of the all-party parliamentary group on social integration. She and my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) made a particular point about the needs of older women. The stats that my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax gave and the two examples that my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green talked about powerfully illustrated that argument.

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan), as well as telling us about the challenges in Bradford and Keighley, probably gave the most memorable soundbite of the afternoon, by combining driving with English, but it is an important point because people want to learn English for specific reasons. That relates to the discussion of and concerns about older people—not just older women—who need ESOL.

Finally, the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) spoke on these matters from the Front Bench for the SNP, with her customary crispness and warmth. She illustrated some of the challenges, particularly in relation to teaching and further education in Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom, and discussed changes in the profile and the specifics of what is happening in Scotland.

ESOL classes offer vital support for people across this country whose first language is not English. They offer them the ability to get the knowledge and skills they need to live more active lives. People rely on those services for many reasons—to be able to speak English and enter work, or as a starting point for education here—in order to feel able to integrate and participate in their communities. Those are important aims, and I know that the Minister will agree with me and colleagues present in Westminster Hall that we must give everyone the support and opportunities to achieve them. In fact, I hope there is cross-party consensus on the issue.

As I have already said, the Minister and I have at various times talked about motivation and the need to reach out to people. The Secretary of State himself has said:

“Improving literacy is vital to improving social mobility”. —[Official Report, 19 March 2018; Vol. 638, c. 6.]
In her review of integration, Louise Casey said:

“English language is a common denominator and a strong enabler of integration.”

Indeed, one would expect Ministers to have been investing substantially in these services for years, given how important they say English language is. As I am afraid has been demonstrated today—it is too often the case—that rhetoric has not been matched in reality since 2010. ESOL funding has been cut by over 50%, from £203 million to £99 million. Sadly, it comes as no surprise that participation has also plummeted. In 2009-10 there were 179,000 learners on funded ESOL courses, but by 2017 the figure had fallen to 114,000.

Will the Minister at least acknowledge that the indifference or—let us be charitable—inability to provide funding since 2010 has contributed significantly, if not directly, to the decline in ESOL participation? I know that she will say that funding has increased in recent years, and it is true that there have been small increases in ESOL funding and in specific areas, which we welcome. The Syrian refugees settlement scheme has been talked about. Given that the Government knew, and now have proof, that additional funding is needed to provide ESOL to specific vulnerable groups, it is a matter of concern that they have not gone further. Will they move beyond that piecemeal approach and offer long-term, sustainable investment to deliver ESOL in all our communities? The fact is that the lack of investment makes it impossible for those who need these vital services to access them.

As shadow skills Minister, I have been talking a lot recently about our urgent need to empower two groups of people: young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in education, employment or training; and adults who are without basic literacy and numeracy, of whom there are probably between 5 million and 7 million. We cannot separate that from ministerial failure to fund ESOL properly—and not just in further education, but in the Home Office and with others who have shared responsibilities in this area. I appreciate that it is complex—I know what the silos are like in Government—but the Government have to deliver on the matter.

I hope that the Minister can tell us how many refugees and asylum seekers are not currently, and have not previously, enrolled in an ESOL course. I and many hon. Members of the House are concerned that they are not getting the support they need. Some 59% of respondents to a Refugee Action survey said that the number of hours of teaching they received were not sufficient, and 66% said that their current level of English did not make them feel ready to work in the UK. That is simply unacceptable. Can the Minister tell us what steps the Government are taking to ensure that refugees and asylum seekers get the support they need to learn English?

It seems to me that Ministers support that goal, because their own integrated communities Green Paper said that everyone should be able to learn English. I agree, but when will it become a reality? If we will the ends, we must will the means—to be more old-fashioned and colloquial about it, there is the old phrase: “If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.” Well, no money has been saddled up to power the fine words and exaltation of the Green Paper, and the Government cannot say that they have not been given chapter and verse on what needs to be done.

I pay tribute to Paul Hook and all his colleagues at Refugee Action, which is a national charity that works to enable asylum seekers and refugees to rebuild their lives in the UK. It is the “leading provider of reception and integration services”, and in the past three years it has been indefatigable in reminding the Government and Members of the House where we need to go. I am quoting from Refugee Action’s July 2018 reaction to the Green Paper, which lists the problems for refugees. They include long waiting lists, difficulties enrolling in a class, inadequate learning hours, gender barriers, unsuitable classes and travel difficulties, many of which have been touched on in the debate. That is what Refugee Action said last year.

As we have already heard, Refugee Action has now produced a response to the integrated communities Green Paper. I have looked at it, and I am sure that other hon. Members will have looked at it, either the whole thing or a summary. It is an excellent summary of where we are, but unfortunately what it summarises is not good. Refugee Action makes the point that there has been a real-terms cut of almost 60% between 2008 and 2018. I have already mentioned the new research: 59% of refugees do not think that they have had enough ESOL teaching hours. To probe further into that, more than three quarters of parents said that a lack of childcare had been a barrier to their ability to attend English lessons. That bears out in anecdotal and other comments that colleagues have made.

Catherine West: Does my hon. Friend agree that we have an enormous problem that results from that? There is isolation and there are resulting mental health problems, which add further costs to the national health service as a result of failing to provide these important preventive services.

Gordon Marsden: I agree. I do not wish to take us into another area, but although the significant cuts to the Sure Start programmes and children’s centres impact on native English speakers, they also have an effect on refugees and asylum seekers, particularly in areas where there is ethnic concentration and a large number of migrants.

Refugee Action’s recommendations have already been touched on. They include a fund to support all refugees to learn English; ensuring a minimum of eight hours a week teaching for refugees, which requires an investment of £42 million a year; an ESOL strategy for England; full and equal access to ESOL for female asylum seekers, with the right to access free English-language learning; and facilitating a national framework for community-based support.

This is an issue that I have taken up with the National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults, Refugee Action and others over the past couple of years. I went back to an article I wrote in FE Week in March 2018, to see whether anything I said then was not up to date. Unfortunately, I do not think much has changed at all. NATECLA said that the “focus on informal community learning…does not go far enough to address the needs of learners…it is sustained and accredited English language learning”
which rather supports the point that the hon. Member for Henley made on the need to have progression in those sorts of courses.

Following Brexit, when we will increasingly have to rely on a smaller pool of workers than we have done for decades, it will become absolutely clear that a skill system that is fit for the future must include a minimum competence in the English language for everyone living in the UK—and not just in London, but in other major cities. We should not neglect the challenges in smaller towns and rural areas where there are recent influxes or long-standing ethnic communities. However, ESOL funding has been whittled away, which has inevitably depleted the cohort of dedicated teachers. It is no good the Education Secretary waxing lyrical on ESOL and social mobility if the Department does not provide—either from its own resources, by lobbying the Treasury, or by combining with other Departments—the hard cash to go with it.

The shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), met a group of Congolese and Sudanese refugees in her constituency earlier this year. She says:

“They told me about their experiences of seeking shelter and safety in my area and of the welcome they had received in my constituency. But they also told me that they were desperate for more opportunities to learn English”.

She wrote in an article:

“From my own experience, I know that the opportunity to learn alongside managing childcare responsibilities is crucial.”

Without the opportunity to do that, they will not be able to succeed.

This is not an issue that only well-meaning people in prosperous areas are concerned about. I have received quite a lot of letters on the matter from my constituents in Blackpool. I will quote from a letter that I received from Raven Ellis:

“Without the opportunity to learn English... Being denied this opportunity means refugees can’t integrate properly or find work. Even the smallest everyday things are hard—catching a bus, going to the doctor, or making friends with neighbours.”

To invest makes sound economic sense. The Government’s integrated communities Green Paper had some welcome proposals, but that justifies the need to move further in this area and not to continue to do nothing. Many things can be done informally. Conversation clubs and volunteers are great, but they cannot replace formal teaching. A recent survey by British Future, which talked to a large number of refugees and asylum seekers, bears out that point.

We know from history, and I know personally and practically from the history of the north-west in towns such as Preston, Barnsley, Oldham and Rochdale, as well as Blackpool—we do not have such a proportion of people needing ESOL in Blackpool—how key it is that communities, whether new or permanent, can assimilate instead of just co-existing separately. We also see that in other parts of the country, such as Yorkshire and Humber—my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) is not in his place, but my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley is—and ESOL is key to that. It is key to social cohesion and individual advancement. It is key to enhancing local productivity and the local economy, especially where the number of people who need ESOL is high. It is also key to those people who are newly assimilated to learn to train and gain skills at whatever age. With that bundle of imperatives, I really hope that the Government, in whatever form or shape they take in the next six months, will put some effort into this area.

3.41 pm

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). We all know—there has been agreement in the debate—that English language skills are crucial. Last week I had the privilege of meeting adult education providers in Birmingham, who spoke passionately about helping students to succeed. I also had a chance to chat to some of the students not just about progress they had made to date but about the progress they hoped to make in the future and what that meant for them.

We estimate that 1 million people—quite a big figure—living in England cannot speak English well or at all, and we know how important English language skills are. The Government make funding available for English language through the adult education budget, and via the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government for community-based provision. There is also specific support for refugees via the Home Office. We are keen to ensure that funding offers the best value for money for those learning and those contributing through taxes.

When I looked at the funding streams available for English language, I saw that the Department for Education, MIHCLG, the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Work and Pensions all put funding into this area. The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) talked about silos, which are a problem because they are not always the most efficient way of delivering the services we want.

Last year, providers supported adults to access English courses with £105 million of investment from the adult education budget. We are developing a new strategy, as hon. Members will be aware, which we plan to publish in the autumn. I share Members’ frustration about Ministers always saying “in the autumn” or “in the spring” or “in the summer” because we are never quite sure when that is. However, we are keen to get the strategy out as soon as possible. I do not mean to be evasive, but it will need to be right before we publish it. It will set out shared aims across Government to ensure that the ESOL provision is effective. We will need to use evidence-based decisions about what we do, and we have undertaken research to ensure that we get it right, which has included speaking to teachers, colleges, adult community learning providers, charities and academics to understand more. Last week, we published a report that explores what barriers those who have not accessed English language support have faced, some of which have been highlighted in the debate.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston articulated extremely well the reasons why being able to speak, understand and communicate in English are critical to building cohesive communities. It has become a bit of political rhetoric to talk about cohesive communities,
but we know what that means. It has to mean more than co-existing, which the hon. Member for Blackpool South mentioned.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston also pointed out that specific first-hand experiences are important in highlighting some of the more general problems with accessing ESOL. She raised several points about the devolution of the adult education budget, which is important. I saw some of that in the west midlands. I met staff and some of the Mayors of the combined authorities a couple of weeks ago, and it will be interesting and useful to us all to note what they do in their local areas, because we can all learn from best practice and experience of delivery in different areas.

The hon. Lady asked four questions, which I think I will have answered before the end of my remarks. On her last question, I can only give my wholehearted support to the fact that we must be an inclusive and welcoming country, particularly for refugees, who have often been through a lot and also have much to contribute to the rich fabric of our society.

Catherine West: The Minister mentioned the notion of devolution, which is a personal favourite of mine. However, devolving only really works if the money is not top-sliced first. Will she please give assurances that any further devolution will not lead to cuts on the way down?

Anne Milton: Of course, around all this is the budget that we have available, and I know that the adult education budget has gone down in its totality. We have a spending review coming up. I am also a fan of devolution. It can make Governments slightly more nervous as they hand over authority for something for which ultimately they will be held responsible, which can feel uncomfortable. But in an area such as this, devolution is the way to get solutions that work, because people know and understand their local communities, their population and the barriers in their area. Top-slicing is always a little trick of the Treasury; our job in the Department for Education is to ensure that nobody top-slices anything. We do not want top-slicing. However, as I said, there are a lot of complex funding streams, although not specifically for refugees. I think it was the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) who asked whether I would give my word that money for ESOL will be replaced pound for pound. I cannot give any assurances, because the spending review is coming up.

Gordon Marsden: I am really sorry to interrupt the Minister, to whom I am listening carefully. I do not mean this in any way sardonically—the mood music coming from her is great—but my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) made a point about losing European regional development fund and ESL funding, and we do have a real concern about this area and others. Can the Minister give us any details on when we will see some nuts and bolts about the shared prosperity fund?

Anne Milton: I will refer to that later, but to answer directly now, there is a lot of work going on about the shared prosperity fund. In the Department for Education, we are very aware of the benefits delivered through the European social fund. Moral imperatives were mentioned, and that money plays a crucial part in giving people an opportunity to take a step on various paths in their lives, as will the shared prosperity fund that replaces it. I cannot give details—not because I do not want to, but because I do not know.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), who is not in her seat, mentioned a German example. We always have much to learn from other countries, although we can rarely transfer ideas straight across because they will not necessarily work.

The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) evocatively referred to the prison that people inhabit when they cannot speak English. I have never been in that position, but it must feel like that if people cannot speak or understand any English.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) referenced the all-party parliamentary group’s work and highlighted issues such as loneliness and isolation, which have been well articulated. He also referenced the Council of Europe’s work. Europe gets many mentions in this place and elsewhere at the moment, but we rarely hear about the Council of Europe’s work, so that was good because it does a lot of good work.

Several hon. Members mentioned the particular problems that women face, including cultural and more complex problems. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley also mentioned community provision. I saw an extremely good example of community ESOL where the local authority was working with primary schools to encourage women to come in to help their children with some of their SATs and end-of-year tests. That is a good vehicle for improving their English while helping them to help their children with the tests that they will sit in school. For women who do not find it easy to get to adult community provision, for a variety of reasons, it is a good way to bypass the barriers that they might face in their own homes.

The ESOL strategy emerged as part of the integrated communities strategy action plan. The strategy has involved officials across Departments, so we have a shared vision, including addressing the needs of refugees. As we set out in the integrated communities strategy, we want to create clearer and easier pathways, improve outcomes and get better value for the money that we spend.

We always come back to funding at the end of the day—funding matters. The hon. Member for Blackpool South and I have frequently discussed the financial pressures that FE is under, which we will look at in the spending review. Warm words from me do not necessarily bring more money—they are needed, but they do not guarantee it. I am sure that all hon. Members who are keen for things to be funded will lobby. Debates such as this add to the pressure on the Treasury. We rarely make a good case for education in a broader sense. For people who do not speak English, ESOL is the first step down a path that includes further education. It also enables refugees who have prior education—we have talked about refugees who are doctors—to come to life and feel that they are a useful member of the society and community that they have joined. We can also realise the benefits of that.

The 2011 census revealed that 59%—nearly 60%—of over-16-year-olds who could not speak English or could not speak it well were not in employment. According to the 2014 British social attitudes survey, 95% of people, which is higher than other figures that have been quoted,
I could go on about devolution, which, as I said, is important. We will use the learning from that. I thank all hon. Members who contributed to the debate. Last year, the Department alone spent £105 million on ESOL courses and qualifications. We need to improve the quality and effectiveness of what is delivered by commissioning new teaching resources for pre-entry level learners and by funding local authorities to trial the co-ordination of provision in their area.

The key is to put in place a co-ordinated system where we do not waste resources and where scarce resources get to the frontline. We need effective teaching and high-quality teachers—the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green raised the issue of pay. We need to remove and overcome some of the cultural barriers. I also note the need to make sure that the system is fully integrated, so that people can learn English, access good employment and have continued training opportunities, and so that we realise the vision that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston set out, where communities do not just co-exist but are fully integrated.

3.58 pm

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. We have heard some excellent testimonies from hon. Members and their areas. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for her work on the all-party parliamentary group on social integration. Some of the work that it has produced is in line with that of Refugee Action.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), who mentioned Paul Hook and his work as head of campaigns for Refugee Action. I also put on record my thanks to Refugee Action and Paul Hook, and the many organisations that work not just on access to ESOL for refugees, but on the “Lift the Ban” campaign, which has been mentioned. I am grateful to the Minister for meeting adult education providers in Birmingham and the students who attended there.

Although we welcome the strategy, we have not heard much detail, which is disappointing. The case has been made today for investing in refugees, which means more funding, because post-16 funding has not been protected—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Chagos Islands: UN General Assembly Resolution

[ViRENDRA SHARMA in the Chair]

4 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I beg to move, That this House has considered the UN General Assembly resolution on the future of the Chagos Islands.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, and to have the chance to debate the issue of justice for the people of Chagos and the country of Mauritius. The topic is not unfamiliar to Westminster Hall, or indeed to the Minister, but recent developments at the UN warrant a fresh perspective. Last week, at Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions, the Minister said that I could expostulate as much as I wish on this matter. Well, it seems that my wish has been granted. Incidentally, Mr Speaker was not sure whether it would not be better to expiate on the matter. Whether it is expiate or expostulate, what most people involved in the historical and ongoing treatment of the Chagos islands situation experience is exasperation. The UK Government’s obstinacy, especially in recent years, and their refusal to make any concessions to those seeking redress is astonishing and frustrating in equal measure. As I will show, it is becoming damaging to the UK Government themselves and to Britain’s global reputation.

I pay tribute to the many campaigners and champions working on this issue, many of whom have been far more deeply involved and for far longer than I or any of my colleagues have. They include the Chagossian community—both the original islanders who were forced off their homeland and their descendants, who have not given up and will not give up on the dream of a right to return, and especially Olivier Bancoult, who has led the community for many years—the lawyers, including Philippe Sands, Richard Dunne and Richard Gifford, who have supported those efforts over the years; David Snoxell, the former UK high commissioner to Mauritius, who ably co-ordinates the all-party parliamentary group of which I am an officer; Tom Guha, who runs a grassroots support group; my good friend and constituent William Henderson, who lectures in international law at Glasgow Caledonian University and first made me aware of the issue; and hon. Members who have kept the issue alive, Caledonian University and first made me aware of the Henderson, who lectures in international law at Glasgow...
were the Maldives and Hungary, Australia and Israel—neither of which are without critics of their own human rights records—and the United States of America, which is led by a man who is basically an international laughing stock. It is pretty damning stuff.

Whenever any of us has questions about whether blindly ignoring the advisory opinion of the ICJ and 116 other members of the UN General Assembly is a good idea for a country that is busy trying to extract itself from the biggest and most successful economic, social and political Union in history, the Government and the Minister simply double down. They say that Chagos has been under continuous British sovereignty since 1814 and has never been part of the Republic of Mauritius, but that ignores the fact that the islands were a dependency of Mauritius when it was administered first by the French and then as a British colony until 1965, when it was detached from Mauritius as a precondition of independence, the declaration of which was drafted by UK lawyers in 1968. It ignores the ICJ’s findings that the colony, by definition, could not freely agree to detachment as part of its territory prior to independence.

**Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con):** It is important to note that the judgment, so to speak, that came out of the ICJ was an advisory opinion, not a binding judgment. It is very important that we do not give the impression in this Chamber that it was more than it in fact was. Is the hon. Gentleman not overstating the case somewhat?

**Patrick Grady:** It is a very powerful statement that was made by a very significant number of countries, and it has left the United Kingdom isolated diplomatically.

The Government say that the UK needs to retain the Chagos islands in order to support the US military presence on Diego Garcia—as if supporting a base for weapons of mass destruction, which has helped facilitate extraordinary rendition, should somehow help us sleep more easily at night. However, the existence of the base is not dependent on British sovereignty, and it is only on the largest of the 55 islands. The rest remain uninhabited as a result of the forced deportation of the community in the ’60s and ’70s. It would be perfectly possible to settle there.

**James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con):** A few years ago, I visited the Chagos island, including the outer islands. I genuinely do not think they would sustain life. Even on the main island, where clearly there is sustainment of life, because there is a big US base, the cost per person is astronomical. Is the hon. Gentleman as concerned as I am about Mauritius’s motives? The Chagossians in Mauritius live in slum conditions in some cases. They are much better off in the United Kingdom.

**Patrick Grady:** I will have more to say about the UK Government’s support fund, which has not been spent on trying to improve the lives of the Chagossians in the United Kingdom, but surely that is a decision for the Chagossian community itself. The principle of the right to return is in some respects at least as important as the ability to return.

The Government say, as the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) did, that the ICJ opinion and the UNGA resolution are advisory and not binding, but the opinion confirms that existing legal obligations already emanate from international law. The effect of all that is that the UK Government have got themselves into a petty and unseemly row with the Government of Mauritius. The Prime Minister of Mauritius, in his response to the UN resolution, described the forced expulsion of the Chagossian population as “akin to a crime against humanity.”

The Rome statute of the International Criminal Court includes

*Deportation or forcible transfer of population* and

*Other inhumane acts of a similar character intentionally causing great suffering* in its definition of crimes against humanity.

The UK Government have repeatedly expressed sincere regret at the actions of the British state in depopulating the islands. In a recent written answer to Baroness Whitaker, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon conceded that “the manner of the removal of the Chagossians from the British Indian Ocean Territory in the 1960s and 1970s was wrong”, so perhaps there is a case to answer. But instead of engaging constructively with Mauritius—instead of seeking some kind of arbitration method, seeking to build consensus around an alternative resolution at the UN or simply agreeing to take steps to implement the decisions—how has the UK reacted? How has the soft-power superpower, the defender of the international rules-based order, the Brexit Britain reinventing itself on the world stage, reacted? It cancelled the Queen’s birthday party at its embassy in Mauritius. Tyrannical regimes and terrorist cells around the world must be trembling in fear. Despots cracking down on human rights and freedom of speech, and illegal traders in arms and drugs, must be watching in horror. Mess with the United Kingdom—upset this diplomatic colossus, Mother Britannia, which once ruled the waves—and there will be no gin and tonic or cucumber sandwiches for any of you.

The Minister has rejoiced in his reputation as deputy Foreign Secretary—I am not sure whether that was ever an official status or just a title bestowed on him by Mr Speaker—and surely, like many of his colleagues, he will be reflecting over the coming weeks on his legacy from his time in office. What a hero he would be if he used the next few weeks to right the historical wrongs that have been perpetrated in the Chagos islands. What a legacy he would leave for the new Prime Minister—he has served under both candidates as their alleged deputy—if the Chagos issue had been resolved and the UK’s diplomatic standing had been picked up from rock bottom.

The Minister could arrange for a little more than £300,000 or so of the £40 million package that was promised to the Chagossian community to be spent. Let us start a genuine programme of facilitation that allows the original generation and their descendants at the very least to visit their ancestral homeland. To date, the management of that fund has been pretty shambolic. It was designed to “improve the lives of Chagossians in the communities where they now live,”
but can the Minister tell us how much has actually been spent supporting projects here in the UK run by and in the interests of the Chagossian community? I understand that the FCO started a needs analysis to determine how that money could best be used, but that was scrapped, and since then there has been no news about how the Government intend to use the funds. Perhaps he can shed some light on whether that needs analysis will be picked up again or how the Government intend to use the money.

Will the Minister arrange to meet the all-party parliamentary group, perhaps with his colleague Lord Ahmad, to hear these concerns out in more detail and discuss a way forward? Even without acknowledging or complying with the full UN resolution, he could unilaterally reinstate the right of return for the Chagossian community—even a recognition in principle that that right exists would be an important first step. The UK Government’s own feasibility study of resettlement found that it was “practically feasible”, and a UK Government consultation with the community found that 98% of Chagossians are in favour of the right to return.

The Minister could work with his colleagues in the Home Office to ensure that all members of the Chagossian community on these islands are fully recognised as UK citizens should they wish to seek citizenship. He cannot argue on one hand that the Chagos islands are not part of Mauritius but have his Home Office colleagues argue on the other that new generations of Chagossians and their partners and spouses are not entitled to citizenship.

The Minister will be aware that the Select Committee on Home Affairs called on the Government to back the British Indian Ocean Territory (Citizenship) Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), which would give all Chagossians the opportunity to register as British nationals. The Foreign Affairs Committee has also called for urgent reforms to citizenship law for people from other overseas territories. At the very least, the Minister should grow his consultation and engagement with the Chagossian community. The Chagos archipelago was and is their homeland and, as the SNP has always held, sovereignty should ultimately lie with the people.

Even if the Minister moves on, this issue is not going away; he or his successor will continue to be held to account. I am afraid that I have not run out of written questions to keep Ministers busy. I still live in hope that the BIOT Administration will take up the permission so proudly granted by Her Majesty’s Treasury for overseas territories to mint their own commemorative £1 coins. There are lots of ongoing issues with the management and development of the marine protected area—not least, perhaps, the fact that the people best able to exercise stewardship of it might just be the communities that lived on the islands for generations.

The scrutiny will not just be here in Parliament or in the UK. The UN resolution finishes with a request to the Secretary-General to submit a report to the 74th session of the General Assembly on the actions of the UK to implement its decision. The choice for the Minister and the UK Government is either to take the bold but obvious step of complying with the UN resolution or to face further embarrassment and isolation on the world stage.

The UK can show that it is serious about the rules-based order and being a soft-power superpower by submitting itself to the conclusions of that rules-based order. It can show that it wants to be a good neighbour and to deal effectively and appropriately with its colonial legacy, or it can continue to promote splendid isolation and British exceptionalism. It can act as if rules are for other people and that might be somehow right, but that is a dangerous path to go down. It weakens and undermines, perhaps fatally, any credibility the UK Government might want in tackling other great international and diplomatic issues of our time. Mother Britannia can no longer get away with waiving the rules. As long as the injustice surrounding the Chagos islands stands out and remains unresolved, it provides an excuse for unco-operative regimes elsewhere in the world to ignore other resolutions of the UN and decisions of the ICJ. The UK and the Minister ought to do better.

I mentioned the solidarity and support that we in the SNP and our friends in Plaid Cymru have always had with the Chagossian cause. I just wonder what message the UK Government’s intransigence on this issue sends to the devolved nations. We were told in 2014 by David Cameron that Scotland should “lead, not leave” the UK. Well, the overwhelming majority of MPs returned from Scotland want the right of return restored to the Chagossian community and want the UK to comply with its international obligations. If we cannot have influence on a matter such as this, what is the point? Would we not be better having our own seat at the top table, with our own vote at the UN General Assembly? Perhaps we should even look at reforming the whole system.

So here we are. Here is the Minister’s opportunity to build his legacy. Let us not hear a rehash of the various written statements and written answers that have emerged from the FCO; let us have genuine engagement and dialogue, stand up for the rules-based international order and finally get the justice that the people of Chagos, and the Chagos islands themselves, deserve.

4.17 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Thank you, Mr Sharma, for chairing our proceedings. I also thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for securing the debate—at least, that is what I thought 20 minutes ago.

I think it would be helpful if I set out the background to the Government’s position on the British Indian Ocean Territory. The UK has administered the islands that make up the British Indian Ocean Territory since 1814, when France ceded the islands to Britain. It also ceded Mauritius, which then included the Seychelles. For administrative convenience, and following French practice, the islands were administered as a dependency of Mauritius until 1965, when, with the full agreement of the Mauritian Council of Ministers, they were detached to form part of the newly established colony of the British Indian Ocean Territory, which we know as BIOT.

Mauritius entered that agreement in return for certain benefits, including a sum of £3 million and a UK commitment to cede the territory when it is no longer needed for defence purposes. That UK commitment still stands. Mauritius affirmed the 1965 agreement numerous times following independence, and the agreement was held to be legally binding by a UN convention on the law of the sea tribunal in 2015. No international court or tribunal has ever found our sovereignty to be in doubt.
In 1966, the UK agreed with the US to make BIOT available for the defence purposes of the UK and the US. The UK does not lease the territory to the US and receives no financial payment from it. The US presence on BIOT is governed by a series of letters, called exchanges of notes, of which the overarching agreement sets out that the whole territory should be made available for UK and US defence purposes for an initial 50-year period from 1966 to 2016.

On 16 November 2016, the Government announced that neither the US nor the UK had given notice to terminate the agreement. Therefore, the US presence on Diego Garcia will continue for a further 20 years until 30 December 2036. BIOT has been a key strategic asset and continues to be vital for defence use by the UK and its allies. The joint UK-US facility on the territory has helped us and our allies to combat some of the most challenging threats to international peace and security, including from terrorism, organised crime and piracy. It is increasingly important at a time of conflicts of international significance, and those functions are only possible under UK sovereignty.

When Mauritius took the matter to the UN General Assembly in 2017, it did so using the argument that our continued administration of BIOT means that the process of decolonisation remains incomplete. That argument completely fails to acknowledge the 1965 agreement. Mauritius’s claim to sovereignty over the islands, which we strongly refute, is not a decolonisation matter, but a bilateral dispute between Mauritius and the UK. It is therefore disappointing that the matter should ever have been referred to the International Court of Justice by the UN General Assembly. It is an accepted international principle that states should not be compelled to have their bilateral disputes adjudicated on by the ICJ without their consent, particularly on questions of sovereignty. Circumventing that principle sets a very dangerous precedent.

Nevertheless, the Government have considered the Court’s advice carefully. We have concluded that the approach set out in the advisory opinion failed to give due regard to material facts and legal issues that the UK Government explained in detail in our submissions to the ICJ. For instance, it did not take account of the 1965 agreement with Mauritius or the numerous affirmations of that agreement made by Mauritius since independence. Furthermore, it fails to address the fact that the UK and US have entered into a binding treaty obligation to maintain UK sovereignty over the whole territory until at least 2036.

When the UN General Assembly voted on the matter in May this year, following the ICJ advisory opinion, we fully expected a large number of member states to support the resolution in Mauritius’ favour, framed as it was around the emotive theme of decolonisation. However, it is important to note that nearly 80 member states did not vote in favour of the resolution. Many of them shared our concern that Mauritius had circumvented the principle that the ICJ should consider bilateral disputes only with the consent of the states. Furthermore, some states explained publicly that they had voted in favour of the resolution out of respect for the ICJ and not necessarily because they agreed with the substance of the resolution.

The UK, too, respects the ICJ. Despite our concerns, we participated fully in the ICJ process so as to ensure that we could present accurate facts and arguments, including on why granting the Court jurisdiction on a bilateral dispute without the consent of both parties could have wider implications for all UN member states in the future.

The issue of sovereignty has recently become entangled with arguments about resettlement, which we have just heard. We need to remember that the outer islands are not just remote but tiny, the largest being no bigger than Hyde Park. They are also extremely low-lying and have no functioning infrastructure. The UK commissioned an independent feasibility study on the practicalities of resettlement, and the study recognised that there would be significant challenges. An interesting comparison to note in passing is that Scotland has 790 islands, of which only 94 are inhabited.

In my role as Minister for Europe and the Americas, I am proud to play my part in the UK’s efforts to defend and strengthen institutions such as the UN and to uphold the norms that underpin the rules-based international system.

Alex Chalk: In his speech, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) suggested that the UK was somehow flouting international law, but we are a nation of laws. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that it would be a gross mischaracterisation to suggest that that has happened in this case? What we are discussing is not a judgment that is binding on the UK, but an advisory opinion, which is not; there is a difference. Does the Minister agree?

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, as indeed was my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge); and, in acknowledging what my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) has just said, I say very clearly that the UK continues to be seen as one of the most prominent international champions of the rule of law across the globe.

The UK recognises the important role that the UN has played, and continues to play, on the issue of decolonisation, including in territories formerly administered by the UK. We will continue to engage fully in the UN General Assembly and to be a staunch defender of human rights institutions and norms. We will also continue to support the role of international courts when states have failed to meet their responsibilities. That is clearly not the case in this instance. We regret that this issue continues to occupy the time and attention of the General Assembly. The UK remains committed to seeking resolution of this bilateral sovereignty dispute with Mauritius through direct, bilateral dialogue.

I have to say, as I conclude, that I do rather sense—

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Sir Alan Duncan: Well, just this once.

John Grogan: The Minister is very generous. I think that he was directly asked whether he or another Minister would come to the all-party parliamentary group to discuss this issue in more detail, out of respect for
Parliament. Is that date definitely in the Minister’s diary now? Has the United Kingdom had any direct discussions with Mauritius about this matter? Was it not a little bit petty to cancel the Queen’s birthday party, and was that a ministerial decision?

Sir Alan Duncan: The party was cancelled because it did not seem appropriate. That was not a petty protest; it just did not seem appropriate to have a celebration of that sort, given the mood. Given that there are likely to be changes in this Government within three weeks and the primary responsibility for this matter rests with my noble Friend Lord Ahmad, I cannot commit as the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) requests. It is the responsibility of Lord Ahmad; I merely answer on the issue here in the House of Commons.

I shall conclude, having listened to so many salvos from the hon. Member for Glasgow North, merely by saying that I feel the reasoned and clear legal points that we have always put as the Government do rather sit in contrast to the hon. Gentleman’s speech, which I think can only be characterised as confected, specious, sarcastic nonsense.

Question put and agreed to.

4.27 pm

Sitting suspended.

Genetic Haemochromatosis

4.30 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. It is a great privilege to secure this important debate on genetic haemochromatosis. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for genetic haemochromatosis (iron overload). I want to raise awareness of the condition, within Westminster and beyond. I will explain what genetic haemochromatosis is and its prevalence within the UK. I will also look at how the condition fits into the NHS priorities. I will conclude with three asks to the Minister on behalf of the charity Haemochromatosis UK, which is represented here, and the APPG.

Until recently I knew nothing about the condition. Two or three years ago I visited the charity Haemochromatosis UK, which was based in my constituency, and the condition was explained to me. The lack of awareness of the condition and the importance of early diagnosis were brought to my attention. As a consequence of those discussions with the charity and some other hon. Members, some of whom are here, we formed the APPG earlier this year.

The APPG was based on the report published by Haemochromatosis UK in October 2018, which highlighted the previously underestimated impact of the condition, in terms of the number of people affected and the chronic effect it has on people’s lives. The APPG first met in January and we met again in May to talk about the adoption of clinical guidelines, which I will refer to later.

What is genetic haemochromatosis? It is a genetic condition in which the body fails to control the absorption of iron. Some hon. Members may have heard it described as iron overload or iron overload disorder. Iron builds up within the body and reaches a highly toxic level. That can lead to a multitude of different health problems. Iron builds up particularly in the liver and the damage is progressive. At its worst, iron overload can kill through liver and heart failure.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I stand as an ignoramus on this matter, but I want to support my hon. Friend who is leading the debate, and I want to know more about the matter. Is this something that is in a baby from birth, and if not, what is the normal age at which it develops?

Mark Pawsey: This is a genetic condition that becomes apparent in some people who possess the gene. People are affected to a variable degree. I will come on to some of the debilitating consequences of genetic haemochromatosis, which include arthritis, joint pain, diabetes, fatigue, psychological or cognitive difficulties, skin conditions, menstrual problems in women, impotence, breathing and heart problems, abdominal pain, liver problems and hair loss.

Just because the condition is not widely spoken about, in either medical or public life, that does not mean that it is not prevalent in the UK. The white UK population of north-European extraction, particularly people of Celtic extraction, gives the UK the highest prevalence anywhere in the world. The condition is found around
the world wherever the Irish and Celtic population has migrated to, including Australia, the Americas and South Africa.

One in eight people in the UK carry a faulty copy of the GH gene. That faulty gene is known as HFE. One in 200 people carry two faulty copies of the HFE gene. Those are the people at risk of iron toxicity. In layman’s terms, people must have two copies of the gene in order to be affected by the condition. It is estimated that around 380,000 people worldwide have the genetic haemochromatosis mutation. Of those 380,000 people, 200,000 are under 40 years old, which is why early diagnosis is important. If we can diagnose the condition early, people will not be overlooked and can attend to their symptoms.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. I thank him for outlining, for those of us who do not have as much knowledge, how important it is that we get services and treatment right. I thank my constituent Roger Keyte, who is a trustee of Haemochromatosis UK. He has done a good job educating me. I thank him and others who are working hard to help the many people who are affected.

Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend is exactly right. That charity, which serves to raise awareness, has done a fantastic job, and that includes her constituent. I should point out that this is a condition rather than a disease, because a disease may be considered to be contagious.

I mentioned that the prevalence is higher in Ireland. According to the Irish Haemochromatosis Association, in Northern Ireland one in five people are carriers. The incidence among people of Celtic origin leads to some people referring to genetic haemochromatosis as the Celtic curse, a term that is not looked on favourably, but does underline the prevalence among Irish, Scottish and Welsh people, and the need for them and their doctors to be aware of the condition. I am delighted to see hon. Members representing Welsh and Scottish constituencies here, some of whom I know will contribute to the debate.

I have already mentioned that the condition is poorly diagnosed. Recent research shows that at least 45,000 people affected in the UK are loading iron as their bodies fail to control the absorption. Only 10% to 13% of these cases are diagnosed. For every patient diagnosed, between eight and 10 have the symptoms but have not been diagnosed. They are suffering unaware of what is happening to them.

Dr Ted Fitzsimons of the University of Glasgow has done a great deal of work in this area. He highlights that 80% to 90% of individuals who have this condition are unaware that they have it. They do not know what it is. They know the symptoms, which affect them, but they do not have an explanation for them.

Professor David Melzer, from Exeter University, and the Haemochromatosis Research Group have conducted a UK Biobank study of half a million patients, which was published in January 2019. They found that people with the double haemochromatosis mutation had four times the risk of liver disease, twice the risk of arthritis and frailty among older age groups, and a 50% higher risk of pneumonia and diabetes compared with those who do not suffer from the condition. In the UK, there are currently 136,000 people with the condition aged 40-plus. The study found that of that generation of 136,000, approximately 12,200 will have had a hip replacement, which they would not have needed if they had been diagnosed earlier and treated for iron overload. However, the study has a caveat, as there is uncertainty about whether all those operations would have been avoided by early diagnosis. But as with any condition, we know that early diagnosis is crucial.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Two of my constituents, Jane and Andrew, have haemochromatosis and have contacted me about this debate, stressing the importance of early diagnosis. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it can be difficult sometimes for people to be clear about the symptoms, therefore making it can be difficult to get a diagnosis, and that we must work on that?

Mark Pawsey: The hon. Lady is exactly right. Very often, people suffer from the symptoms and persevere. They feel tired and just generally unwell, but they do not know why they are affected, so awareness of the condition among the medical profession when people present with those symptoms is vital in identifying those affected.

In terms of the additional demands placed on the NHS, we can estimate an extra 564 patients diagnosed with liver disease and 125 new liver cancer patients every year from among those with the condition. If we can diagnose it, enable patients to be aware of it and deal with it earlier, we can prevent it from making such a substantial demand on the NHS.

Bob Stewart: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. As I am half-Scottish, I have had my hip replaced and feel tired most of the time, I am worried, but not as worried as doctors must be, because it seems to me that if someone goes to a general practitioner with normal symptoms like that, it must be bloody difficult for them to diagnose the condition. Everyone here is nodding, so I presume that is right.

Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. Next time he visits his GP, he can ask, armed with the knowledge that he has as a consequence of this debate, whether the condition might be something to consider.

Let me turn to the cost saving to the NHS. The basic test for iron levels in blood would cost only £1 per patient if routinely done at the same time as other blood tests. The test is not commonly done; perhaps it should be. Iron testing could be added to the NHS health check, which people receive at the age of 50. That might provide a pointer to some of the symptoms that my hon. Friend has referred to.

The UK Biobank study also indicates that the HFE gene is associated with significant morbidity, in particular associated arthritis and liver disease. Of course, because of the influence of the liver, there is a highly increased risk of liver cancer compared with the general population. There are approximately 6,000 cases of liver cancer per annum nationally, and the outlook for those with liver cancer is particularly poor. The survival rate for liver cancer is among the lowest of all cancers. Professor Ted
Fitzsimmons of Glasgow University estimates the cost of a liver transplant at around £100,000. That is a broadbrush estimate, which excludes personal costs such as loss of employment and the need for family members to help with caring. Again, we know that early diagnosis could not only improve the lives of those affected but result in significant savings for the NHS.

Since my involvement with genetic haemochromatosis began, one thing that has had an impact on me is the stories of patients affected by it. I will read out a couple of patient testimonies. One comes from another trustee of Haemochromatosis UK, Michelle Weerasekera. This is her account:

“I was diagnosed with genetic haemochromatosis after suffering from chronic fatigue for some time. I had visited my GP and been told to take folic acid and wouldn’t have returned had I not had a routine blood test carried out for an insurance policy that I was taking out.”

She therefore became aware of her condition accidentally. She continues:

“I returned to my GP, who, thinking that I may be anaemic, ran a ferritin test. This showed that my results were elevated and I was referred to a Haematologist. I had a FerriScan carried out which showed some stored iron in my liver but luckily with regular venesections”—

the taking of blood—

“over the last eighteen months I have managed to reduce my ferritin levels and am now in what is called the ‘maintenance phase’. I hope to soon become a regular blood donor”—

an issue that I will raise with the Minister later on—

“So that my blood can be put to good use. I know how lucky I have been by being diagnosed when I was. Having talked to my GP since diagnosis, I know that Haemochromatosis was not on his radar and this is why raising awareness is so important. Had I not returned to the GP, my body would have carried on storing iron and the outcome and my future health may have not have looked so positive.”

The second piece of testimony comes from another patient with genetic haemochromatosis, a young woman. Katharine Hough has only 27 and has had to fight to be taken seriously by the medical profession, largely because genetic haemochromatosis generally affects older people. The key point about Katharine’s concerns is that she is relatively young. She says:

“Despite the advantage of being diagnosed young, I have often had to fight to be taken seriously by the medical profession. Doctors seem to think it will not affect me as I am young and they are accustomed to solving health issues rather than helping to maintain good health and prevent problems.

I have had many cases where specialists think that, as I am a young woman and my symptoms are not as severe as those suffered by older people, I am healthy and have nothing to worry about. But I am only 27...If they stop and think for a moment to consider it, I should not have joint pains, and my knees should not hurt when I walk. I want to prevent further damage and not wait until my symptoms are very bad...It is my health and only I can fight for it.”

Both these stories highlight the importance of early diagnosis and increased awareness of the condition among GPs and other medical professionals.

The frustrating thing is that in a large number of cases treatment will alleviate many of the symptoms. The earliest intervention prevents many of the problems that I have described, including the build-up of iron in the liver and heart. In the vast majority of cases, treatment is venesection, which is essentially giving blood. Done intensively, this removes excess iron from the body effectively. Done regularly, it will maintain iron levels. In simple terms, the body uses some of the stored excess iron to make red blood cells to replace those that have been removed.

Venesection is a safe and proven procedure. It is similar to donating blood, as those of us who donate blood will realise. The blood taken from a haemochromatosis patient is perfectly usable and would go some way to addressing NHS blood demand. However, blood taken in a venesection clinic is discarded, which does not seem to make sense. I will come back to that in my final remarks and asks of the Minister.

Why is this condition not higher on the UK health agenda? There are many and varied reasons, but one key reason is the lack of consistent clinical guidelines. What protocols exist are often non-mandatory, related to an individual trust, inconsistent and poorly adopted. The University of Exeter has conducted some research into the impact of iron overload, which shows wide inconsistencies in the experience of patients, and the prevalence of chronic symptoms arising from non-diagnosis is much higher in the UK than was previously thought.

I am looking for the Minister to respond to the point about introducing guidelines. If there were guidelines, that could increase diagnosis perhaps as much as tenfold. That would prevent many people from developing the follow-on conditions, such as cancer, heart failure and diabetes, that I have referred to.

A consultant rheumatologist at St George’s Hospital in London, Dr Kiely, says that the cost of a typically large joint replacement is in the order of £10,000—which may be of interest to my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). Dr Kiely has also said that the big impact on healthcare costs would be in primary care, from delays in diagnosis. Those who suffer from genetic haemochromatosis suffer from less productivity when they are at work. They often have to take time off work, but also often want to continue at work. That leads to presenteeism, where people turn up for work but are ineffective because of the debilitating conditions that they suffer from. All those are costs to society, and are burdens that patients have to deal with.

A January 2019 editorial in The Lancet on gastroenterology and hepatology said:

“We wholeheartedly support the need to increase education and awareness of genetic haemochromatosis among clinicians to improve early diagnosis. The necessary tools are in hand, the guidelines are clear, and”—very significantly—

“their implementation would be...cost-free. It is difficult to imagine a clinical problem that represents lower-hanging fruit for the...NHS. As such, there is no time like the present to elevate the priority of genetic haemochromatosis on the UK healthcare agenda.”

Professor Ted Fitzsimmons of the University of Glasgow, who attended the most recent meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for genetic haemochromatosis, has produced a set of guidelines for this condition. Those guidelines have been endorsed by a number of professional medical bodies, and the APPG would like them to be adopted and expanded on by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in order to improve and increase diagnosis, and to improve and, importantly, standardise care after diagnosis. We believe that doing so would put genetic haemochromatosis higher on the NHS agenda.

This condition fits into two of the priorities of the NHS long-term plan. First, the plan talks about prevention. Prevention of genetic haemochromatosis affecting patients
means effective diagnosis before the damage is done. If we can identify it, we can save the NHS money and ensure that patients’ health is protected early. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care drew attention to that in November last year, when he said that “if we get prevention right, it holds the key to longer, healthier, happier lives and a sustainable, high quality health and care system... It’s why...I made it one of my big three priorities”.

There is no easier win than adopting prevention for this condition.

Another NHS priority is supporting people to age well. The University of Exeter report highlighted the impact of genetic haemochromatosis on our ageing population, and we know that the condition affects arthritis and frailty in older age groups and increases the risks of diabetes and chronic pain. It is an issue that we need to address.

My three asks of the Minister, which I hope she will respond to in her remarks, are as follows. First, what steps can she take to ensure that those who are affected are promptly and correctly identified, regardless of where they live? We have already heard that early diagnosis saves lives, yet so frequently people with genetic haemochromatosis suffer needlessly as a consequence of late diagnosis. Secondly, what steps can she take to encourage the NHS to adopt, share and embed the best practice we have referred to, both through screening and associated therapies, to ensure that venesection is available? We know from Haemochromatosis UK’s 1,800 members that NHS standards vary widely across the country. With a single system, we could offer a consistent, world-class approach.

That brings me on my third point. How can the Minister encourage different areas of the NHS system to collaborate more effectively to realise the economic benefits of joined-up care, and also the benefits to the patient? One example would be making use of the blood taken during venesection, incentivising NHS Blood and Transplant to make greater use of genetic haemochromatosis patient blood to meet ongoing needs. It is astounding that the blood collected is wasted. That distresses many of the people affected by genetic haemochromatosis, who take the view that if they are going to have their blood taken, they would love for it to be used productively to support other patients.

Mr Sharma, I know that other Members wish to contribute. I look forward to the Minister’s response to our asks at the conclusion of the debate.

4.54 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for genetic haemochromatosis, for having brought this debate before the House. It is an important subject; I imagine the hon. Member for Rugby has observed that haemochromatosis can be difficult to spot, which is also a pertinent point. A lot of the symptoms can be very non-specific, and it is not a condition that is uppermost in the minds of general practitioners, which is why we are now considering routine screening. As we have heard, the treatment is relatively simple and involves regular venesection, or bloodletting. As the body makes more blood to replace that which is taken, it uses up the excess stored iron. That treatment, if started early enough, can avoid the complications of haemochromatosis that we have already referred to—liver failure, diabetes, chronic pain and severe arthritis—developing later in life.

I will illustrate the effect of having a diagnosis of haemochromatosis later in life by telling the story of my constituent, Paul Dicken. Paul has given me permission to use him as a case history, and I think his story will strike a chord with many haemochromatosis sufferers. He was diagnosed only this year after years of suffering from symptoms including liver, joint and stomach problems, for which he has been taking multiple painkillers over the years. Since his diagnosis, he has been having venesection, but he tells me that he now suffers from lethargy due to the frequency of venesection, no energy, muscle loss and joint pain. He has said that his depression is hitting a new low and, regarding his eventual diagnosis, has said that “I was being asked for a long time if I had a drink problem because of my liver problems...but I don’t drink and the haemochromatosis was only discovered because the doctor was worried about my white blood cells being high.”

Paul’s case is a clear example of how raising awareness of the disease among GPs and medical professionals might have helped him get an earlier diagnosis and spared him some of the painful symptoms and possibly inappropriate treatment he had. I am grateful to him for allowing me to tell his story. Testing for iron overload is simple and GPs should be aware of the transferrin saturation test, where a result of greater than 50% indicates
a risk of iron accumulation. If such a result is found, the patient should be referred to secondary care for further tests.

Bob Stewart: From what I have heard today, which is the entire encyclopaedia of my knowledge, it seems to me that we could cover the issue pretty well if every blood test included a check, because most people have blood tests at some stage—that happens fairly often these days.

Liz McInnes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point, but I issue a caveat about blanket screening: it has to be proven to be clinically effective and it must not throw up false positives and false negatives. The tests are fairly specific for haemochromatosis, but they will have to go through an evaluation process, as I am sure the Minister will inform us when she makes her closing remarks.

At this stage, I want to mention the biomedical scientists and clinical scientists working in our NHS pathology labs. Those often unsung heroes of the NHS are the people who will be performing the tests. Indeed, that was my profession before I was elected as the MP for Heywood and Middleton.

In closing, I want to say that it is important to discuss with any patient diagnosed with genetic haemochromatosis the desirability of genetic testing for other members of the family, as there is at least a one in four chance that a sibling will also have haemochromatosis. Family checks frequently lead to the detection of haemochromatosis before organ damage has occurred. That is important.

It is important we are having this debate. Early diagnosis will help save lives, help cut costs for the NHS and reduce unnecessary suffering for so many individuals, such as my constituent Paul, and families around the UK.

5.2 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on all the work he does through the all-party parliamentary group and on securing this debate. It is a delight to follow the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) and hear about the experiences of their constituent. It is said that the Celtic peoples have a tendency for fair skin, freckles and being ginger. I do have fair skin on the odd occasion, I do have freckles and I am ginger, although Members might not believe it without a head of hair on me.

Having a name that in the ancient is Máirtín Ó Dochartaigh-Ó hAodha—I will send Hansard the spelling—it should come as no surprise that the Celtic curse, as the hon. Member for Rugby pointed out it is commonly known, looms large in my constituency. It has one of the highest proportions of the Irish diaspora anywhere in these islands. There is also the Celtic connection, in that Dunbron was the capital of the Britons. I believe they moved to Wales around the year 600. We have a huge idea of what this means in terms of haemochromatosis. Let me be clear though, that just because someone is a Scot does not mean they are a Celt. We need to be clear on that, but the ethnic link with western Ireland—I am sometimes known as not only the Member for West Dunbartonshire, but the Member for Donegal—gives an idea of the genetic links of the condition.

I want to highlight my constituent, David McAleer, who is a well-known member of my constituency through Clydebank FC. David has given me permission to talk about him today. He wants to pay his respects to Dr Fitzsimons and his team for everything they do at the University of Glasgow. David got the condition diagnosed because his mum got diagnosed—this is not only about men—and after that, his younger brother got the diagnosis. His father on the other side of the family is a carrier, as are his two other brothers. Indeed, my own late father-in-law heard he had the condition later in his life, before he passed away. My brother-in-law went on to get tested, and he also has haemochromatosis. He lives a very lively life indeed.

It is important to state that we need some clear facts about the condition. In my constituency, on the basis of statistics and population—I am grateful to Haemochromatosis UK for the numbers—350 people would have haemochromatosis, but given the genetic make-up of my community, which is not that diverse in its Celtic make-up, I would assume that to be far higher. Early diagnosis is key in treating the condition and its long-term impact in other areas of healthcare provision, whether that is liver transplant—the costs of that vary across the UK—hip problems, bone issues or a whole range of other issues. There is a call to arms—it might not go down too well with some people—of offering automatic testing from birth to identify haemochromatosis in young people as quickly as possible, to deal with the reality of haemochromatosis and its broader impact on society across the whole UK.

It is notable that other major issues include alcohol consumption. In Scotland, we have for many years been confounded by high levels of alcohol consumption. Those are now reducing, and I congratulate the Scottish Government on pushing forward minimum pricing, but that is only part of a healthier lifestyle. We have to think about the type of food we consume, and how much of it, and, more importantly, about taking iron supplements. People should not take an iron supplement because they read in a magazine that it will help them feel better; they should go along to their doctor.

My clarion call to those watching today, especially in my constituency, is to go and talk to the medical profession about how they are feeling. They should try to get the test. It might not only save them a lot of time, but they will most probably save the NHS a lot of money and ensure that those in the medical profession in my constituency know more about the condition. I finish by congratulating the hon. Member for Rugby, the members of the Haemochromatosis UK who are here and the members of the APPG for the hard work they are doing on this issue.

5.7 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Diolch, Mr Sharma. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on securing this important debate and I pay tribute to Haemochromatosis UK for its work supporting both the sufferers of the genetic condition and the all-party parliamentary group. If I may, I particularly thank Lisa Flude, who first brought the condition to my attention and has been an invaluable source of information and advice to me in recent months.
As we have already heard this afternoon, genetic haemochromatosis is the most common genetic disorder in the UK and yet it remains largely unknown or unfamiliar. Too often it is poorly diagnosed and managed. Approximately 10% of individuals of white European descent in the UK—as my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) pointed out, this particularly affects those of Celtic descent—or some 5 million people are believed to be genetic carriers of the mutated copy of the haemochromatosis or HFE gene, as the hon. Member for Rugby mentioned. Perhaps 100,000 or 200,000 people might have two mutated copies of the HFE gene and are then at the risk of iron toxicity or overload and the subsequent diseases and conditions that can emerge from that. Yet—this is the nub of the debate in my opinion—for every patient diagnosed with the condition, between eight to 10 are left undiagnosed and unaware of the risk to their health. It is some risk, too: although genetic haemochromatosis is easy to diagnose and to treat, if left untreated it has serious consequences.

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) referred to the two recent studies led by groups from the Universities of Exeter and Connecticut. They have shown that the condition quadruples the risk of liver disease and doubles the risk of arthritis and that individuals with the condition are at higher risk of diabetes and chronic pain. In addition to those serious health complications of iron overload, individuals with genetic haemochromatosis can suffer from fatigue, muscle weakness and joint pains. Unfortunately, those symptoms are often mistaken for the signs of ageing or tiredness, but together they can still prove debilitating. Yet genetic haemochromatosis can be diagnosed and treated effectively when detected. The treatment, as we have already heard, entails venesection. I will not go into that any further, but it is a safe process that should be widely available across the UK.

Given the pervasiveness of genetic haemochromatosis and the serious impact that iron toxicity has on an individual’s health and wellbeing, the case for ensuring consistent and effective diagnosis of the condition across the UK is clear. It is not a condition for which there is no treatment or diagnosis. The problem that we face is the lack of consistency, or standardisation, as the hon. Member for Rugby put it, in the application of clinical guidelines.

A survey of health boards across the country showed that even where protocols are in place they are often non-mandatory and differ between boards. Sometimes they are discipline-specific, which can be problematic in itself when we consider that haemochromatosis is often treated by a range of specialists, including hepatologists, haematologists and gastroenterologists.

Introducing standardised guidelines, and ensuring their consistent application, has the potential to increase diagnosis rates tenfold. Early diagnosis prevents so much unnecessary pain and suffering. I hope that the Minister can explore the introduction of more standardised guidelines or patient pathways for the diagnosis of this condition, as it would vastly improve treatment and management of the condition.

If further persuasion were needed, improved diagnosis and earlier treatment of genetic haemochromatosis has the potential to save the NHS considerable resources in the long term, as other Members have mentioned. Iron overload can cause a range of cancers, heart failure, diabetes, and joint disease. Researchers have found that, for men, 1.6% of all hip replacements and 5.8% of all liver cancers occurred in those with two HFE genes. The treatment of those conditions exerts incredible pressure on both primary and hospital care, without considering the impact that multiple appointments over years by patients with non-specific chronic conditions have on primary care.

I am conscious that you want me to finish, Mr Sharma, so to conclude, addressing the current lack of national or standardised guidelines and thus improving the rate of diagnosis of genetic haemochromatosis could reduce the unnecessary suffering of thousands of individuals, while saving the NHS much-needed resources. As somebody more eloquent than I put it, it is a no-brainer.

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): I am sorry, I was conscious of the time—I want the Minister and the Opposition spokesperson to respond as well. I call Gavin Newlands.

5.12 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Sharma; it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair. I will start, as is customary, by congratulating the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on genetic haemochromatosis, not only on securing today’s important and historic debate, but on setting out in such detail the nature of the condition, its prevalence, the symptoms and the available treatments, such as they are.

The hon. Gentleman spoke of the great work of Professor Ted Fitzsimons at the University of Glasgow, and of the fact that not only do the majority of people with the condition not know they have it, but thousands of hip replacements may not have been required, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) also mentioned. I wholeheartedly endorse the three asks that the hon. Member for Rugby made of the Minister, and I look to forward to hearing her response.

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) spoke of research involving nearly 3,000 individuals and the possibility of screening for GH, as I will call it from here on in to avoid tripping over it. She concurred with the hon. Member for Rugby that, given the symptoms, without screening the condition will remain difficult to diagnose.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) spoke of his fair skin and freckles, and of being a ginger. He also spoke of the Celtic curse. I am not sure about the Celtic curse, but he is certainly known for his Celtic verse, as we heard during his contribution. He also spoke of his constituent, David McAleer, and his GH story, and of Scotland’s relationship with alcohol, and what we are doing to tackle that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion—I never pronounce his constituency correctly—spoke of how, for every person diagnosed, around eight to 10 go undiagnosed. He also mentioned the serious impact that iron toxicity has on health and wellbeing.
I, too, am a member of the all-party parliamentary group. The reason I am a member is because my dad has genetic haemochromatosis. I have not been tested myself yet, but I should, and will, endeavour to do so at some point in the near future. My dad was unaware of his condition; it turned up in a routine blood screening. He felt fine and had no symptoms that he was aware of at that point. My dad had further checks, including several ultrasounds, an endoscopy and a liver biopsy. When he was diagnosed, he did some digging around on the internet and found that he absolutely should not touch oysters. Google says lots of things, but apparently oysters could prove fatal. He told me and I had a look, and it also said that he should regulate his alcohol intake. When I pointed that out to him, he did not want to know that fact, but he was quite happy to accept the point about oysters—that is my dad for you.

My dad was not put on medication. We have already heard that the treatment is venesection. I am told that the normal ferritin level is around 50 to 60, or thereabouts, but when my dad was diagnosed his level was around 2,400, so it was quite high. He still did not have any symptoms at the time. He went on a weekly course of bloodletting for some time, and his levels are now normal. All he does now is go for a venesection every few months and watch his diet, particularly breakfast cereals, most of which are fortified with iron. Most concerning for him is the fact that he cannot eat Stornoway black pudding any more.

As we know from everyone who has spoken so far, early diagnosis is key. The Scottish National party welcomes the debate, as it offers an opportunity to raise awareness about GH and its symptoms for the first time in the history of the House of Commons. We also welcomed the “Living with the Impact of Iron Overload” report released last year.

Early diagnosis would reduce the demand on primary care services from tens of thousands of chronically affected patients, for whom the underlying cause of GH remains unidentified. Some Members have already outlined the substantial economic benefit of early diagnosis on top of the health benefits to the individual. The cost of a blood test to detect iron overload at an early stage is a few pounds at most. The cost to the NHS of a liver transplant, arising as a result of the lack of early diagnosis, could be close to £50,000.

The Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network—SIGN—collaborates with clinicians and health and social care professionals to develop evidence-based guidelines. Were SIGN to publish guidelines regarding GH, we would welcome that. Introducing guidelines would have the potential to increase diagnosis as much as tenfold.

I thank the hon. Member for Rugby again for introducing this important debate and for bringing this condition to the attention of the House. I look forward to working with him and the rest of the APPG in keeping the pressure on the Minister, the Government and the NHS.

5.18 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) for securing this important debate, and for his excellent and detailed speech, which set the scene. I congratulate him on establishing the all-party parliamentary group on genetic haemochromatosis earlier this year. I have set up a number of all-party parliamentary groups and am a big believer in them. I know how important they are in getting things one, cross-party, in this House. I am pleased that he was able to bring the condition to the House’s attention.

I thank all hon. Members who have spoken in the debate—in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) and the hon. Members for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), and for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands)—as well as my hon. Friends who made helpful interventions.

As we have heard, GH is a genetic disorder that causes the body to absorb excessive amounts of iron from the diet. Iron overload occurs in one in every 200 people and is now recognised as the most common genetic disorder. Although GH cannot be prevented, its symptoms and health implications can. When untreated, GH can cause serious health problems, including fatigue, weight loss, irregular periods, type 2 diabetes, early menopause and depression.

GH was previously thought to be a low-level health risk, but a study by the University of Exeter found that the genetic condition usually quadruples the risk of liver disease and doubles the risk of arthritis and frailty in older age groups. As hon. Members have already said, treatment of those conditions comes at a huge cost to the NHS, so it is important to ensure that symptoms are prevented by diagnosing GH early and advising on how to avoid iron overload.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): My hon. Friend must have extra-sensory perception because I was going to ask if she agreed with everybody else who stressed the importance of early diagnosis, and she just did.

Mrs Hodgson: Excellent. If something is worth saying, it is worth saying more than once.

With early diagnosis in mind, I have a number of questions for the Minister; I will rattle through them quickly. What assessment has she made of the diagnosis pathway for patients suspected of having GH? How early are patients diagnosed after presenting with symptoms, and which diagnosis route is the most successful and least painful and invasive for patients? Is that diagnosis route available across NHS trusts and clinical commissioning groups? When someone is diagnosed, is it routine for their family to be tested and treated?

GH can be aggravated by environmental and lifestyle factors, so can the Minister assure the House that patients with GH are clearly advised on how to care for themselves if they have the disorder? Are patients given direct advice on their diet and on alcohol and tobacco consumption? As we have heard, that can make the condition easier to manage, if the advice is taken on board, of course—often people do not want to hear what is good for them, myself included. Where necessary, is support available to help patients reduce their alcohol consumption and to quit smoking?

As we know, diet, alcohol and tobacco consumption have huge health implications for all society and cost the NHS millions in treatment. It is therefore crucial that public health services are available to everyone to
allow them to live healthier lives, especially patients with GH, who are more susceptible to health problems relating to the heart and liver.

I never miss an opportunity to call on the Minister once again—if she can; it might be above her pay grade—to reverse the public health budget cuts that have decimated our vital public health services. I also urge her to ensure that when the prevention Green Paper is published—I have heard rumours that it could be as early as Monday—patients with any existing conditions are also taken into consideration for prevention, so that their symptoms can be controlled, too. I look forward to her response.

5.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I know that I am pressed for time, so if I do not respond to all comments I will happily write to hon. Members. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsay) for securing this important debate on genetic haemochromatosis. I also thank his fellow members of the APPG and all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken in the debate for highlighting the disease, which affects so many of us. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) in particular, with her scientific knowledge, made a very good speech.

The Government are dedicated to improving the lives of all patients who live with rare diseases, as set out in the NHS long-term plan and the rare diseases strategy. Clearly, early diagnosis and treatment is key to prevent the development of the conditions that can arise from GH. I hope to be able to answer all the questions raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby and others.

One part of diagnosis is genetic testing. That is a more recent development in haemochromatosis and is used to determine whether a mutation in the HFE gene is present, which can lead to iron overload. In January 2019 the NHS long-term plan set out the ambition to focus targeted investment in areas of innovation, including genomics. Last year NHS England launched its genomics medicines service, making the UK the first country in the world to integrate whole genome sequencing into routine clinical care. The GMS aims to provide consistent and equitable access to cutting-edge genomic testing to England’s population.

The first national genomic test directory, which underpins this service, was published in March 2019. It specifies which genomic tests are commissioned by the NHS in England, the technology by which they are available, and the patients who will be eligible to access them. GH is not currently part of the NHS health check, but Public Health England routinely publishes open calls for proposals for new content to include in the check, which they consider in view of evidence, cost, clinical effectiveness, feasibility of implementation and health equity. On NICE guidelines, the British Society for Haematology has already published guidelines on the management of GH. They were last updated in 2018. NHS England is the body with responsibility for commissioning new clinical guidelines from NICE. If anyone considers that guidance from NICE would add value, proposals for such guidelines can be made to NHSE.

The shadow Minister made some points about the public health budget and the Green Paper, which we have often discussed. They will of course be subject to best evidence in the spending review. My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby talked about patient blood meeting ongoing national needs for donated blood, red blood types and associated blood products. NHS Blood and Transplant has been working in close partnership with Haemochromatosis UK to engage with patients with GH and to inform them that they are able to have their blood removed through blood donation. During National Blood Week in June this year, articles and social media posts were used to inform patients about the procedure for donating blood at a blood donation centre. NHSBT is continuing its work to ensure that patients are informed about the life-saving gift that they can give.

Patients who want to donate blood instead of having venesections have to meet the criteria set out by NHS Blood and Transplant for all donors, and they are advised to have iron check-ups with their consultant. Patients who want to donate blood need to call the NHS Blood and Transplant national call centre to inform it of their condition. That will allow the haemochromatosis patient to donate blood at a donation centre more frequently than the rest of the population.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members and the members of Haemochromatosis UK who have helped us to raise awareness of this condition, because there is a significant gap in our understanding. Hon. Members have rightly pointed out that this is the first time we have discussed GH in this House. I fully recognise the need to raise awareness about GH among healthcare professionals and to provide training. I reassure the House that the Government are committed to ensuring that those affected by rare diseases receive high-quality care.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered genetic haemochromatosis.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
were impressed by the generosity that we saw during our visit to east Africa. Uganda, Ethiopia and Sudan each host around 1 million refugees and asylum seekers, but we know that generosity alone is not enough. The African Union has declared this year to be the year of refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons.

Last December, the United Nations—including the United Kingdom—signed up to a new global compact for refugees, the aim of which is to improve support and share responsibility for hosting displaced people more equitably between the wealthier and poorer countries of the world. That global compact recognises that a number of countries are responsible for hosting most refugees, and that often the countries shouldering the greatest burden are those least able to afford to do so. That is certainly the case in sub-Saharan Africa.

The refugee compact is ambitious and has the potential to make a life-changing difference to millions of refugees around the world. That will require a global effort, which needs to include robust accountability and indicators of progress to ensure that those commitments are translated into practice. As a Committee, we plan to hold the Government to account for the promises they have made, but we also recognise that the UK has an important part to play in pushing for robust accountability at an international level.

Funding, sadly, is woefully insufficient. The recommendations in our report simply cannot be achieved without plugging the gaps in funding to support displaced people. Based on evidence, we identified that the begging-bowl approach to raising international funds—crisis by crisis, annually or every other year—needs to be overhauled in line with the commitments made as part of the refugee compact, recognising that countries hosting refugees are providing a public good.

We also raised concerns that any new mechanism should not encourage low or middle-income host countries to take on yet more debt. Schemes such as the World Bank’s IDA18 regional sub-window for refugees and host communities are getting money through to the countries that need it, which is welcome. However, much of that funding comes in the form of loans, rather than grants. In the context of increasing anxiety about a new African debt crisis, we question the appropriateness of an approach that makes those countries borrow to support refugees. We urge DFID to look again at how it can work with multilateral organisations such as the World Bank to reduce the financial burden that loans undoubtedly place on refugee-hosting countries.

Throughout our inquiry we sought to establish how far DFID is supporting people who have been forcibly displaced, which has not always been a straightforward task. Scrutiny of the Department’s expenditure in that area is challenging because of the way the data is held and published. It has left us unable, for example, to determine the split in spending between support for refugees on one hand, and for IDPs on the other. In the Government’s response, the Department says that its focus is “on vulnerability rather than status”, and therefore that “we cannot necessarily break down that support based on the migratory status of recipients to determine what percentage of beneficiaries are refugees, IDPs,” or “members of a host community”.

Westminster Hall  
Thursday 4 July 2019

[Mr Nigel Evans in the Chair]

**Forced Displacement in Africa**

1.30 pm  
Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op):  
I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Tenth Report of the International Development Committee, Forced displacement in Africa: Anchors not walls, HC 1433, and the Government response, HC 2357.

As ever, Mr Evans, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, not least because you serve as a distinguished member of the Select Committee on International Development. In February of this year we released our report on forced displacement, and last month the Government published their response. A year ago we invited submissions on all aspects of this broad issue, and I am grateful to everyone who gave evidence to our inquiry, both in person and in writing. I thank all members of the Select Committee for their participation.

As part of our inquiry, we visited Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia to look at first hand at the UK’s support for Governments, UN agencies and non-governmental organisations that are providing shelter and services for those forcibly displaced in east Africa. We were extremely grateful for the assistance, engagement and openness that, as ever, we encountered on that visit. We are also hugely grateful for the hard work of staff from the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office in making the visit a success, and for the broad range of interlocutors from the Governments in the three countries, the United Nations, various multilateral organisations, and of course civil society. In the context of today’s debate, I particularly thank the refugees and host community members who we met as part of those visits for their courage in sharing their stories and experiences with us.

Globally, we are in the midst of the greatest displacement crisis on record. Last month, on World Refugee Day, the latest data was published, showing that 70.8 million people around the world are displaced from their homes—more than the entire population of the United Kingdom. It is an increase of more than 2 million on the previous year, and to compare it with 10 years ago, the figure in 2009 was 43.3 million. Most of the people who are displaced remain within their own country—internally displaced persons, in the jargon. A further 29.5 million are refugees or asylum seekers—in other words, they have crossed an international border. However, we say that regardless of whether those displaced people are still in their own country or have crossed a border, they are among the most vulnerable anywhere in our world, and most at risk of being left behind as the world strives to achieve the sustainable development goals.

More than 20 million of those displaced people live in sub-Saharan Africa; by definition, in some of the poorest countries in the world. Seven of the top 10 countries of origin for refugees and three of the top 10 countries for hosting refugees are in sub-Saharan Africa, yet the African refugee crisis rarely makes the headlines, even compared with other refugee crises in recent years. We were impressed by the generosity that we saw during
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on having secured the debate. What consideration has the International Development Committee given to displaced people of Christian faith across the whole of the middle east and Africa? I am ever mindful that 1.7 million Christians were displaced in Syria, 1.3 million were displaced in Iraq, and hundreds of thousands have been displaced in Nigeria. When it comes to looking at migrants and those who have been displaced, what particular consideration did the Committee give to those of Christian faith who have been persecuted and had to leave?

Stephen Twigg: The focus of this inquiry was east Africa, because we felt that it merited specific attention. However, in the previous Parliament our first report was on the Syrian refugee crisis, and one of the things that we highlighted was that Christians, and indeed some other minorities, faced particular challenges in the context of that crisis. The hon. Gentleman mentioned Nigeria; I will say something about north-east Nigeria in a moment, but he is absolutely right to say that Christians and a number of other minorities face particular challenges when it comes to displacement. It is very important that that is addressed, and I hope the Minister will feel able to respond to the important point that the hon. Gentleman has made.

I get it when DFID says it is determined that support should be based on vulnerability, but we need to be able to assess whether the funding being allocated is enough, particularly to reach the most marginalised internally displaced people. There are around 13 million such people, often living on the fringes of society in some of Africa’s poorest, often conflict-afflicted countries, and the number is going up. In 2017 the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre recorded more than 8 million new displacements, with more than half of all new conflict displacement taking place in the region, including more than 2.2 million in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and almost 2 million in South Sudan. I have privately expressed real concern to the Minister—I put it on record today—about reports of what is happening now in north-east Nigeria. More than 825,000 people there are described as being beyond the reach of aid.

IDPs are some of the most vulnerable people in the world, yet they remain largely forgotten in these debates; they do not have the same protections under international law as refugees and they were not included in the refugee compact. Providing support to IDPs, whose care remains the responsibility of their own Governments, is a complex policy challenge. Christian Aid told us that “75% of IDPs do not live in camps, yet camps receive the majority of funding for IDPs.”

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): As my hon. Friend knows, I am very much involved with Sudan. We visited northern Darfur last year. One of the problems with the camps in such places is that they have become permanent settlements. That has resulted in conflict with the indigenous population, who do not want a camp on the edge of their town. There is a belief that these people will one day return, but in Darfur they are never going to return, given all the problems in Sudan at the moment. Does he agree that we need to look at the impact of forced urbanisation, because that will be a growing problem?

Stephen Twigg: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point. I will say something about Sudan a little later in my speech, but he is absolutely right to raise the specific context of Darfur. Similar challenges exist. I will say a bit more in a moment about some of the progressive policies that a number of African Governments, including the Ugandan Government, have pursued. Those tensions often do exist, and it is incredibly important that policies pursued support the host communities and the displaced communities. We have a good example of that with the approach taken in Jordan, but we need to learn lessons from that for other parts of the world, too.

DFID needs to support Governments in Africa to uphold the principles of the Kampala convention, which contains legal protections for IDPs, while encouraging other countries that have not yet signed up to do so. I will say something about the particular vulnerabilities of women and girls who are refugees or internally displaced. Protection is a critical part of our response to forced displacement. It is important that DFID ensures that the highest standards are applied to safeguarding refugees through its own work and, critically, that of its partners, as well as ensuring that the right mechanisms are in place to support anyone who experiences or feels threatened by sexual abuse and exploitation. As we know, tragically that sometimes includes aid and health workers.

Putting women at the forefront of refugee responses is one way we feel as a Committee that protection could be improved. We took powerful evidence that suggested giving women a much more senior and prominent role in refugee response and humanitarian support for refugees could make a real difference in safeguarding some of the most vulnerable people.

We were alarmed by reports of cases of corruption, mismanagement and other harmful conduct at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. That came to light during this inquiry and during our previous inquiry into sexual exploitation and abuse. Where such cases arise, the UN must act urgently to put safeguards in place while it investigates to prevent disruption to life-saving operations. DFID, in turn, has a responsibility to react swiftly and proportionately to protect UK aid and, above all, to limit the impact on refugees who rely on the UN’s services.

Despite those extremely serious cases, we found that overall UNHCR does an extraordinary job under incredibly difficult circumstances as the sole agency mandated to protect refugees around the world. Given that its work remains more important than ever, and its challenges greater than ever, its efforts to protect some of the most vulnerable people in the world need to be supported by the UK. We received good evidence that DFID is one of the most generous donors in the world in responding to emergency situations, and UNHCR thanked DFID for its support.

DFID is also a leader in supporting refugee education, and I welcome the commitment to prioritise the education of children in crises in the refreshed DFID education policy paper last year. Only half of refugees in low-income countries get even basic access to primary education, compared with a global figure of 90%. Since it was established in 2016, the Education Cannot Wait fund has helped provide education to hundreds of thousands of children and young people. The United Kingdom has been a strong supporter of Education Cannot Wait, and I warmly welcome the Minister’s recent commitment
that we will increase our commitment to the fund in its forthcoming replenishment. She will not be surprised that I take another opportunity to urge the Government to make that pledge as soon as possible and to put a higher figure on their commitment. The earlier we make a pledge, as we have demonstrated this week with the Global Fund, the more likely it is that other donors will follow. That will ensure that this excellent fund can play its part to support education in emergencies.

Evidence to our inquiry showed the need for refugees to be integrated wherever possible into national education systems in host countries. I am pleased that the Department agreed with the recommendation that it should work with host Governments and communities wherever possible to facilitate that integration. I hope the Minister can say a bit more about how the Department will provide the technical and financial support needed to achieve that. Throughout our inquiry, we heard about the importance of enabling refugees to be self-reliant, including giving them the right to work and to move freely. Professor Alexander Betts told us:

“If refugees can be self-reliant and achieve autonomy it is better for them, their communities, the host societies, and indeed donor assistance.”

For obvious reasons, I realise that granting refugees unfettered rights to work is challenging for Governments in many parts of the world, but we were impressed by some of the progress we saw. Uganda has arguably the most progressive policy in the region and possibly the world in that regard. Since 2006, refugees living in Uganda have had freedom of movement, subject to some limited restrictions; employment rights; and equal access to services such as health and education. Refugees are granted a plot of land to cultivate. During our visit, Committee members saw at first hand the care and attention that refugees give to those plots of land.

This January, the Parliament of Ethiopia revised its existing refugee laws, making it easier for refugees to obtain work permits, live outside camps and access education. Central to that is the Ethiopian jobs compact, which seeks to create at least 100,000 jobs, including at least 30,000 for refugees. DFID has rightly invested heavily in the jobs compact. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact has been very positive in its assessment of the compact. If we want countries such as Uganda and Ethiopia to continue with policies that are progressive and, let us face it, potentially unpopular in their own countries, we must equip them with the resources and support they deserve.

The UK Government, however, need to look at what example this country is setting through our treatment of refugees and asylum seekers here. Evidence to our inquiry emphasised the importance of donors leading by example, including by allowing asylum seekers in the UK the right to work. We concluded that DFID cannot ask the poorest countries in the world to grant refugees the right to work while the UK Government significantly limits those rights here in our own country. It is extremely disappointing that the Government rejected our recommendation, and I urge them to reassess that policy. Little could carry more weight with our partner Governments in Africa than the UK practising what it preaches.

For the many refugees who cannot return home, integration into their country of asylum is often the most desirable means of rebuilding their lives. That comes at a big financial, logistical and political cost for host countries. Our ability to advocate, as we do, for refugee integration in Africa is hampered by the United Kingdom’s limited commitment to integrate refugees here in the UK through resettlement and asylum.

Lucy Hovil, chair of the International Refugee Rights Initiative, gave evidence to us. She said:

“At the end of the day, this is about political will. Who has the leverage to persuade Governments that are hosting enormous numbers of refugees to begin to offer local integration, without a similar level of commitment?”

Resettlement is a really important option for refugees who cannot return home. Yet at a time when more resettlement places are needed than ever, the number available is sharply in decline, largely because of the policies of the Trump Administration in the United States.

In 2017, the last year of figures, the UNHCR was able to submit only 75,000 refugees for resettlement—a 54% drop from the previous year. In this country, we have policies to be proud of in our resettlement of some of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees. However, we have been much less open to vulnerable refugees from sub-Saharan Africa, taking in just 448 in 2017-18. Providing those limited resettlement opportunities is a crucial part of the responsibility principle, which is at the heart of the refugee compact.

The UNHCR has said that it would like the UK to increase our total resettlement numbers to 10,000 places a year—almost double the current number. It is not a large number, particularly in contrast to the numbers taken by some of the poorest countries in the world. The Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees, George Okoth-Obbo, told us in evidence that that would both “help people and have an incredible demonstration effect.”

He said:

“The word I would use for that would be ‘tremendous’.”

It would show those countries hosting the lion’s share of refugees that we in the UK are willing to shoulder some of that burden and provide people with alternative opportunities to rebuild their lives in the UK.

Jim Shannon: I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman. Does he recognise that within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland there are many communities who wish to help, including faith groups, Church groups and community groups? Such organisations could help the Government to do that.

Stephen Twigg: The hon. Gentleman is right. It is for the Government to decide on the numbers, but there is an enthusiasm and commitment in constituencies including his and mine and, I am sure, those of Members across the House, among faith communities, other communities and local authorities. I know that because when Syrian refugees came to Liverpool there was real enthusiasm and positivity. Although 10,000 would be a really significant contribution, it is not a large number of people; it is 30 refugees for each constituency. That is not a large number, and the hon. Gentleman is right to make the point that there would be a moral purpose to which faith communities and others would absolutely sign up.

The Committee, which is cross-party, endorsed the UNHCR’s call to increase resettlement places to 10,000, and we added the rider that we felt that at least a
quarter of those places should be for refugees from sub-Saharan Africa. We were disappointed but, if I am honest, not surprised that the Home Office, and the Government collectively, rejected that recommendation.

The progress that the UK has made with the Syrian vulnerable persons and vulnerable children resettlement schemes shows the capacity to scale up resettlement schemes quickly if the political will is there. Given the severity and urgency of the refugee crisis in Africa, a similar response is required. I hope that the Government will reconsider our recommendation.

I will finish by talking about some broader issues. We were very worried that the Government’s approach to forced displacement is too influenced by the desire to control the number of people coming to Europe. Migration is, perfectly understandably, central to the UK’s strategies on aid and on national security and defence. Both those strategies focus heavily on refugees and migrants travelling to Europe and the implications of that for the UK.

We received evidence expressing concern that the focus on Europe risked detracting from tackling the root causes of displacement—hence “Anchors not walls”.

Action Aid said:

“The emphasis on preventing the movement of refugees towards Europe is short-sighted, unlikely to address the symptoms of deep-rooted power imbalances, structural inequalities or underlying drivers of conflict and climate change”.

There is real concern, for example, about the European Union emergency trust fund for Africa, to which the UK contributes both directly and through our contributions to the EU budget and the European development fund. Care International told us:

“EU Trust Funds...were not established with a vision to reduce poverty or meet humanitarian needs or human rights, but to stem migration flows to the EU.”

Programmes funded by UK aid should surely be driven first and foremost by the objective of protecting people on the ground, many of whom are the most vulnerable people in the world. That should surely be reflected in all our work in this area.

We also heard widespread unease about the human rights implications of some of the UK Government’s work on irregular migration, particularly with regard to Libya and the Khartoum process. The 2017 report of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact cited significant concerns about the potential for the UK’s support to the Libyan coastguard to breach the “do no harm” principle. There are serious concerns that the programmes are returning vulnerable migrants and refugees to Libyan detention centres, where Amnesty International have told us that migrants and refugees are “routinely exposed to torture, extortion and rape.”

ICAI’s follow-up report said that “DFID has taken action to strengthen analysis and risk management”, but noted that “the cross-government Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) has more to do in this area.”

The UK’s involvement remains a cause for apprehension. As a Committee, we are very worried that policies pursued by some parts of the UK Government risk conflicting with others. There is a pressing need for a more joined-up approach to migration across Government.

We concluded that the Government need to take a comprehensive look at all their policies on migration and displacement. We called for a national strategy to bring much-needed clarity and transparency, to consolidate the work that DFID is doing with that of other Government Departments to identify and resolve areas of conflict, facilitate better cross-Government working and create a coherent narrative that should reflect the UK’s position as a progressive voice in the debate on displacement and migration.

Dr Drew: By chance we visited the Khartoum process in Khartoum, and we were struck that it was nothing to do with Sudan, because they were mainly Ethiopians and Eritreans. I was not sure on what basis those people would be persuaded to go back. It would be useful to know the current status of the Khartoum process, given the state Khartoum is in. Is it an extant programme, or has it stopped?

Stephen Twigg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I think the answer is that it is still an ongoing process, but perhaps the Minister can give us a definitive response.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): All our migration programmes in Sudan have been suspended in the light of the current political and security situation. We are working with partners including the EU to ensure that all programmes in which the UK has a stake are also suspended. The regional operational centre in Khartoum has been temporarily relocated to Nairobi.

Stephen Twigg: I thank the Minister.

I am conscious of time, so I will draw my remarks to a close. We were disappointed that the Government rejected the recommendation for a coherent cross-Government national UK strategy on displacement and migration. I welcome the fact that the Department has responded positively and has agreed in whole or in part with 31 of the 34 recommendations that directly apply to it, but unless the Government as a whole address the inconsistencies in the policies of different Departments, we are at risk of failing some of the most vulnerable people in the world. It is time for the Government as a whole to practise here in the UK what we preach on the global stage.

2 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Evans.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) for securing this timely debate and for all the work that he and the International Development Committee do to scrutinise the work of the Department. The Committee’s extremely important report, “Anchors not Walls”, shines a light on the lives of some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in the world. I was pleased to see the focus on education, which not only is a right but can help to protect girls from forms of exploitation such as trafficking and child marriage—highly pertinent threats for teenage girls in the region.

Like many hon. Members, I remain distraught by the number of people forcibly displaced. One person or family displaced is tragic, but 20 million is horrendous
and intolerable. I feel passionately about the subject as a British-born Nigerian and as a representative of Edmonton, which is a special, vibrant and multicultural place. Many of my constituents come from countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Jamaica, Somalia, Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Turkey, Yemen, Uganda or Cyprus—to name just a few. I have not named them all; please do not be offended. Most have ties to countries affected by high levels of displacement.

There are more than 1 million refugees in Uganda, in one of the most progressive arrangements on the planet. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, said:

“Given the record numbers of people needing safety from war, conflict and persecution and the lack of political solutions to these situations, we urgently need countries to come forward and resettle more refugees”.

CARE International’s report, “Suffering in Silence”, profiled 10 of the most under-reported crises around the world, which are due to climate change, conflict and war. They are in North Korea, Eritrea, Burundi, Sudan, DRC, Mali, Vietnam, the Lake Chad basin, the Central African Republic and Peru. They have gone on for far too long and it is the poorest and most marginalised civilians who pay the price.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Nigeria, I strongly support the Committee’s report, particularly its assessment that humanitarian crises in Africa are often overlooked. I want to highlight in particular the hidden crisis unfolding in the Lake Chad basin. One of the most severe humanitarian emergencies in the world, it has displaced more than 2.2 million people, half of whom are children. More than 10.8 million people across Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger need humanitarian assistance. At times, the crisis seems intractable.

The scourge of violence in Nigeria is under-reported and, sadly, not acted on earnestly by the Federal Government of Nigeria. The crisis in the Lake Chad basin is in its 10th year. Escalating violence, including deliberate targeted attacks on civilians, has characterised the conflict, hindered humanitarian access and rendered any long-term development impossible. Long years of conflict with Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa have perpetuated the humanitarian crisis throughout the four countries of the Lake Chad basin, but the roots of the crisis are long-standing. It is the product of widespread inequality, political marginalisation and competition for scarce resources, particularly water, and other developmental challenges, which have contributed to its severity and complexity.

Boko Haram’s violent conflict, which broke out 10 years ago in north-east Nigeria, has involved a horrific campaign of attacks on civilians and mass abductions—we all remember the Chibok girls. All too often, the words of adolescent girls in fragile and conflict-affected areas go unheard because, unfortunately, politicians and policy makers fail to listen to them. Today, I want to share the words of Kwaney, a 16-year-old girl living in the Lake Chad basin. She said:

“I could not continue my education because girls were being kidnapped from my school. Everyone wanted me to get married but I refused because I wanted to go to school. I had good grades, friends and was happy at school before the crisis. I always thought education would give me a better life. But one night, everything changed. I lost my parents, uncles and siblings in the crisis. I constantly read my old books so that I don’t forget. I can’t go to school when I can barely afford to eat.”

Kwaney’s words are truly harrowing, but that is the situation not just for one girl or for a handful of girls; right now, around the world, 39 million girls like Kwaney have had their education disrupted as a direct result of a humanitarian crisis.

Equally worrying, recent Plan International UK research found that 13 million girls are completely out of school because of conflict, disaster and long-term displacement. The region around the Lake Chad basin is the worst place on earth to be a girl seeking 12 years of quality education. A girl in Niger is 20 times more likely to be a teenage mother than to finish secondary school. The killings and destruction have spread into four countries—Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. Increasingly, host communities take in as many displaced civilians as possible, but most host families are poor and fear the repercussions of the now-developed violent confrontation engaged in by Boko Haram and the region’s security forces.

In February 2017, the countries of the Lake Chad region—Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria—donor governments such as Norway, Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom, and international organisations gathered for the Oslo humanitarian conference on Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, at which $672 million in financial support was pledged for 2017 and beyond. The humanitarian response in the Lake Chad region was scaled up significantly as a result: more than 6 million people were reached with assistance in 2017 and a famine was averted in north-east Nigeria.

In September 2018, a high-level conference on the region was held in Germany, which built on the achievements, partnerships and commitments of the Oslo conference. It focused on thematic pillars: humanitarian assistance and protection, crisis prevention and stabilisation, and building resilience for sustainable development. I ask the Minister to explain how the Department plans to mobilise resources to meet the immediate and longer-term needs of those affected by the crisis, particularly the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, in 2018, 541,000 new displacements were recorded in Nigeria; 200,000 of them occurred in the middle-belt region and the rest were due to Boko Haram. Almost one in three women report having experienced sexual violence committed by members of Boko Haram, the security forces or the armed forces during the conflict. Violence against men and boys is also prevalent, with many killed, detained or recruited, or otherwise unaccounted for.

The Nigerian Government urgently need to propose action to ensure that security operations identify better ways of distinguishing between combatants and civilians. They must also investigate and challenge abuses and exploitation by authorities, and take concrete steps to ensure that fundamental human rights are respected. When there is evidence that human rights have been violated, those cases must be sent to the International Criminal Court. I ask the Minister, what assistance is the UK offering the Nigerian Government via non-governmental organisations to ensure that all evidence is being securely collated and documented?

In February, the African Union declared 2019 the year of refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons, so this is the year for us to be proactive, and I urge all UK parliamentarians to act. Will the Minister explain what DFID’s long-term plan is for managing migration and forced displacement sustainably and fairly...
through the global compact for migration and the global compact for refugees? The UK’s humanitarian work cannot and must not depend only on the ebb and flow of pity and shock. Today, more than ever before, we need international solidarity and respect for international laws and norms. We already have the universal declaration of human rights, which is more than 70 years old, the 1951 refugee convention, and the sustainable development goals.

I ask the Minister to use this opportunity to say that the UK will put refugees at the heart of its foreign policy and uphold human rights around the world. It is imperative that the UK reinforces a collective, multifaceted approach to addressing the crisis and its root causes. I end with the words of Kofi Annan:

“Internal displacement is the great tragedy of our time. The internally displaced people are among the most vulnerable of the human family.”

2.12 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you for chairing this debate, Mr Evans. I congratulate all those who created this report: the Select Committee members, the staff team, and all those who contributed evidence and shared their experience. I think it is an excellent report that is full of detail and has great recommendations. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) made an excellent opening speech, which really did the report justice.

The global refugee compact states:

“Countries that receive and host refugees, often for extended periods, make an immense contribution from their own limited resources to the collective good, and indeed to the cause of humanity.”

The SNP will continue to be an advocate for the most vulnerable. We call on the UK Government to do more. The UK Government have been slow in filling the 480 places they promised for unaccompanied children; only 220 of those places have been filled so far, which means there are 260 unaccompanied children alone out there who could be helped today by the UK Government. It is imperative that they fulfil their commitment—I would prefer it to be more—and ensure that those 260 children are helped.

Education is a long-term challenge, and is easily disrupted by outside events. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) recently led a debate in this Chamber on education for the most vulnerable and marginalised people. The “Send my friend to school” campaign brings to the ears of children in these nations and the SNP will continue to do all we can to empower women unless we educate them and ensure that they have access to appropriate healthcare and women’s empowerment. I believe that we will not empower women unless we educate them and ensure that they have access to appropriate healthcare and contraceptive choices, so that they can make the choice about what they do with their bodies. Where they desire it, they can choose not to have children and so can escape that poverty trap. That is incredibly important. That is even more vital in post-conflict zones, where there are often a huge number of internally displaced people, and access to medical facilities can be incredibly patchy. Contraception is perhaps not the first thing that people think of when providing medical aid, but it is greatly important for the empowerment and support of women.

I want to flag up an issue that I discovered in a UN Government Home Office paper on trafficked women from Nigeria. It says:

“Trafficked women who return from Europe, wealthy from prostitution”—

wealthy from prostitution!—

“enjoy high social-economic status and in general are not subject to negative social attitudes on return.”

I raised that issue a couple of weeks ago with a Home Office Minister in the Chamber, and the document is still online and has not been changed. I am hugely concerned about that use of language. The hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) also mentioned it in the Chamber this week. It needs to be changed, because the UK Government should not have that view of women who have been trafficked and used in prostitution.

On the SNP’s support for women, the UN special envoy to Syria invited our First Minister to provide support and training to female peacemakers in negotiation and communication skills. The Scottish Government and the SNP will continue to do all we can to empower women and help them to rebuild their communities.

The report says that the UK must practise what it preaches. We agree that the UK should commit to taking 10,000 people per year after 2020. That represents a meaningful but, we believe, realistic increase over the current commitment. We are playing our part in Scotland—these are not hollow words—and we commit...
2.19 pm

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Evans. Let me start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) not only for securing the debate, but for the hard work that he did, along with his staff and colleagues on the International Development Committee—let me curry some early favour by acknowledging that that includes you, Mr Evans—to produce this report on forced displacement in Africa and to hold the Government to account on one of the most important crises of our time.

I want to reflect on a few things that my hon. Friend said, because they bear repeating. He mentioned that forced displacement affects a wide range of people—the internally displaced, people in camps and people outside the country but not in camps—but the one thing they have in common is that they are vulnerable. In our drive, as he characterised it, to achieve the sustainable development goals, we will leave those people behind if we do not act to support them and help them rebuild their lives. We must acknowledge every time we have this conversation that displacement happens into the poorest countries. My hon. Friend made the point well that those countries provide an exceptional public good, but those who shoulder the greatest burden are those who are the least able to do so.

I will return to the “begging bowl” approach, but while I am reflecting on what my hon. Friend said, let me mention that I was visited yesterday by a senior colleague in a major aid organisation for a private briefing on Yemen. We talked about Yemen but, as often happens nowadays, we got on to the climate emergency. He rightly said that the climate emergency has already reached the countries we are talking about—certainly those with the very least—so the idea that we have to wait for something to happen and then run around desperately trying to get the funding to tackle it is a nonsense. Regrettably—we really should regret and reflect on this—this is the new normal, so there is no need to wait for it to happen before we act.

Everyone who spoke mentioned the role of women. My colleagues in the shadow international development team, the Leader of the Opposition and I received a delegation of Syrian women politicians, who told us about their experiences. They said in particular that they felt constantly, from the beginning to where they are today, that their roles were gendered for them. In conflict, on the road to reconstruction and everywhere in the middle, women’s roles are gendered for them: they must be peacemakers and care givers, but not leaders. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby made a very strong case for the benefit we would get from female leadership in such situations. I hope the Minister heard that and reflects on it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) started her speech by referring to education. When we think about humanitarian crises and displacement, we think about meeting immediate needs—ensuring that people have shelter and that their healthcare and nutrition needs are met—but education is an exceptional form of immunisation in itself. That is why we want everyone in our communities to have access to it. That was really brought to life by my hon. Friend. Friend’s example from Niger: a girl is 20 times more likely to be a teenage mother than to finish school. That really is quite something.

My hon. Friend also made a really important point about the 10 years of experience in the Lake Chad basin, where 2.2 million people have been displaced, half of them children. Incidents such as the Boko Haram abduction become massive global stories but then go away. Although Kwanye was not an abductee, her story—one of lost education and lost opportunities—is just as stark and important. I do not think I can put it better than my hon. Friend did when she said that these people need solidarity, not pity and shock. That is really important as we reflect on how we engage on an ongoing basis. Our pity and shock can be useful at times, but an ongoing, consistent, bankable, reliable sense of solidarity would be a much stronger approach.

The numbers on forced displacement are staggering. Last year, a person was displaced every two seconds, and 68.5 million people have been forced to flee their homes: for every one of us living in our beautiful country, there is a person on the move, without a home of their own. We know that those millions of people fleeing conflict face poverty, persecution and other forms of insecurity. They face incredibly perilous journeys: they can be exploited, raped or attacked on the way, just seeking safety. The majority of them are prevented from getting to a safe point where they can start a new life. Instead, they tend to get stuck in so-called gateway countries such as Libya, where they are locked up and blocked from reaching their safe final destination.

Many of the people who are trapped in a third country, unable to return home or to start a new life somewhere new, face a bleak future. Last week—this sort of thing brings it home—I met campaigners from Western Sahara, who talked about the 50,000 Sahrawi people who fled Moroccan forces in 1975. The majority ended up in refugee camps in the Tindouf province of Algeria. There are now 90,000 people in those camps, many of whom are the original 50,000. That was 45 years ago. I have been walking this planet for 35 years, so they have been there, stuck in stasis, for 10 years longer than I have been around. Time has moved on for the rest of the world—imagine the changes between 1975 and 2019.
the world is a completely different place—but not for them. For them, time has stood still. They have spent whole lifetimes without enough food, water, healthcare, housing or education—the things we build our lives on.

As we know, that experience is not restricted to Western Sahara. There are far too many displaced people living a life in limbo in camps across Africa—in Kenya, Uganda, Libya and Tanzania—and beyond, in Jordan, Bangladesh and Lebanon. If we do not act, that will be the future: decades-long stays in camps for millions of people on the move. That is a real stain on our conscience.

The report does so much to keep the light shining on this issue. I am grateful that the Government agreed with many of the Committee’s recommendations—that really ought to be reflected in this discussion—but I want to draw attention to three points. First, no one can do this alone. The global compact on refugees was a huge step towards international co-operation, but if Governments on the frontline of the displacement crisis are to meet their obligations, they need the money to do it.

That brings me back to what the Committee called the “begging bowl” approach, in which Governments have to ask for more every time to help them meet a new challenge. Will the Minister consider again the Committee’s recommendation to set up, with our international partners, new grants and funding mechanisms that would enable long-term, sustainable financing of international responses—again, solidarity rather than shock? Can she tell us any more about how the Government intend to approach the global refugee forum in December and the mooted UN high-level panel on internal displacement to keep up the momentum towards international solutions?

Secondly, DFID can and ought to keep raising the technical standards on international refugee responses. The UK has real influence in the UNHCR, which is a good thing, and we should continue to drive organisational reform there. Refugees must be able to get better information about what is happening in the homes they fled, especially in terms of safety, before they decide whether to go back. When voluntary return is not possible, refugees ought to be offered routes to integrate locally rather than staying indefinitely detained and excluded. I hope the Minister will commit to learning quickly some of the lessons—good and bad—from Jordan, Ethiopia and Bangladesh on voluntary returns and local integration, and to doing more in those areas.

Thirdly, I want to touch on what my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby and the Committee characterised as the “practise what we preach” approach, which is about honouring our own obligations here in the UK. The Committee made clear, reasonable and powerful recommendations, for which we heard support in the debate, in particular about easing the restrictions on asylum seekers’ right to work in the UK. Prior to taking up this role, I was on the Select Committee on Home Affairs, and that is something we recommended. We should also increase resettlement numbers to 10,000 annually, as recommended by the UNHCR, with a quarter of those places reserved for refugees from sub-Saharan Africa; and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton mentioned, put in place a coherent cross-Government strategy.

There is pressure on global north democracies to try to keep the migration crisis away—out of sight and out of mind—because it is politically difficult. It was politically difficult for generations of colleagues before us. I hope that perhaps in my generation we might get towards having a proper, sensible and honest conversation with our voters about it.

The sticking-plaster approaches of trying to incentivise potential migrants to stay at home or funding coastguards to shut down the Mediterranean will not work. There are those who would push us towards hoping that other countries will do it, without us doing so ourselves, but that will not work. When other countries pander to the far right, we see what that means: people drowning in the Mediterranean; the captain of Sea-Watch 3, Carola Rackete, arrested in Lampedusa because her crew put saving lives before politics; choosing to build walls and put children in cages; and allowing others to drown in the Rio Grande.

We would all reflect on those things and say, “Never here,” but we must understand that no one gets there in one leap. It starts with “Go home” immigration vans, with locking up people who have done nothing but be migrants to this country, and with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender migrants being sent home to face persecution. If we go on that journey, we lose our claim to be part of the solution and become part of the problem. That is what the Government and Parliament must consider: what side of history will we be on? Will we be part of the solution, or will we contribute to the problem?

I look forward to the Minister’s response. I again thank hon. Members for their contributions, and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby for securing the debate.

2.31 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, particularly as you are a member of the International Development Committee. I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, (Stephen Twigg) on securing the debate and thank his Committee, through him, for having written a very good report on an issue that is too often overlooked. The report has shone a strong spotlight on it. The debate allowed us to raise some issues considered in the report and to cover the Government’s response. I was glad that we were able to fully accept 22 of the report’s 34 recommendations and partially accept a further nine. In fact, we disagreed with only three, two of which were for the Home Office, while one was a cross-Government matter. I will try to respond to the range of points made in this wide-ranging debate.

The Government fully recognise the scale of the issue, and I hope in my remarks to outline what we are doing not only in our country but, in terms of my responsibilities, across Africa. As I said when I gave evidence to the Committee, we take a needs-based approach to humanitarian issues, so the difference between refugees and internally displaced people is not one that we formally recognise. Legally, of course, there is a difference when we are evaluating the need, so we stand ready to help both internally displaced people and refugees, as I hope I made clear to the Committee.

The point about sexual exploitation was well made. I reassure hon. Members, as I did earlier this week, that in the light of the allegations made in The Times last
week, we have checked and ensured that that was not a DFID-funded programme. However, as that example highlights, there can be no let-up in our work to ensure that the highest standards are maintained by the industry and that we get commitments from all our suppliers.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby keeps tempting me on Education Cannot Wait. I am particularly tempted because I do not know whether I will be able to go to the UN General Assembly later this year—I hope I will. He knows that I share the enthusiasm of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for the “Send my friend to school” campaign, which connects young people with the right of young people all around the world to go to school. No one could be more committed than I am to the cause of education in emergencies, education for girls and the power of education to make the world a better place in the 21st century. We have announced that we will continue to be one of the leading donors to Education Cannot Wait. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby will know, the amount is not yet finalised or announced.

The hon. Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) also raised the importance of education and girls’ education. Not everyone knows that Boko Haram basically translates to “Western education is evil”, which shows how it is feared and how powerful education is for the cultural reasons that she outlined, as well as for the economic impact it can have. Every year someone spends in school adds 10% to their lifetime earnings.

I assure the hon. Lady that we are doing everything we can to encourage the newly re-elected Nigerian Government to tackle the challenges in north-east Nigeria. It was tempting for them to say in the run-up to the election, “Look, we’ve solved the problem. Everything’s okay.” We all recognise that it is not okay. Our North East Nigeria to Transition to Development programme is our top programme in Nigeria and is worth £85.9 million. I assure her that the problems around the Lake Chad basin are at the forefront of our agenda.

The hon. Lady will know that near Rann, many refugees were chased over the border into northern Cameroon and that there was a process of refoulement to take them back to Nigeria. We were able to intervene with the Cameroonian Government to say, “That is not how you treat refugees.”

That brings me to how refugees are treated. Everyone cited the great example of Uganda, which is exemplary. I want to say for the record, though, that in the UK refugees can work from day one. It is important to make the distinction, however, between refugees and those who seek asylum, which is a route often used by people who come as economic migrants. I hope we can all agree that irregular migration, where people risk their lives and those of their families crossing the Mediterranean, doing incredibly dangerous things and putting themselves in the hands of people smugglers, is not something that we can encourage or incentivise. Global compacts are valuable in outlining our desire to regularise such paths, and asylum seeking is clearly an area where there can be and has been abuse. That is why we are careful that, only once 12 months of delay has occurred—through no fault of the person claiming asylum—can they then work in shortage occupations. The Home Secretary has committed to keep that area under review, but I want to make that distinction because I do not think the general public always understand it.

I hope the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby saw the announcement we made on World Refugee day about our approach post 2020, when we will merge all schemes into a single scheme, which will enable us in the first year to offer 5,000 places to refugees. He will be aware that that number is an increase and that the numbers of people coming in under the schemes are ahead of the commitments we have made. I will give Members an update.

In terms of the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, the most recent data shows that, against our commitment of 20,000 by 2020, we will be at nearly 16,000 by the end of the first quarter. The gateway protection scheme is for 750 people a year. As of March, 9,427 people have come under that scheme, including 762 this year. The mandate scheme has no specific annual commitment, but as of March 2019, 423 people had been resettled. Some 1,410 have been resettled under the vulnerable children’s settlement scheme, against a commitment of up to 3,000 by 2020, including 687 in the year to March 2019. In total that is 23,000, plus about 750 per financial year. It is important to note that we very much welcome community sponsorship schemes, and the numbers for those can be counted in addition.

I mentioned the latest on Sudan in my earlier intervention, and it was important to get that on the record. Libya was also raised.

Stephen Twigg: I welcome what has been said about resettlement. Can I ask her, as the Minister for Africa, to liaise between the Foreign Office and the Home Office to look at the options for refugees from sub-Saharan Africa, particularly those with vulnerabilities? One of the strengths of the Syrian scheme was that it recognised that there are certain minorities, for example disabled people, who particularly benefit from the chance to come here. Could we look at something similar for sub-Saharan Africa?

Harrriet Baldwin: I know that the hon. Gentleman’s recommendation was for a specific quota. From 2020 onwards, rather than focusing on a particular country, that is widened to one global scheme, without specific target numbers for particular areas. That widens things geographically and addresses some of what he is looking for.

On Libya, at the United Nations Security Council yesterday, we tried to get condemnation for the attack on the detention centre, as Members will have seen. I want to say for the record that neither the UK Government nor the European Union fund Libyan detention centres—there is sometimes the allegation that we do. We fund humanitarian programmes, and with humanitarian programmes, the principle of doing no harm is observed. I want to reassure Members that we properly apply risk assessment mitigation and monitoring to all the programming in Libya.

On the debt versus grant point, the vast majority of what we do is through grants, so we do a lot of grant funding. The World Bank programme is additional. It is debt-financing and it is extremely concessional, but it is a welcome additional layer of support, coming on top of the grant funding that we already do.

I pay tribute to the wonderful Scotland-Malawi partnership. It was great to hear about the specific work to help girls to stay in school. When I was in Malawi, I
met some of the young women who walk miles every day to go to school, and miles again at the end of the day, who were thoroughly enjoying being able to stay in school for so much longer. I will take back the point that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North raised about the wording on women returning “wealthy from prostitution” on Government websites. I will look into that and see if we can get it erased.

The hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) spoke of how climate change is exacerbating the situation. It is doing so in the Lake Chad basin, which has been dramatically reduced. It is clearly exacerbating the movement between herders and pastoralists in central Nigeria, which has been an area of terrible conflict, and other things across the whole of the Sahel—Darfur was also mentioned. That is why we are stepping up what we are doing not only on climate, but also in the Sahel. There is more that we can do on the use of things we have invented, such as more drought-resistant millet, and there are different interventions with trees that can make a difference. There is always scope for us to scale up what we are doing to tackle these issues.

The Grand Bargain was mentioned. We have committed to do more through medium-term funding and funding that is not earmarked for specific projects, and that is meeting our side of the Grand Bargain.

I cannot say who is going to go in December, but there will be good UK representation. I have also noted down voluntary returns—the UK position will always be that all returns for refugees should be voluntary.

I think I have touched on all the recommendations and on the cases where we did not agree with the recommendations. I hope I have clarified the position on refugees having immediate access to the labour market in the UK. I hope I have highlighted the offer that we have made for the post-2020 refugee resettlement offer, which is an increase, and I hope that we can all agree, as politicians, that this is about balance. Were we to do what the German Chancellor did a few years ago, I think that might very well undermine the welcome that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said about “Send my friend”, a brilliant campaign that has brought the issue of access to education to the fore of debate in this place, as well as among the wider public.

On resettlement, I need to correct my earlier mental arithmetic. I said that 10,000 divided by 650 was 30, but of course it is not; it is 15—I doubled the figure. So it would only be 15 refugees per constituency, not 30. I welcome what the Minister said. The announcement on World Refugee Day came after the publication of our report. That announcement is progress. I particularly welcome what she said in response to my intervention, because it gives some hope that refugees from sub-Saharan Africa might get a larger proportion of those resettlement places in future. I still encourage us to be a bit more generous and get to the 10,000 figure that UNHCR has recommended. The Minister is right to say that it is a question of balance, but 10,000 is still a very modest number when compared with the numbers coming into countries such as Uganda and Ethiopia.

The focus of our report was east Africa, but we have had a number of contributions—not least from my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor)—on what is happening in the Lake Chad basin and north-east Nigeria. There is clearly a challenging set of issues, which I know the Minister is focused on because we have spoken about it. I hope there might be an opportunity on a future occasion, either in Westminster Hall or the main Chamber, to look in more detail at the Government’s strategy on the Sahel, the Lake Chad basin and Nigeria, because there is a huge challenge there. I was very struck by the figure—I think it is from the UN—of 825,000 people in north-east Nigeria who are beyond the reach of aid; the aid organisations cannot even get to them. I hope that is something we can return to. I thank all Members—including you, Mr Evans, for your chairmanship.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Thank you. It has been a superb debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Tenth Report of the International Development Committee, Forced displacement in Africa: Anchors not walls, HC 1433, and the Government response, HC 2357.
Tier 5 Religious Worker Visas

[Mike Gapes in the Chair]

3 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered changes to Tier 5 Religious Worker Visas.

It is, as always, an immense pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Gapes. I thank colleagues on the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this debate; it is greatly appreciated. I also pay tribute to my co-sponsors, my friends the hon. Members for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen). I have always believed that our politics is better when we work cross-party to tackle injustices, so I am particularly grateful to them for joining together on this occasion.

More than 70 right hon. and hon. Members expressed support for this Backbench Business debate, and I know from conversations with colleagues across parties that the changes introduced by the British Government have caused great consternation in constituencies and parishes all across these islands. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), who cannot be here today, has been inundated with correspondence from more than 120 constituents in three Catholic parishes because they are particularly concerned about the changes. Likewise, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) wanted to put his opposition on the record, but for diary reasons he cannot make it to the debate.

This is an opportunity to air those concerns with the Minister, who I know will listen attentively before responding. Before I go any further, I express my sincere thanks to Anthony Horan from the Catholic Parliamentary Office in Edinburgh and to the Bishops’ Conference for an excellent briefing in advance of the debate. We have only 90 minutes and I want to ensure that all colleagues get a good opportunity to air their views, so I will confine my speech to around 10 minutes, but I will of course be happy for colleagues to intervene.

Concerns about changes to religious worker visas were first raised with me by my good friend Father Liam McMahon, the parish priest at St Michael’s in Parkhead. Essentially, at the tail end of last year the British Government introduced a change in regulations that meant that visiting clergy could no longer enter the UK via the tier 5 visa route and would instead have to have both practical and financial implications for parishes.

It will cost £244 and that might still be required to sit an English language test before coming on supply placements. That strikes me as bizarre.

The British Government’s changes will quite simply mean that visiting priests, Catholic parishes and dioceses regularly used the tier 5 religious worker visa route for priests to come to the UK on supply placements. That is important because a supply placement priest would typically lead the celebration of holy mass, including the celebration of the sacrament of marriage. He would also lead funerals, including the support of bereaved family members, and would routinely visit sick and elderly members of the local community. It is important that the Minister realises that those tasks do not simply stop when the existing parish priest falls ill or goes for a well-earned holiday or religious retreat.

Surely we would all agree that, in an age when social isolation and loneliness are increasing, the church is so often the place where people can gather as a community, to support each other and engage in friendship. The church is not only a place of worship, but a hub for the local community, providing both spiritual and practical support to the sick, the elderly and the vulnerable. Parishes may host tea and coffee mornings, cafes, youth clubs, pensioner clubs, soup kitchens, food banks and toddler groups. They provide a safe space for counselling and addiction meetings—Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, for example—as well as financial support for struggling individuals and families, especially through voluntary groups such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul.

Clearly, without the support of visiting priests, Catholic parishes will simply be unable to provide the present level of service to the local community, and that would be a crying shame. The Bishops’ Conference is crystal clear that much of the positive work in and around Catholic parishes, which engender a great sense of community, is seriously compromised by the changes to the immigration rules. My colleagues will elaborate on that point. The new arrangements more than double the cost incurred by parishes, making supply cover effectively unaffordable. Basically, the cost of applications will go from £244 to £610, which nets an extra £366 per application for the Home Office.

The tier 2 minister of religion visa route also imposes strict language requirements. I saw in the press this morning that the Home Office is putting a lot of emphasis on the argument about the English language. Even priests who undertook seminary formation in English may still be required to sit an English language test before coming on supply placements. That strikes me as bizarre.

The British Government’s changes will quite simply have both practical and financial implications for parishes. The Home Office needs to understand that visiting clergy not only allow the local parish community to continue to function, but benefit and enrich the whole community, which gains from a cultural exchange and the sharing of knowledge and experience by priests or...
clergy from other parts of the world. When I visit parishes, more often than not I hear about communities being educated about life in other countries. That opens up avenues for local parishes to support communities in need.

I am somewhat intrigued about why this draconian change for visiting clergy was made. As far as I understand, there have been no problems or abuses of the system by churches bringing supply placement clergy to the UK. It is not just the Catholic Church that has expressed concerns about the change; the Church of Scotland is also urging the British Government to reverse the decision. The Rt Rev. Dr Susan Brown, who convenes the Church’s World Mission Council, said that she had been “shocked” by this “retrograde step”, and is on record as saying:

“The benefit of the time spent in the UK is not just to the individual or to our churches but whole communities. Having the opportunity to have a minister from one of our partner Churches overseas brings a wealth of learning to people about faith and about global issues. Scotland is a welcoming country and we believe that the Church of Scotland can play a great part in this, but if the UK government continues to thwart efforts to invite people to spend time in Scotland for legitimate reasons by making the process more difficult and more expensive then we will be the ones to lose out. We strongly urge the UK government to reverse this change in the visa system.”

This is probably not the Minister’s natural brief, but he is standing in today, so can he explain why those changes have been introduced? Would he at least concede that they have led to an unintended consequence for local parishes, and does he acknowledge the difficulty that many dioceses now find themselves in? I gather that the Minister for Immigration has agreed to meet faith leaders early next week. That is genuinely very welcome news, and I hope that the Bishops’ Conference of Scotland and others are welcome to send a delegate to that meeting.

The Minister knows from the amount of casework that I raise with the Home Office that I have profound differences with the Government on how I would wish to see our immigration system run. I freely acknowledge and accept that, and tempted though I am, I am not going to enter into a wider ideological debate about the hostile environment, “Go home” vans, or any of that stuff. However, surely we can all agree that the changes to the religious worker visas have led to unintended consequences, which are in turn leaving parishes and dioceses in an incredibly, and unnecessarily, difficult position. It is within the Home Office’s power to reverse this retrograde decision, and—as I am sure the Minister is about to hear—I, along with other colleagues, call upon him to do so.

3.9 pm

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op):
It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Gapes. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing the debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for it. The issue is of great concern to parishes in my constituency, as it is in others, not least because many Catholic parishes rely on tier 5 religious worker visas to bring priests to the UK on supply placements, which allows cover for illness, retreats, outings and, of course, much-needed holidays. The hon. Gentleman has covered many of the salient points and concerns in his remarks, so I intend to be brief.

I am disappointed not to see the Minister for Immigration, the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), here, but I am sure that the Minister who is here will convey to her our concerns. I simply ask the Minister this: where is the evidence that the changes were necessary? Where is the evidence that large numbers of people were coming to the UK on tier 5 religious worker visas for another purpose? Where is the evidence that ministers of religion are coming in large numbers to the UK to preach, despite not having the English language skills necessary to do so? Is it not a matter for the parish to determine whether a priest or a minister has the appropriate level of English to preach to their congregation? The alternative in many cases is that services will simply not go ahead at all, and we all know the impact that can have when people, many of them elderly or at risk of social isolation and loneliness, lose out on the opportunity to come together as a community to worship, to support one another, and to seek spiritual and practical help.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): My constituents, particularly those at the Sikh gurdwara, rely on tier 5 for religious workers to come in. They do not want the tier 2 so that their religious workers can be here a long time, and neither do they want to stay indefinitely. It really is a short-term issue and religious workers are being absolutely excluded. In my constituency they have already spent more than £1,000, having been refused a visa while the change of policy went through. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need something in the interim, a bit like the old tier 5, so that short-term religious workers can come in and read from the holy book, which is what they need to do? They are not lecturers or cultural exchange people; they are religious workers who do not want to stay here for a long time.

Ged Killen: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and I absolutely agree. Another senseless decision seems to be based on an ideological basis, rather than on any evidence. The Catholic Church in Scotland is in no doubt whatever that the changes will mean fewer priests will be able to come to Scotland to support local parishes. Perhaps the Minister can tell us, if he is aware, what assessment has been made of the likely impact of the changes. How many people have been refused under the new system who would have been granted a visa under the old one? Is the Home Office aware of how many other people are likely to be refused entry at a later date?

We all have casework that demonstrates how often the Home Office gets decisions wrong. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) raised in a debate in this place just a few weeks ago concerns revealed in the Financial Times that the Home Office is using algorithms to process visa applications. Many of my constituents have had applications inexplicably refused, usually because of Home Office errors, which were later overturned following an intervention from my office. As the hon. Member for Glasgow East said earlier, we do not want to get into the wider debate, but I will mention the recent example of my constituent Sabir Zazai, the chief executive of the Scottish Refugee Council. He was being honoured by Glasgow University for 20 years of remarkable contribution to civil society, but his father almost missed out on going to the graduation ceremony, where he was to receive his honorary doctorate,
because he was refused a visit visa. That is exactly the type of case that speaks to the heart of the issue that we are talking about today, although we are talking about a different tier of visas.

**Mike Gapes (in the Chair):** Will the hon. Gentleman speak to the actual motion?

**Ged Killen:** I apologise, Mr Gapes, but it does speak to the wider issue where mistakes are made all the time. We already have an under-resourced Home Office, which is why we get so many mistakes, making decisions that are not based on any logic, evidence or fairness, but on ideology, and often getting the decisions wrong and causing enormous hurt to individuals and families. In this case we are talking about what was a relatively straightforward process for ministers of religion to come to this country and we are making it needlessly more complicated, which will inevitably lead to more incorrect decisions and will have a huge impact on local parishes up and down the country.

We are left with the question of why we are doing this. What problem are the Government attempting to fix? We know the problems they will create: parishes in constituencies such as Rutherglen and Hamilton West will be unable to maintain the high level of service that they offer in communities that often badly need it. Coffee mornings, youth clubs, bingo nights, food banks and counselling services are all compromised by the decisions and will have a huge impact on local parishes up and down the country.

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*3.15 pm*

**John Howell (Henley) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. It was also a pleasure to hear the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) introduce the debate. I wish to discuss some points that this debate generates.

The hon. Gentleman set out the background issues very clearly. As he pointed out and as the letter from the Catholic Church clearly points out, the debate is held in the context of the supply of priests, particularly in the summer, and allowing the laity to continue to attend mass. So there are two issues at stake: the laity attending mass and the priests being allowed a holiday. I am all for priests being allowed a holiday, just as I am all for MPs being allowed a holiday. As an aside, when I first came into this House, a very senior Member said to me, “The person you should acquaint yourself with to get the right sort of status is the suffragan bishop.” Members can interpret that as they wish. Whether the popularity of MPs and suffragan bishops has taken the same turn is something I will leave for others to decide.

We have heard about a change whereby visiting priests are required to apply under tier 2 rather than under tier 5, and that is producing problems, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) illustrated, as well as costs for various communities. There are also English language burdens they have to suffer and a little more red tape than under the current scheme. However, I do not think the problem is widely shared among all religious communities. The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) nods. I will illustrate how it is not the case in some communities.

I accept that it is a case for the Catholic Church and for many others, but we live in a world where it is very difficult for anyone to recruit priests. Although this is perhaps the subject of an additional debate on another occasion, I point out that Anglicans are in a much better position because they have admitted women as priests. They therefore have an enormous supply of priests who are available and ministering. Whether the Catholic Church wants to take up my suggestion is a matter for it to decide and I will not interfere.

**Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP):** I am sitting here as a Catholic utterly stunned by what the hon. Gentleman suggests. He is here in Westminster Hall suggesting that the Catholic Church should change its policies because of what he perceives to be an issue and because of the actions of the Government. Honestly?

**Mike Gapes (in the Chair):** Order. I know it is tempting to have a wider debate, but will Members, including Mr Howell, focus on the motion before us?

**John Howell:** Thank you, Mr Gapes. To respond briefly, I was not suggesting that; I was leaving it to the Catholic Church to decide. As I said, we can debate that issue on a separate occasion, but I think my point is a valid one.

I made inquiries in the Anglican Church about whether it has this problem. The answer was no, it does not have this problem, for a number of reasons. First, there is a supply of Anglican women priests, so the supply issue is taken care of. Second, Anglican ministries are organised increasingly in teams, so someone is always around; because all the members of the team do not take their holiday at the same time, someone in the team is always available to cover for others in the ministry. It is important to bear that in mind.

**Carol Monaghan:** The Catholic Church organises in teams as well, but the smaller groups within the archdiocese have priests who are already stretched to the absolute limit. When one takes a well-earned break, the others are simply asked to do even more. For them just to pick up the slack, as suggested, is unsustainable.

**John Howell:** The hon. Lady makes an interesting point, but I return to mine: we live in a time when it is very difficult to get enough people to come forward for the priesthood of whichever denomination.

**David Linden:** The hon. Gentleman will realise that in my speech I quoted the Very Reverend Dr Susan Brown, who is both a woman and a member of the Church of Scotland, which permits female clergy. If the Church of Scotland, which is not the Catholic Church, acknowledges that this is a problem and one not specifically related to gender, does that not drive a coach and horses through his argument?

**John Howell:** I am tempted to say that if it is not just a Catholic problem, perhaps it is a Scottish problem.

**Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab):** I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman’s argument. Does he accept that the issue that we should be debating is whether the changes are right in principle? They might not affect every single ministry grouping to the same degree, but the question that we parliamentarians should talk about is whether the changes are right in principle.
**John Howell:** I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention, but I do not see the two as different; I see them as all part of the same problem. I will go back to my comments on the Anglican Church.

**Valerie Vaz:** The hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time in allowing us to intervene. I am a Roman Catholic, but I speak on behalf not just of that Church but of the religion directly affected by the changes, which is the Sikh religion. He is right when he talks about the Church of England, but that is exactly it: it is the Church of England; many of the others are international religions and therefore need religious workers to come here. More to the point, does he not agree with having an interchange of people of different faiths coming to this country, whether of the Catholic Church or of any other religion? Does it not mean that we are able to look beyond we simply one of visas. The second aspect of the change is the 12-month cooling-off period, which clearly smacks of security concerns far more than the risk of visitors simply overstaying their permit for a few weeks or months. If the Government chose to introduce that change for security reasons, they should have the guts to make that clear. Whether or not the consequences are unintended, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East said, they are real.

We heard some specific examples; I mentioned one in my constituency of a missionary who is not a native speaker of English would not have much to gain by bringing in preachers who are not fluent in that language. It stands to reason that faith communities that conduct services primarily in English would not have much to gain by bringing in preachers who are not fluent in that language.

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between their own long-term wellbeing and the provision of often vital services in their parishes, many of which reach out beyond the immediate faith or worshipping community that they serve.

I have a personal connection with three very good Malawian priest friends who are studying in Rome, Fathers Dan, Isaac and Kondwani. They first had to complete their seminary training in Malawi in English; they are probably proficient in at least one vernacular language; they will probably have proficiency in Latin and, because they live in Rome, they will be proficient in Italian, too. They have been unable to acquire tier 5 visas this year that, in previous years, would have been routine at a cost of around £200. One of the sponsoring parishes is in the constituency of my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands)—St Conval’s in Linwood. It reckons that to bring those priests over under the new process would have cost well over £1,000, between the visas and the various test and proofs. That is totally prohibitive and leaves parishes across that diocese struggling to cope.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am grateful that my hon. Friend raises that point; it is not the first time that he has assisted with issues relating to Linwood, particularly in connection with Malawi. Not only did Father Michael McMahon of St Conval’s get in touch with me but the Bishop of Paisley, Bishop John Keenan, Father Michael has just come back from a trip to Malawi with St Benedict’s High School; he said that not only can the parish not afford those elevated costs; the wider diocese cannot absorb them at all. Simply put, there are no winners from the policy change at all.

Patrick Grady: The complete opposite is the case: the change is having a detrimental effect. In the past, visiting priests would have come for two or three months perhaps, spending a couple of weeks in each parish. They would have built warm and supportive relationships and they would have come back on a regular basis. Now, those parishes have to strip back their worship schedules and many other support services that run alongside them. That is repeated across Scotland and the United Kingdom, as we hear.

The Bishops’ Conference of Scotland has said that in all the years it has sponsored priests through the tier 5 process, it has not been aware of any abuses of the system. Visiting priests are tied by religious vows to the bishop, to say nothing of their own personal and family ties. Once again, the base assumption of the Home Office’s immigration rules is that the streets of mother Britannia are so paved with gold that the only reason anyone would want come here is to abscond while on their visa and sponge off the NHS and the welfare state. That is simply not the case, and it is insulting to those visitors to suggest otherwise.

What are the solutions? The simple solution would be simply to undo the change and revert to the previous system. At the very least, the Home Office, at ministerial level, must be prepared to continue to engage directly with all the stakeholders across the UK who are interested in this issue. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East said, I believe a meeting is taking place with the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, but Ministers should be willing also to meet the Bishops’ Conference of Scotland and its representatives. I am sure that Ministers know the Catholic Church in Scotland has its own history and governance, which is distinct from that south of the border.

What is really needed is a deeper, more fundamental review of the overall immigration rules and the hostile environment. The Vote Office kindly produced an extract of the immigration rules for me, which are vast. The document comes with an erratum. With the greatest respect to the drafting officials, it is so complicated; no one could keep track of it. One correction, to the “Statement of Changes in Immigration Rules, presented to Parliament pursuant to section 3(2) of the Immigration Act 1971, Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed on 11 December 2018, HC1779”, states:

“On page 8, for change 6A.13 where it reads, ‘… paragraph245ZP (f)(2)…’ I tracked that down on page 41 of a document that runs to hundreds of pages. This is what small Catholic parishes are being asked to get to grips with when trying to bring over their priests. That is why the whole system needs to be fundamentally reviewed. Other Members have touched on wider issues in the immigration and visa system. The all-party parliamentary group for Africa and the all-party parliamentary group on Malawi are to publish a report on that in a couple of weeks. I hope the Minister will confirm that his colleague the Minister for Immigration plans to attend that launch on 16 July.

As I said at the start, the experience of anyone navigating this system is that it is designed with deliberate hostility, suspicion and to minimise the chances of a successful application. That is seriously beginning to harm the global reputation of a Government who at the same time are spending millions on a campaign to say that we are open for business and that Britain is great. For a middle eastern academic trying to come to a university conference, an author from Belarus trying to get to the Edinburgh book festival or a west African roots band wanting to play at Celtic Connections, it is not great and we are not open for business. Now, it is not great for a simple priest who wants to come and help communities pray for a few months over the summer. Those are all real, verifiable examples.

All Ministers will be wondering over the next few weeks what their legacies will be. Here is an opportunity for the Home Office to reverse this policy and launch a wider review of the overall visa system. Otherwise, the legacy will be one of shutting the door, in pursuit of an ideological and arbitrary net migration target, perpetuating a hostile environment that has done nothing but damage this country’s economy, culture, society and global reputation.

3.36 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this important debate. The removal of tier 5 visas for visiting clergy was first brought to my attention by my friend Monsignor Peter Smith of St Paul’s Parish in Whiteinch. Monsignor Smith was part of the original team that met the Government as the tiers were introduced. At that time, the Government suggested that there was no need for
tier 5 visas. However, Monsignor Smith argued strongly for having access to tier 5 as well as tier 2. He pointed out that not all our visitors wish to be on the path of leave to remain, as tier 2 allows.

Priests who come here are all incardinated in their own home diocese. We do not want to change or disturb that. The tier 5 route allows us to have priests here for short terms. As the number of clergy decreases, for whatever reason, more is expected of the few we have. Priests often have responsibility for several parishes, so they are battling to provide spiritual leadership and to administer God’s work. Monsignor Smith himself is seriously ill—in any other profession, he probably would not work. But we are not talking about regular work. These people are living out their vocation and dedicating their lives to their faith communities.

In the Catholic Church we have many lay people who are stepping up to take on some of the responsibility and provide some sort of service when priests are extremely stretched, but they cannot provide the sacraments, celebrate mass or perform baptisms. We need priests, but when they are stretched to the limit we have to look at other ways. Even the priests who are serving in such a way must have time to refresh, reflect and renew themselves spiritually. Breaks from the parish are therefore essential to enable their continued service. The tier 5 visa allows archdioceses to get priests to the UK to allow our own priests time to recharge.

Many visiting priests are already in the EU as postgraduate students at universities in Rome or Louvain, so it is less expensive to bring them here to help. These priests are keen to experience more of Europe while they are away from home, and it suits parishes to be able to have their services during the summer vacation. They regularly go to the same parish, year after year, and build up a relationship with the parishioners. It is a win-win situation.

I understand the desire for good English for tier 2, but visiting priests are here for only a short time and congregations are so thankful to have them that any potential language difficulties are simply not an issue. Bear in mind that mass used to be said in Latin and congregations are so thankful to have them that any potential language difficulties are simply not an issue. Bear in mind that mass used to be said in Latin and perfect English—although, in many cases these priests probably have better English than myself and some of my colleagues—because it is only for a few weeks and not a permanent arrangement. Everything that the parishioners gain from having priests outweighs any potential difficulties. Tier 5 visas need English of a lesser standard than that required for tier 2 visas.

I had a letter from a constituent recently who accused the SNP of being anti-faith—specifically anti-Catholic—as a result of these visa changes. I politely pointed out that such priests read from the holy book, which is not in English, so they are required to speak the Sikh language—the Punjabi language. The priests want to be here for only a short time. Having heard everything that hon. Members have said, would the Minister consider interim measures? Otherwise, can he say how I can bring in the priests?

The Minister for Immigration has repeatedly said that tier 2 visas are a possibility, but we have heard why that is not suitable. The English language requirement, along with the increased cost, makes this utterly unsustainable for most parishes that are already financially stretched. Without the presence of tier 5 priests over the summer, many of our priests will be deprived of their time to recharge and many parishioners will be deprived of services. It will come to a point that we will simply have to close the parish while the priest is on holiday.

Parishes are more than just a faith community; for many people, particularly the elderly and the vulnerable, they are a vital lifeline. I think of my own elderly parents, because their church is such an important part of their life; it is what gets them out of the house in the morning and gives them great purpose. Without it, serious problems with loneliness and isolation for many elderly people would be caused.

Ultimately, we need both types of visa: one for temporary summer placements that are usually repeated for a short period of time over a number of years, with no path to leave to remain; and one for more lengthy placements, where tier 2 would be more appropriate. The UK says that it champions freedom of religious practice, but the removal of tier 5 visas for visiting priests calls that into question. How can Catholics fully practise their faith when mass cannot be celebrated because of these policies? We have seen many groups targeted in this hostile environment.

Surely this Government are not now targeting God.

3.44 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I had not intended to speak, so thank you for giving me the time to do so. I will be very brief and ask the Minister just a few questions.

As I mentioned earlier, I have a gurdwara in my constituency that has found it difficult to bring priests in. The point about the tier 5 visa is that such priests read from the holy book, which is not in English, so they are required to speak the Sikh language—the Punjabi language. The priests want to be here for only a short time. Having heard everything that hon. Members have said, would the Minister consider interim measures? Otherwise, can he say how I can bring in the priests? They have been refused twice, and there is a new system in place. How is it possible for them to come here? I have been told by those at the gurdwara that they are desperate to get them in. No other member of the congregation can perform the function that the priests can undertake.

Could the Minister also say what is happening to the licence system? Is it currently suspended? Many gurdwaras and other religious places apply under a licence, under which there are checks and balances to ensure that they can bring in their religious workers. What is happening
to that system? Finally, could the Minister arrange for the Minister for Immigration to meet hon. Members as soon as possible to discuss our individual cases?

3.46 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is good to see you in the chair, Mr Gapes. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and the hon. Members for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) for securing the debate—it is truly a cross-party campaign as well as an interfaith campaign. I pay tribute to all hon. Members who have taken part today. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) made a particularly brave speech, but I say gently to him that I think he slightly missed the point. His argument was that the changes that the Government have introduced have not been too bad. The whole point, that all hon. Members have focused on, is that there has been absolutely nothing at all to justify the changes being made in the first place.

As hon. Members across the House have already explained, the tier 5 religious visas were operating perfectly smoothly for the many churches and religious organisations that relied upon them, until these unexpected changes were made in December last year. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East said, what we are talking about is churches bringing in overseas ministers and priests a couple of times a year—perhaps in the summer, or at Easter or Christmas—to allow local religious leaders to take congregations on a trip, to go on retreat, to recover from ill health or even just to have a holiday.

We are talking about not only Christian churches, but other religions too. I have heard directly about a Buddhist temple and a Sikh gurdwara that have been negatively impacted. The hon. Members for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) made important interventions about how important these routes are for gurdwaras in their constituencies.

In my constituency, parishioners from St Lucy’s in Cumbernauld were among the first to contact me about the issue. Father Campbell wrote to me at the end of April, saying that the changes “will have a vast impact on me and our parishioners here, as we rely on Father Alex Mpaggi coming to allow me a holiday in July and to accompany 50 parishioners to Lourdes in France, also in July.”

Those are the nuts and bolts of what these changes have almost destroyed.

This is about the support that visiting priests and celebrants can provide. It is important to say, as hon. Members have done today, that visiting clergy in themselves enrich the life of the churches that they work at with their new ideas and approaches, and by sharing knowledge of different cultures. That point was made by the Rt Rev. Susan Brown from the Church of Scotland, as quoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East in his speech.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) said, over the course of time close relationships are built up between parishes and priests. For example, Father Mpaggi has been coming to St. Lucy’s in Cumbernauld since 2013. When he comes he leads worship, carries out the celebrations of holy mass, including marriage, and conducts funerals and supports the bereaved. All of that is now put in jeopardy.

As other Members have explained, churches and other places of worship are not only about worship, although that is obviously their central function; they also form important parts of their communities, and indeed are communities in themselves. It is about the youth clubs, the coffee mornings, the pensioner clubs, the mother and toddler groups, the food banks and the soup kitchens. The same visiting clergy also help to carry out those important functions.

These arrangements were working well, but now they are not, because the changes that the Immigration Minister introduced are already having a negative impact. The Home Office has more than doubled the cost to parishes. As Father Campbell has told me, that means “making supply-cover effectively unaffordable”. He expressed concern about the impact that the changes will have on the health of local priests if they cannot afford to bring in the support that they need and have relied on in recent years. Those costs arise not only from the visa fees, but from unnecessary English tests. As Father Campbell points out:

“Even priests who have undertaken seminary formation in English may be required to sit an English language test before coming on supply-placements. This will have both practical and financial implications.”

My first big question for the Minister is: why? Where is the evidence, as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) put it? Why did the rules have to change? What is the justification? Is the problem so significant that it merits creating all these other problems for our churches?

The Immigration Minister’s written statement, letters and answers firstly point to some sort of problem with ministers of religion coming over and taking on roles such as preaching and leading congregations while not being able to speak a good standard of English. Her various responses have also referred to the need for integration. So far, I find those explanations flimsy and utterly unconvincing.

As one of the 100 or so constituents who contacted me said:

“I have attended services in Synagogue where the language used was Hebrew and in other faiths where the language used was Hindi, Guajarati or whatever. That may not suit the British Government but it is a reality.”

In short, is it really any business of the Government if religious celebrants spend short periods here and preach in different languages? The shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South, made that point very strongly, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West.

Similarly, integration of the religious workers, which the Immigration Minister referred to in her various letters, is not really relevant here. As the shadow Leader of the House also pointed out, nobody is proposing that these people will live here permanently or become settled here. In fact, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West powerfully pointed out, the integration argument is completely the other way round, because community integration and social solidarity are undermined if these religious workers can no longer come to do all the work they have previously.
As a spokesperson for the Bishop’s Conference of Scotland said today:

“Catholic parishes, without the support of visiting priests would be unable to provide the level of service to the local community that it does at present, such as Masses, weddings, funerals, comforting the bereaved, tending to the sick and needy, and many other works of charity including food banks and soup kitchens.”

I have seen no good reason for these changes, and certainly none that justifies creating all these other consequences.

Now, let us be incredibly kind and imagine for a minute that the Minister manages to explain today why exactly these changes have been made in this particular way. That is being very optimistic, but in any event it would still not be an end to the matter. Even if, having listened to the Minister, we took the view that reform was necessary, surely there must be another way to accommodate the needs of all the churches we have heard from without undermining whatever strange purpose the Home Office is pursuing? Surely it cannot be beyond the wit of the Home Office to come up with something that is both better fit, and a more reasonably priced fit, for those ministers and priests who come just for very short stays to support the work of our churches from time to time?

Tier 2 is not designed with these scenarios in mind, and neither is the new tier 5. Nor, I believe, is the business visitor route, which is not even something that the Home Office has until this point prayed in aid. Why not offer a low-cost two or three-year visa, for example, which does not have the same stringent requirements regarding English qualifications, which allows applicants to work as ministers or to lead worship, but which sets a maximum stay of a certain number of weeks or months in any calendar year to prevent any circumvention of the tier 2 requirements? Surely the Government could work up something along those lines?

As the shadow Leader of the House said, it is important that that is done as a matter of urgency, even on an interim basis, because this is harming parishes and other religious organisations right now, this very summer. I join the calls on the Home Office to engage in discussion about how the impact of these changes can be reversed, or at the very least ameliorated. I also join the calls for Ministers to meet representatives of churches, including churches in Scotland, to discuss the impact that these rules are having.

Finally, I turn to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), powerfully flagging up the poor consultation and policy-making process. That takes me back to one of my hobby-horses, which is how we go about making immigration policy. Is this not the perfect example of why leaving it to the Home Office does not work? I dare say officials believed that they had thought through all the implications, but they had not. Meanwhile, MPs were barely aware that changes had been made, and if they were aware, they were, as my hon. Friend pointed out, completely unable to decipher what they meant or what the implications would be.

That is why, when the Immigration Bill was in Committee, I proposed an exciting, shiny immigration equivalent of the Social Security Advisory Committee, so that experts could scrutinise Home Office proposals, flag up concerns, allow others to give input and give MPs advice on what needed further scrutiny. I was sad that my proposals did not have the Committee as excited as I was. Seriously, though, we do need to think how we go about consulting and scrutinising immigration rule changes.

In conclusion, I again commend the hon. Friends and colleagues for bringing this debate on an important issue. I hope that the Home Office will listen and provide a better route for visiting priests and ministers to keep coming and carrying out the vital temporary work that they do. But, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North said, if we had a better system of scrutiny, we could hopefully avoid these mess-ups happening in the first place.

3.55 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) points out, why would a congregation that routinely conducts its services in English try to bring across a priest who did not speak English?

Religious ministers have been removed from tier 5 visas and are now obliged to apply for tier 2 visas, for which an English language proficiency test can be included in a successful application. Ministers must know, however—and have received representations to this effect—that the change is unwieldy, costly, bureaucratic and discriminatory. Ministers must have been made aware by representatives of a range of faith communities that the measures are a blockage to faith communities, to the religious ministers they need to lead them, whether temporarily or for a little longer, and to good community relations. Yet here we are with a Minister defending a policy that many in the community question.

In fact, Ministers announced this change to long-standing policy towards the end of the parliamentary Session last year. Can the Minister tell us what consultation was conducted prior to that change? What were the results of that consultation, and what risk assessments were done for Ministers by Home Office officials before the decision was taken and the policy announced? Do Ministers understand that Catholic priests, rabbis, imams and many others need holidays and cannot be on call 365 days a year, or that they have to visit loved ones or go abroad for further study? They might even get ill, and they need people to stand in for them as occasion arises.

As we have heard, the shift to tier 2 is costly, time-consuming, bureaucratic and unnecessary. We have heard about the issues with English language at tier 2, and about the fact that tier 2 visas are much more expensive than tier 5 visas and put a considerable financial burden on faith communities. As a whole, tier 2 visas are also subject to a numerical cap, which is surely folly. It means that people who we need for our economy and public services may be refused a visa solely on the grounds that the number has already been met, and religious ministers have to compete in that total.
In explaining the change of policy, Ministers have stated that:

“This change will prevent migrants from using the tier 5 Religious Worker route to fill positions as Ministers of Religion, and instead direct them towards the appropriate—category of tier 2... The ‘cooling off’ period will ensure tier 5 Religious workers and Charity Workers spend a minimum of 12 months outside the UK before returning...This will prevent migrants from applying for consecutive visas”.

So, there you have it: this whole discriminatory rigmarole is an effort to prevent people, of whatever religious faith, from using what Ministers seem to think is a loophole to come into this country on a permanent basis. I hope that, having listened to Members from across the House, the Minister recognises that no one is talking about a loophole but about the very real needs of faith communities. Maybe he will tell us how many people he thinks sneak their way into the country under a religious cloth. A handful? Dozens? What evidence can Ministers provide for that outlandish proposition?

We pride ourselves—or used to—on being a religiously tolerant society, but these measures do not seem religiously tolerant to those of us here today or to the wider community. This discriminatory policy is causing distress in faith communities of all types across the country. It should be a matter of concern for those of all faiths and none. In 30 years in the House, this is not the first time that I have seen immigration measures brought in willy-nilly to target a specific community—for example, the Muslim faith—but catching all sorts of faiths. If the Home Office has a particular ill in mind, it needs better drafted legislation and better conducted administration.

We should not dictate to anyone who their faith leaders should be. We should recognise and honour the contribution that faith communities make to our society. The Government should take note of the debate, meet faith representatives and Church leaders, that the Minister recognises that no one is talking about a loophole but about the very real needs of faith communities. Maybe he will tell us how many people he thinks sneak their way into the country under a religious cloth. A handful? Dozens? What evidence can Ministers provide for that outlandish proposition?

The adjective “generous” is not often attached to the system, but we think that this is a generous offer. However, it must be balanced against ensuring that those wishing to lead congregations, regularly performing the primary rites and rituals of their faith, are subject to stronger requirements than those coming to the UK to fill long-term vacancies and shorter-term postings. We appreciate that this Minister is not the one who we would have liked to see here, but although the Immigration Minister has now agreed to meet faith representatives and Church leaders, that took six months of asking. There has been a genuine unwillingness on the part of the Immigration Minister to meet those Church leaders.

Mr Hurd: I am not sure how fair that is, because I do not know the background to those conversations. However, I know the Immigration Minister well. She is the listening type, and I think she is entirely sincere in saying that she recognises the sensitivities that have emerged from this policy change.

Before I go into why there were changes, it is always helpful to assert the common ground. Many Members—the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), who particularly on this—spoke about the importance and the value of faith communities in all our constituencies. I think she spoke for many of us in expressing the importance of those communities, not least in giving many people a sense of strength and purpose. I absolutely recognise that from my constituency and the extraordinary work of churches such as Emmanuel Church in Northwood, the Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue and St Martin’s Church in Ruislip, to mention three.

We all know the fundamental truth of that, and I think we all agree with the point about the added value of contributions made by members of religious institutions from overseas, which is at the heart of the debate. That is why the immigration system maintains dedicated arrangements for religious workers, with two dedicated visa categories providing for those seeking to come to the UK to fill long-term vacancies and shorter-term postings. As hon. Members know, the requirements necessarily differ between the two, to ensure that the system is used in an appropriate manner.

The adjective “generous” is not often attached to the Home Office, but we think that this is a generous offer. However, it must be balanced against ensuring that those wishing to lead congregations, regularly performing the primary rites and rituals of their faith, are subject to stronger requirements than those coming to the UK to fill supporting roles for shorter periods. We believe that those tasked with leading roles within our churches, synagogues, mosques and temples must be able to demonstrate a strong command of the English language, which is fundamental to the change to tier 2. The changes that the Government have introduced ensure that all those seeking to undertake such important roles can explain their teachings in English to all in the community, not just to their congregation.

Stuart C. McDonald: This is fundamental: are churches, mosques and synagogues not better placed to assess the level of English required for priests and other religious leaders to lead worship in their communities, and whether applicants coming in under tier 5 have the skill required?

Mr Hurd: I completely understand that point, which was raised earlier. The Government’s position is that it is important that the same rules apply to all, in the
Mr Hurd: I absolutely understand that point. On the hon. Lady’s direct question on the specific problem of her constituent, while I obviously do not know the individual case, one of the three visa entry routes may well be relevant for the role that she described, not least the visitor visa route. With respect, she should engage on that directly with officials, which I can help to facilitate.

Valerie Vaz: The Minister is doing an excellent job—he is an excellent Minister; I say that with sincerity—and he has been very helpful so far, but he is confusing social cohesion and religion. I made the point that the Sikh holy book is not in English. The priests who are required to come over have to read it in their language.

Mr Hurd: I am happy to take an intervention from the hon. Member for Glasgow East.

David Linden: I am incredibly grateful to the Minister for giving way. I sense that, although he is the Fire Minister and is trying to fight fire here, he understands that he has been asked to flog a dead horse today. The fact is that people do not come to be here indefinitely. They come here to cover a month to enable priests or other faith leaders to go on holiday, so the idea that we are talking about people coming here indefinitely and integrating is surely for the birds.

Mr Hurd: Some may want to. That is why we have the different tiers of visas for people in different circumstances. I completely understand that the heart of the concern, particularly among Scottish Members of Parliament, is not about individuals who want to stay here longer, but about people coming in to fill gaps over the summer. I completely accept that point. I am just trying to set out, because I was asked to, what the policy background is and trying to answer the fundamental question posed: why have the Government made the changes?

Stuart C. McDonald: The Minister is being very generous with his time. I think that we have just come to the nub of the issue. He is describing different visas, but I think what we have discovered in the course of this debate is that none of them fits the circumstances of what we have been describing this afternoon—people who come temporarily but nevertheless want to carry out the roles of leaders of congregations and ministers of religion. Short-term visas do not allow people to lead a congregation, but the longer-term visas are completely inappropriate, because people are coming only for short-term visits, so we need to invent a new visa. I think that is the ultimate point.

Mr Hurd: I am not sure that the Government agree with that position, but it is clearly one held by the hon. Gentleman and other Members of Parliament, so it is clearly something that needs to be discussed and talked at the roundtable next week with the Minister for Immigration and in subsequent follow-up. That is the nature of this place: we change rules; we make laws. We do that, believe it or not, with good intentions, although conspiracy theories have been articulated this afternoon. We do impact assessments. Then—as in this case—after a few months, issues begin to arise and concerns need to be dealt with. In the democracy that we live in, it is incumbent on the Government and the Minister at the time to listen very carefully, engage with those who have a problem and, in a democratic process, work through that. And I am absolutely sure that the Minister for Immigration will do that.

Patrick Grady: The Minister is being generous with the time available, and I appreciate that this is not his specific brief, but he is talking about the reasons for the Government’s decisions and he has mentioned conspiracy theories. I think that, when I said that I think there are
security reasons behind this change. I saw the Minister shaking his head, so is he prepared to say that it has not been introduced because of security concerns and because of particular religions where the visiting ministers of religion would not necessarily have proficiency in English?

Mr Hurd: I certainly do not think that is the case. If I understand the hon. Gentleman’s line of thinking—it has not been made explicit—he needs to recognise that the original instinct came from the previous Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, in terms of the integrated communities strategy. That might possibly undermine the hon. Gentleman’s point.

With your permission, Mr Gapes, I shall try to answer directly the fundamental question of the what and the why for the policy. I have set out that the new requirement is for individuals seeking to enter the UK as a minister of religion to use tier 2, demonstrating their command of the English language. We are also introducing, as has been noted, cooling-off periods for the tier 5 religious worker and charity worker routes. Applicants who have held a visa in one of those categories will not be permitted to hold another visa in the same category for 12 months after expiry of their leave. The immigration rules had previously permitted tier 5 religious workers to fill roles that may include preaching, pastoral work and non-pastoral work. That allowed an applicant to come to the UK and fill a role as a minister of religion without demonstrating an ability to speak English. That is no longer possible and, as we have discussed, applicants must use tier 2 to accommodate that.

The cooling-off period for the tier 5 religious and charity worker categories was introduced because we had become aware of a small but increasing number of religious and charity workers who were living in the UK on a near permanent basis, returning overseas for only a brief period to renew their visa. On the point that was made, I do not detect in the change and I am certainly not aware that underlying that are concerns about security. It is more concerns, as I said, about people using the system to live in the UK on a near permanent basis, which was not the original intention.

The shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), and others asked about the process of consultation. There is a sense that people have been bounced into this and that the ground was not prepared, so let me restate that the changes were included in the “Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper”, which was published on 14 March 2018. Stakeholders were invited to respond. The Minister for Immigration chose to write directly to faith leaders in December 2018, before the rules took effect. That letter set out the detail and explained the rationale behind the changes. As I have said, the Minister for Immigration is extremely clear about her wish to hear directly from religious leaders themselves, and that is the context of the meeting that she is chairing next week. She wants to listen to concerns and discuss the future system.

The Government therefore feel that there was consultation and communication. To what degree the messages have been absorbed and people have focused on them is obviously open to debate. It is quite possible that people have started to focus on them only as we have got closer to the time when applications are made and positions need to be filled. We understand that, but the Government’s view is that we did engage, communicate and consult, and if people have problems, we need to see the evidence; the process needs to be evidence-led. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) stirred the debate up, but he also to explain that these points that in the Anglican community, there does not seem to be an issue. The Government must listen to evidence, but those with problems and concerns must present evidence in those discussions.

Ged Killen: I am glad that the Minister is talking about evidence, because he was also asked in the course of the debate what evidence the changes were built on. It seems to me that the Home Office was trying to fix a problem that did not exist and has ended up creating a whole range of new problems. Is there an evidence base? I appreciate that the Minister is up against it today, but does he have in front of him an evidence base that was used to inform the decision?

Mr Hurd: I am grateful for the empathy shown by the hon. Gentleman in saying that I am up against it. He should come to more police debates.

The changes that seem to be causing the most difficulty for hon. Members are the changes to the visa arrangement from tier 5 to tier 2. I have tried to explain that these changes are rooted in the strategy incubated in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which focuses on the importance of reinforcing the need for English language skills and is rooted in a policy directed at greater social cohesion. In relation to the cooling-off period for tier 5, I think I was clear that that was driven by evidence of a small but growing misuse of that system, with people effectively here on a permanent basis. [Interruption.] I have been asked a straight question, and that is a straight answer.

Stuart C. McDonald: If these visa changes were introduced on the back of a consultation from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which is a devolved issue, then that consultation would have nothing to do with Scotland at all. That may be one reason why the particular circumstances that we have been speaking about have not made their way into the Home Office’s thinking about these visas. That might be something the Home Office wants to reflect on for the future.

Mr Hurd: I am sure that the Immigration Minister, who will read the record of this debate closely, will want to reflect on that.

Valerie Vaz: The Minister has not touched on the issue of licences, which I raised. He mentioned that there was a small but growing problem about misuse. The whole point about the licensing system is that there were checks and balances, and that places of religion were allowed to bring their workers in under these licences, which are constantly monitored by the Home Office. What is happening to that system? Is it completely gone? Is the Minister not aware that the licensing system prevented the abuse?

Mr Hurd: Either the Immigration Minister or I will have to write to the hon. Lady on that point. I am simply stating that one of the drivers for the cooling-off period was a sense that people were effectively here on a permanent basis, which was not the intention of the original visa policy.

We have heard a lot about those who come to the UK on a temporary basis, perhaps to cover for a minister of religion while he or she is on holiday. To be clear, the
Government absolutely recognise that that is a legitimate activity. We certainly have no wish to leave any communities bereft of a spiritual leader while the normal incumbent has a holiday or is otherwise absent.

Remarks were made, which I thought were wildly off target, suggesting that we are targeting God or penalising the Catholic community, as if we were targeting Christian communities. These changes do not mean that we are targeting any particular group. All faiths are treated equally. Of course, we do not want communities to be bereft of spiritual leaders while the incumbent has a holiday or is otherwise absent.

That is precisely why the immigration rules for visitors specifically refer to those coming for religious purposes. Among the permitted activities for those coming on a visit visa, or for a visit without a visa if they are a relevant national, the rules state:

“Religious workers may visit the UK to preach or do pastoral work”.

This provides an opportunity for ministers of religion to officiate at a wedding or funeral, for example, and even to conduct a weekly service on an adhoc basis.

The visit rules rightly do not permit a Minister of religion to undertake paid work. If the intention is to provide cover for a holiday incumbent on a prolonged basis, which involves remuneration, we believe that the visiting Minister should have a work visa. That position is no different for a locum doctor providing cover for a GP or a supply teacher in a school, or anyone else coming to the UK on a temporary basis to provide cover for a full-time worker.

Anyone in that situation does require a tier 2 visa, as we have elaborated. It is right that those rules apply in the normal way to ministers of religion, not least because tier 2 contains an English language requirement. This ensures that visiting ministers of religion have the required level of English reflecting the important role that faith leaders play in ensuring community cohesion.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the Minister for being so generous with his time. Of course, priests are not paid. They get living expenses and a small allowance. That is very different from a salary that a doctor or teacher would receive.

Mr Hurd: I understand that point. I am just trying to set out the differences between the three different visa routes that exist, to try to help people come into the country to support religious communities.

I hope that I have set out—I do not feel I have agreement on it; clearly there is a vigorous debate and discussion to be had on this—why the Government have done what they have, and why we believe that we did consult on this matter in an appropriate way with impact assessments. If there is hard evidence of genuine problems, of course it is incumbent on the Government and Minister to listen. It is worth reflecting that since the changes that we have discussed were made in January 2019, like for like grants are actually up by 6%, so it is clear that the Government are not seeking to restrict the practice of faith in the UK, as has been suggested—wildly, in my view.

I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East for securing this debate and for his continued interest in this vital element of life in the UK. The Government are entirely sincere in their commitment to continuing engagement on these sensitive matters.

4.25 pm

David Linden: My overwhelming feeling is that the Minister has been sent here to defend a policy that, in his heart of hearts, he probably realises is a bit of a mess. I thank hon. Members who have come today on a cross-party and interfaith basis and made a compelling argument.

I am sure that the fact that the Minister for Immigration has agreed to a meeting with faith leaders next week is not a coincidence with the timing of this debate. I and many colleagues have been writing to the Home Office about the matter since as far back as April, but miraculously we all started receiving letters only at the end of the week to tell us that that meeting would take place. That may be a coincidence; I do not know. I leave it to the Minister to decide.

It is important that people should not think that this debate affects only Scotland. It does not; our application to the Backbench Business Committee was signed by Members from right across the UK, including some very senior members of the governing party. Given the sheer number of hon. Members who have been contacted about the issue, I would like a commitment from the Minister—a simple nod of the head will be fine—that after the Minister for Immigration’s meeting with faith leaders next week, an update will be circulated to Members of Parliament.

Mr Hurd indicated assent.

David Linden: I see the Minister nodding. I am grateful.

We must not let go of the issue, because it is very serious and is causing great consternation in parishes right across the country. It is incumbent on all of us to stand up for those parishes and make sure that we fix this injustice.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That this House has considered changes to Tier 5 Religious Worker Visas.

4.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Daniel Morgan Independent Panel: Contingent Liability for Indemnification

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today giving notice of a contingent liability for the issuing of an indemnity with respect to the work of the Daniel Morgan independent panel (DMIP).

The panel was established by the then Home Secretary in May 2013 to shine a light on the 1987 murder of private investigator Daniel Morgan, the background to the murder and the subsequent handling of the case.

The proposed indemnity will cover current and former members of the DMIP and any individual engaged at any time to provide assistance to the panel against any civil liability for any act done or omission made in good faith in the execution of his or her duties, or in the purported execution of his or her duties. This indemnity applies only to acts done or omissions made during the course of the panel’s work, from its establishment on 10 May 2013 until its final report is submitted to the Home Secretary.

The indemnity is subject to the proviso that any liability which is to any extent met by insurers on the beneficiary of this indemnity, or for which reimbursement is made to any extent by such insurers, shall in that event and to that extent no longer be the subject of the indemnity and (if previously met or reimbursed by the Government) shall to that extent be refunded by the beneficiary to the Government.

Her Majesty’s Treasury has approved the contingent liability in principle. The National Audit Office has been consulted on the proposal.

Refugee Protection

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The UK is today reaffirming its ongoing commitment to supporting refugees, and to working with partners to find a longer-term approach to refugee protection, an approach that restores dignity and offers refugees a viable future.

The UK has a long history of supporting refugees in need of protection. Our schemes have provided safe and legal routes for tens of thousands of people to start new lives in the UK. In every year since 2016 the UK resettled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU member state. These remarkable achievements have been made possible through the tireless commitment of individuals, community and faith groups, local authorities, the devolved administrations, NGOs and our international partners. I am grateful to them for their ongoing support.

The global humanitarian need continues to grow with over 68.5 million people around the world forced from their homes and nearly 25.4 million refugees fleeing persecution; whether due to conflict, religious belief, sexuality or any reason under the refugee convention. Over half of those refugees are children and for some, resettlement to places like the UK is the only durable solution.

With our commitments under the vulnerable persons’ resettlement scheme, vulnerable children’s resettlement scheme and gateway protection programme coming to an end during 2020, it is right to provide certainty to our partners on the future of the UK’s refugee resettlement offer. That is why today I want to confirm the UK’s ongoing commitment to resettlement and set out our plans for after 2020.

Once we have delivered our current commitments we will consolidate our biggest resettlement schemes into a new global resettlement scheme. Our priority will be to continue to identify and resettle the most vulnerable refugees, identified and referred by UNHCR. Under the global resettlement scheme, we will broaden our geographical focus beyond the middle east and north Africa region and be better placed to swiftly respond to international crises in co-ordination with global partners.

In the first year of operation of the new scheme, the UK will aim to resettle in the region of 5,000 of the world’s most vulnerable refugees. We will continue to purposefully target those most in need of assistance, including people requiring urgent medical treatment, survivors of violence and torture, and women and children at risk. A new process for emergency resettlement will also be developed, allowing the UK to respond quickly to instances of heightened protection need, providing a faster route to protection where lives are at risk. Building on the experience of delivering the current schemes and the significant contribution of our community sponsors a key part of our resettlement offer will be that those resettled through our community sponsorship and Mandate routes will be in addition to our yearly, global commitment.

We will continue to work in partnership with local authorities. Recognising that their continued support will be fundamental to achieving our ambitions, we will ensure that they continue to be well-funded, supporting them to provide resettled refugees with the best possible support upon arrival.

We will also continue our strong engagement with civil society as we move forward.

We will continue to support the long-term integration of refugees, empowering them to fulfil their potential and contribute positively to their new communities.
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

CMA Loyalty Penalty Report

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark):

Our competition, legal and regulatory frameworks are fundamental to our future economic success. We have a reputation for a world-leading competition framework and independent economic regulators with duties to protect the interests of consumers. However, where markets are not working for consumers, we will ensure that they are treated fairly. Today I published the Government response to the Competition and Markets Authority’s (CMA) loyalty penalty report. It is my intention that the UK’s competition and markets regime is firmly focused on delivering improved outcomes for consumers. That means ensuring that significant sources of consumer detriment, such as the loyalty penalty, are tackled quickly and effectively.

Following concerns raised by Citizens Advice in a “super-complaint”, the CMA uncovered harmful business practices by firms, which exploit consumer loyalty. The CMA investigation looked at the five markets highlighted by the super-complaint—cash savings, mortgages, household insurance, mobile and broadband—and found that there is a total loyalty penalty of around £4 billion a year in these markets. It also found that vulnerable people, including the elderly and those on a low income, may be more at risk of paying the loyalty penalty.

Our response to the CMA’s loyalty penalty investigation sends a strong signal that poor practices by suppliers will not be tolerated and sets out the following:

- our intention to establish an administrative model of consumer enforcement for the CMA and to consult on how to do this as part of the forthcoming consumer White Paper
- that the CMA and the economic regulators must do more to stop business practices that lead to the loyalty penalty, and that we are prepared to legislate to give our enforcers new tools to do so where necessary
- that targeted price interventions, where proportionate, should be considered by regulators to tackle the loyalty penalty. Although pricing interventions should be a matter of last resort, it is vital that all potential interventions are considered to protect those who are most vulnerable
- reiterates the commitments we set out in our smart data regime and establishing a vulnerable consumer challenge.

This builds on our consumer Green Paper, as part of our modern industrial strategy, published in April 2018, which tackles areas where markets are not working for consumers and businesses. We believe that all of these measures will help create the conditions for more effective competition and improve day to day outcomes for consumers.

I will place a copy of our letter to the CMA in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1629]

INHERITANCE TAX RELIEF: KINDERTRANSPORT

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):
The Government are proud to continue to support victims of Nazi persecution. Earlier this year, the German Government set up a compensation scheme for Jewish individuals who were transported from Germany on the Kindertransport. Under the previous rules, these payments would be treated as part of the individual’s estate and liable to inheritance tax. The Government will legislate in Finance Bill 2019-20 so that compensation payments made as part of this scheme will not be subject to inheritance tax considerations.

[HCWS1634]

EDUCATION

Disadvantaged Children in Education

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi):

Education should give every child, no matter their background, the opportunity to reach their full potential. To this end, we are announcing the conclusion of the children in need review, delivering the Government’s manifesto commitment to better understand how we can improve the educational outcomes of children who have needed a social worker.

Through our reforms to social care and across Government, we are already taking action to improve safety and stability for these children: strengthening families and tackling domestic abuse, poor mental health and substance misuse, which are prevalent drivers of need. Through our action to drive up the quality of services in local authorities and to develop a highly capable, skilled social work workforce, we have seen the number of local authorities judged inadequate decline by around a quarter since 2017—providing consistently better services for thousands of children and families across the country.

We have also delivered significant work to raise the educational attainment of our most disadvantaged children. This includes the Timpson review of school exclusions, reforms to alternative provision, delivering on the 2014 SEND reforms, and ensuring a system of advocacy and support for looked after children.

Children in need are those who need a social worker for help or protection, including children on a child in need plan or a child protection plan, looked after children, and disabled children. The children in need review set out to assess the educational outcomes of this group of children and what actions and interventions are needed to improve them. As part of the review we have developed new data and analysis, conducted a broad programme of qualitative evidence gathering, including a call for evidence and literature review, and engaged with practitioners working in education and social care, as well as children and young people with experience of being supported by social care.
The review has evidenced, for the first time, the prevalence of children who have needed a social worker currently or previously, and the extent of these children’s lasting poor educational outcomes. We now know that 1.6 million children have needed a social worker at some point, equivalent to one in 10 last year. This group do significantly worse than others at all stages of education. Of young people who needed a social worker in their GCSE year, by age 21, half had still not achieved level 2 qualifications (which include GCSEs) compared to 12% of those not in need.

The review has developed four priority areas for action, and identified where we can start work immediately. These are: promoting visibility and recognition, not only for the purposes of safeguarding but in education; keeping children in school, making sure education is a protective factor against abuse, neglect and exploitation; raising aspiration to believe that more is possible of this group of children; and finally, supporting schools to support children themselves—recognising the consequences of childhood adversity on attendance, learning, behaviour and mental health.

The immediate action we will take includes:
- Clarifying and strengthening our expectations around information sharing between within schools and social care;
- Continuing to improve our national data on this group;
- Improving clarity, timeliness and transparency around in-year admissions;
- Developing much-needed new research on tackling absence;
- Consulting on strengthening the role of the designated safeguarding lead in schools, and exploring whether there is a case for extending and adapting the scope of virtual school heads;
- Building on reforms to mental health support, by identifying and sharing best practice around responding to the lasting impacts of childhood adversity;
- Working with What Works for Children’s Social Care to analyse which interventions, trialled by the education endowment foundation, are most effective for children with a social worker.

This action aims to ensure that every child can benefit from their education, ensuring they have the knowledge and skills to fulfil their potential, and the resilience they need for future success. However, it is only a start. To support families and communities, the whole of Government will continue to work together in preventing and tackling the causes of need, from the early years through to adolescence.

The report “Help, Protection, Education: concluding the children in need review” has been published alongside a companion data and analysis document on gov.uk. I will place a copy of the documents published in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1635]

EXCITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

Bilateral Voting Rights

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): Today, I can confirm that the Government have reached a bilateral agreement with Luxembourg that will secure the rights of UK nationals living in Luxembourg, and Luxembourgish citizens living in the UK, to stand and vote in local elections in both a deal and no-deal scenario. This agreement builds on our close ties and reinforces our commitment to the future relationship between our two nations.

Citizens have always been our priority in the negotiations for our departure from the EU, as has protecting the interests of British expats. The UK pushed hard in negotiations to protect the right to stand and vote in local elections for UK nationals living in the EU, and EU citizens in the UK, but these rights were not included in the withdrawal agreement. Instead, we have been pursuing bilateral arrangements with individual member states to secure these rights. Throughout this process we have been clear that allowing EU citizens to vote in local elections in the UK should be considered alongside the rights and interests of UK nationals and it has been our priority to secure these reciprocally.

We have now reached agreements with Spain, Portugal and Luxembourg and we are continuing our discussions with other member states.

UK nationals will be able to continue to vote, and in some cases stand, in elections in member states where their domestic legislation allows this and they meet the requirements set out, for example on length of residency. This includes: Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, Netherlands, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden.

I will be depositing a copy of the latest agreement in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1633]

General Affairs Council

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): I will attend the General Affairs Council in Luxembourg on 18 June 2019 to represent the UK. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full member state and continue to act in good faith.

The provisional agenda includes:

- Multiannual financial framework 2021-2027
- Ministers and the Commission will discuss progress on the multiannual financial framework (MFF) negotiations. The intention is for member states to reach an agreement on the negotiations in autumn 2019.
- Preparation of the European Council on 20-21 June 2019: Conclusions and European Council follow-up
- The Council will discuss preparations for the June European Council. The agenda includes: adoption of the 2019-2024 strategic agenda for the European Union; MFF; climate change; the European semester; and the disinformation and elections report prepared by the Romanian presidency in co-operation with the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Ministers will also discuss progress in implementing previous European Council conclusions.

Enlargement and stabilisation and association process

Enlargement is the process whereby European countries are able to join the European Union. Ministers will discuss and adopt conclusions on the 2019 enlargement package which was presented by the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and other EU institutions on 29 May.
European semester—Horizontal report on country specific recommendations

The European semester provides a framework for the co-ordination of economic policies across the EU. Ministers will discuss the Commission's horizontal report on the macro-economic position of the EU, which draws on country specific recommendations. The report will be passed to European Council ahead of its meeting on 20 and 21 June.

[HCWS1632]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Firearms Licence Fees

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Today, I am publishing the Government response to the consultation we launched in January 2017 on new fees for applications for firearms licences administered by the Home Office and the Scottish Government. These licences are:

- licences to possess firearms that are prohibited under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968. Such licences are issued to, for example, dealers or manufacturers of prohibited firearms and are distinct from police-issued certificates for civilian firearms, shotguns, and those issued to registered firearms dealers who deal in civilian firearms and shotguns;
- licences for museums that hold firearms as part of their collections; and
- licences for approved target shooting clubs.

The Government introduced measures, through the Policing and Crime Act 2017, to enable new fees for these licences to be set on a cost recovery basis, through secondary legislation. The fees will apply in England, Wales and Scotland.

I am very grateful to those who responded to the consultation. We received almost 5,000 responses.

The Home Office has reviewed the levels of fees set out in the consultation document, and we discussed our proposals with representatives of fee payers. The levels of fees now set out in the Government response are significantly lower than those originally proposed, due to both revised estimates of Home Office costs and a fresh look at the costs that it is appropriate to recover through the new fees.

An important issue raised by fee-payers' representatives was the potential impact of the proposed fees on museums with firearms collections. Given that the museums involved are publicly funded and act in the public interest, the Government has decided to maintain the current museum firearms licence fee level of £200 for the grant and renewal of these licences. This is set out in more detail in the impact assessment accompanying the consultation response. The Government response and the impact assessment will be published on gov.uk, and I will arrange for copies to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The new fees will be introduced by statutory instrument as soon as parliamentary time allows.

[HCWS1630]

JUSTICE

Female Offenders

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): Today, I am publishing the Farmer review, which was commissioned as part of our female offender strategy in June 2018.

This work builds on Lord Farmer's 2017 review of family ties for male prisoners, which concluded that good relationships are vital to reducing reoffending. For women, relationships are the most significant factor to impact directly on the likelihood of reoffending. More so than men, women in the justice system are in relationships that are abusive and/or criminogenic, and therefore supporting female offenders to strengthen and develop relationships is not straightforward.

We also know that women are more likely to be primary carers than men when entering the criminal justice system. Whereas children of male prisoners will often remain at home with their mother, children frequently have to leave their home when mothers go into custody. This tells us that incarceration of women disproportionately impacts families and children, and could increase the risk of intergenerational offending.

This is why I am immensely grateful to Lord Farmer for undertaking this important review.

Building on his original review, this review looks at his earlier recommendations through the lens of the needs of female offenders, including the distinct complexities in their relationships.

The Farmer review for women investigates how supporting female offenders to engage with their families can lower recidivism, aid rehabilitation and assist in addressing the issues of intergenerational crime. It does this by looking across the whole system—not just within prison—following the vision of our strategy to support women and improve outcomes for them at all points of the justice system.

The review finds that there is a lack of information on the personal circumstances of women, including of dependent children, which poses a fundamental barrier to supporting women to maintain those relationships. It draws practical proposals to help women communicate better with their family and dependents when at court and in custody, as well as proposing how prisons can better facilitate more frequent, safe, and private family visits.

In line with our strategy, the review represents a preference for women to be managed, and to manage their own relationships safely, in the community where possible.

The review can be found online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/farmer-review-for-women

I am pleased to welcome this report and to share my commitment to take forward this important area of work. We will look closely at the findings and recommendations from Lord Farmer’s review for women and how we can best give effect to these in both the short and longer term.

In doing so, my Department will build on the good work we have been taking forward following Lord Farmer’s original review. My officials will also work closely with other agencies, partners and Government Departments to ensure the importance of strengthening family and relational ties for female offenders and their children is reflected across the criminal justice system.

[HCWS1631]
A further £1.45 billion capital funding has been given to hospitals to provide winter improvements such as upgrading wards and redeveloping A&Es and an additional £36.3 million has been invested into the ambulance services for new vehicles and “make-ready hubs”. This is on top of the additional £1.6 billion for the NHS in 2018-19 to support A&E and elective care performance.

This Government have been able to make these significant investments in social care because of the balanced approach we have taken to our public finances, investing in public services while keeping debt falling.

In 2017-18, local government spent £17.1 billion on adult social care, up by £390 million from £16.75 billion in 2016-17.

We are also investing £84 million in protecting our children over the next five years to expand three of our most successful children’s social care innovation programme projects. The projects will keep more children at home safely in up to 20 local authorities.

Helping the most vulnerable in our society also means supporting troubled families and local government is at the heart of this agenda.

Our troubled families programmes helps local authorities support families with complex needs and improve outcomes for individuals.

It has been a catalyst for local services, transforming how they work together, making them more integrated and cost-efficient, reducing dependency and demand for expensive services.

The results speak for themselves. The latest national programme evaluation shows that—when compared to a similar comparison group—targeted intervention saw: the number of children going into care down by a third; the number of adults going to prison down by a quarter and juveniles in custody down by a third; and 10% fewer people claiming jobseeker allowance.

Although I recognise there is more to do, these outcomes are a real tribute to the efforts of family workers, local authorities and their many partners in our public services and the voluntary sector.

Our work supporting vulnerable families is much more than the financial boost you get from a regular wage, it is about the pride and dignity that comes from being able to take control of your own life.

This Government have given local authorities the tools and resources they need to do this vital work.

The end of the current multi-year deal is in sight, and it is clear we need to take a longer view on how we fund councils, as we move to a stronger, sustainable and smarter system of local government.

Preparations for increased business rates retention, a new approach to distributing funding between local authorities and the upcoming spending review will be pivotal to this. Important work is under way with authorities and the wider sector to better understand service costs and pressures.

For years, councils have asked for more control over the money raised. We have listened and responded through our plans to increase business rates retention to 75% by devolving additional grants, and in the process providing local authorities with powerful incentives to grow their economies.
Local authorities estimate they will retain around £2.5 billion in business rates growth in 2019-20 under the current system. This is a significant revenue stream on top of the core settlement funding.

In addition to giving more control, councils want and need to see a clearer link between the allocation of resources and local circumstances.

Our new funding formula will ensure a more transparent link between local needs and resources and the funding councils receive. We will ensure that measures of deprivation are, rightly, central to this, when we look at services like adult social care, children’s services, fire services and public health, because we want a system that ensures no one is left behind.

The Government are determined to give all local authorities the freedoms and flexibilities they need, so that they can continue to flourish and deliver vital services to meet the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.
We are working with UK Finance and the finance sector to review the role supply chain finance plays in fair and prompt payment, including the potential for an industry led standard for good practice in supply chain finance. We also want to bring greater transparency to how supply chain finance is reported in company accounts and assessed in audits, by working with the Financial Reporting Council to develop guidance and build it into their sampling of companies’ accounts.

Our modern industrial strategy aims to make Britain the best place to start and grow a business and removing barriers to growth is key to this. The response to the call for evidence and the package of measures I have announced will tackle the continuing issue of late payments to ensure this happens.

**Competitiveness Council 27-28 May 2019: Post-Council Statement**

The final Competitiveness Council of the Romanian presidency agreed three sets of Council conclusions: on the single market; on industrial policy and on tourism and reviewed the legislative achievements of the last six months.

The Council discussed the link between competition policy and EU competitiveness. Commissioner Bienkowska presented the Commission’s analysis on market integration, market concentration in the EU and protectionist practices in third countries. Ministers discussed EU competition rules and EU trade policy with regards to third country competition. The UK cited the Furman review which recommends updating competition policy for the digital age.

Ministers held a wide-ranging discussion on priorities for the future of EU industrial and single market policy. On industry there was broad agreement that the new Commission should develop an integrated industrial strategy which recognises global challenges. Discussions focused on the need to develop strategic value chains within Europe and welcomed the focus on important projects of common Europe interest (IPCEIs). The UK highlighted the need to recognise the global nature of value chains when developing policies. The increasing servitisation of manufacturing, the importance of digitalisation and the need to support the transition to a low-carbon economy were also key themes. The Council adopted conclusions on a vision for an EU industrial policy strategy (9263/19) and the future of the single market (9402/19). Ministers also agreed conclusions on the importance of tourism (document 9264/19).

The Commission reported progress on current legislative items: the directive on cross-border conversions, mergers and divisions; the directives on the modernisation of the EU consumer protection rules; and the collective interests of consumers and the general safety of vehicles regulation. The Commission also outlined its work on better regulation and provided an update on the future of the Rapex market surveillance system following the 2018 assessment.
The presidency reported on its conference in Craiova, Romania on the automotive sector on 18 March. The forum discussed challenges around low emission vehicles; connected and autonomous vehicles; and the competitiveness of European industry.

The Commission reflected on work to move the EU towards a circular economy and to achieve the objective of recycling 10 million tonnes of plastic by 2025.

The incoming Finnish presidency set out its future priorities: environmentally and socially sustainable growth with an integrated view of the single market and a modern industrial policy.

**Day two - Research**

Day two of the Competitiveness Council (Internal market, industry, research and space) took place on the 28 May in Brussels. I represented the UK.

The Competitiveness Council started with a policy debate on strengthening Europe’s role as a global actor and promoting international co-operation, space diplomacy and contributing to building the global space governance. The UK stressed the importance of open collaboration with third countries and entities with expertise, such as the European Space Agency (ESA), in order to achieve the strategic objectives of the EU in space.

Following the policy debate there was a brief “extraordinary ESA Council”, which adopted the “space as an enabler” conclusions.

The 11th EU-ESA Council was jointly chaired by the Spanish ESA presidency and Romanian EU Council presidency. They facilitated an exchange of views on the topic of “space as an enabler”. In the UK’s intervention Minister Skidmore highlighted the need to focus on better exploitation of the new technologies—artificial intelligence, internet of things and quantum technology—which would drive the 4th industrial revolution.

The Romanian presidency then resumed the Competitiveness Council with a policy debate on research and innovation as a driving force for a more competitive European Union. The UK stressed the importance of researcher freedom, closing the innovation gap and operating in a global context—as well the importance of training the next generation: in this context, the UK’s intervention Minister Skidmore highlighted the need to focus on better exploitation of the new technologies—artificial intelligence, internet of things and quantum technology—which would drive the 4th industrial revolution.

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During any other business the Slovakian delegation outlined the recently signed BIOEAST initiative whilst the Romanian presidency recalled the launch of the joint strategic research and innovation agenda for the Black sea (SRIA) on 8 May. The incoming Finnish presidency concluded the Council by providing information on the work programme of their EU Council presidency.

The GCA was established by the Groceries Code Adjudicator Act 2013 (“the Act”). Its role is to monitor and enforce the groceries supply code of practice (“the code”), which the UK’s designated large grocery retailers must comply with when dealing with their direct suppliers.

Section 15 of the Act requires the Government to review periodically the performance of the GCA. The first review carried out in 2016 covered the period from the creation of the GCA (in June 2013) to 31 March 2016. The second review will cover the period from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2019.

The primary purpose of the review is to look back over the period 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2019 and to seek views and evidence which will allow the Government to make an assessment of the performance of the GCA against the measures set out in the Act. These measures are explained in the terms of reference. The statutory review is not a review of the code or the remit of the GCA. The code is a competition measure owned by the Competition and Markets Authority as the UK’s independent competition authority.

The Act requires us to consult the following: the GCA; the Competition and Markets Authority; the retailers subject to the code; one or more persons representing the interests of suppliers; one or more persons representing the interests of consumers; and any other appropriate person.

The consultation will run for 12 weeks and can be accessed at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/groceries-code-adjudicator-statutory-review-2016-to-2019. Stakeholders have until 12 September 2019 to respond. Following this, BEIS will analyse the responses. A report on the findings will then be published and laid before Parliament.

The Terms of Reference for the GCA Review have today been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

**DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT**

**Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): The Education, Youth, Culture and Sport (EYCS) Council took place in Brussels on 22-23 May 2019. The UK’s deputy permanent representative to the EU, Katrina Williams, represented the UK for the youth session on 22 May. The Minister for School Standards, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), represented the UK in the education session. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Lord Ashton, represented the UK on 23 May for the culture/audio-visual session and part of the sports session.

**Youth**

The session began with the adoption of both the Council conclusions on young people and the future of work and the resolution on the governance of the EU youth dialogue.

**Groceries Code Adjudicator**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I have today launched the statutory review of the Groceries Code Adjudicator (GCA).
This was then followed by a policy debate on young people as agents of democracy in the EU.

Other

There was information from the European Commission in regards to DiscoverEU and information from the Portuguese delegation on the world conference of Ministers responsible for Youth 2019 and Youth Forum Lisboa (22-23 June 2019).

Culture/audio-visual

The meeting began with the adoption of both the Council conclusions on young creative generations and conclusions on co-productions. This was followed by a policy debate on “from tackling disinformation to rebuilding EU citizens’ trust in the media”.

Other

Information was provided by the Hungarian delegation on the nomination of Veszprém for the European capital of culture 2023. In addition, information was also provided from the Spanish and Portuguese delegations on celebrating the fifth centenary of the first circumnavigation of the world, led by Fernão de Magalhães and Juan Sebastián Elcano.

Sport

The sport session of EYCS began with the adoption of a resolution on EU member states’ representation and co-ordination for the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) meeting in Montreal. In addition, Council conclusions on access to sport for persons with disabilities were also adopted.

The session then proceeded with a policy debate on increasing the participation of children and young people in sport in 21st century Europe.

Other

There was information from the EU member states’ representatives in the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) foundation board on the meeting with WADA that took place in Montreal on 14-16 May 2019, information from the Finnish presidency on the work programme of the incoming presidency and information from the Danish delegation about the Council of Europe convention on the manipulation of sports competitions (match fixing).

To conclude, there was information from the Bulgarian, Greek and Romanian delegations on the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Serbia to host either the Euro 2028 championship or the 2030 World cup.

[HCWS1644]

Telecoms Council

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The Telecommunications formation of the Transport, Telecommunications and Energy Council took place in Luxembourg on 7 June 2019. The deputy permanent representative to the EU, Katrina Williams, represented the UK.

The Council held a policy debate and adopted conclusions on the future of a highly digitised Europe beyond 2020: “Boosting digital and economic competitiveness across the Union and digital cohesion”. The Council then considered a progress report on the e-privacy regulation.

The Romanian presidency then provided information on the digital Europe programme in the next multi-annual financial framework from 2021-27, and the proposed regulation establishing the European cybersecurity competence centre and the network of co-ordination centres. The Czech presidency then provided information on the Prague 5G security conference. The EU’s counter-terrorism co-ordinator provided information on 5G and law enforcement.

The Romanian presidency then provided an overview of presidency events in Romania. The incoming Finnish presidency provided information on its work plan.

Due to a lack of ministerial quorum at the Council, the decision on the position to be taken by EU member states on behalf of the European Union in the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) world radiocommunication conference 2019 (WRC-19) will now be adopted at the Employment, Social Policy, Health, and Consumer Affairs Council as an A-point on 13-14 June. The recast public sector information directive was adopted as an A-point at the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 6 June.

[HCWS1643]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bovine TB

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): Today I am updating the House on the implementation of the Government’s strategy to eradicate bovine TB in England by 2038.

Bovine TB remains one of the greatest animal health threats to the UK, causing significant hardship and distress for hard-working farmers and rural communities. Government and industry are therefore continuing to take strong action to eradicate the disease.

Professor Sir Charles Godfray’s independent review of the strategy highlighted a number of potential further actions while noting the difficulties associated with eradicating bovine TB. The review’s conclusions include improving surveillance in cattle herds, the need to continue to address the disease in badgers and for more research and development (R&D). We continue to assess the review’s findings and plan to publish a full response in due course. I am however today providing further information on reinforcing TB testing in the high-risk area, announcing plans to invite further applications to our badger vaccination grant scheme and confirming the licensing and authorisation by Natural England of three supplementary badger control areas for 2019. Further information is available on gov.uk.

In May 2018 we announced that from 2020 we would introduce six-monthly cattle surveillance testing, with less frequent testing for lower risk herds, in the high-risk area (HRA) of England to enable earlier detection and eradication of disease, and to prevent it spreading to new areas. Having considered the likely demands that roll-out across the whole of the HRA in one step would place on cattle herd owners and the veterinary businesses that carry out the vast majority of the testing we are now working on a phased introduction from 2020. We will provide further details to affected cattle keepers and veterinary businesses in due course.
Vaccination of badgers against TB using BCG can provide a level of protection and can play a role in limiting TB spread to healthy badger populations. Therefore, a third round of applications for the “Badger edge vaccination scheme” (BEVS 2) is now open, with further grant funding available to private groups wishing to carry out badger vaccination in the edge area of England. Groups will receive at least 50% funding towards their eligible costs. This builds on the four initial four-year projects we have funded.

Alongside this we are investing in social and economic research to understand farmer behaviours and drivers of: cattle purchase and movement; attitudes to risk-based trading; attitudes to biosecurity, wildlife control and vaccination; and analysis of pros and cons of compensation versus insurance schemes.

In May 2019 fieldwork closed on a self-completion postal survey. Over 1,250 responses were received from herd owners across England. This will provide national representative estimates of cattle farmers’ attitudes and behaviours and towards biosecurity, cattle purchasing, and what influences on-farm decision making. We expect to publish headline findings in July 2019.

In July 2019 fieldwork will commence on a telephone survey of 1,500 HRA and edge area farms which have suffered a breakdown. The survey will estimate the monetary costs involved in a bovine TB breakdown which herd owners are not compensated for, including increased staffing and housing costs, and loss of productivity. This will allow accurate analysis of the financial impact of the disease to industry and individual farms. The project will report early in 2020.

We are determined to eradicate this devastating disease as quickly as possible.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse: Archdiocese of Birmingham Case Study

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Today the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse has published its latest case study report, which can be found at www.iicsa.org.uk

This report relates to the Archdiocese of Birmingham in the inquiry’s Roman Catholic Church investigation. I pay tribute to the strength and courage of the victims and survivors who have shared their experiences to ensure the inquiry can deliver its vital work.

Government will review this report and consider how to respond to its content in due course.

I would like to thank Professor Jay and her panel for their continued work to uncover the truth, expose what went wrong in the past and to learn the lessons for the future.

[HCWS1642]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council took place on 13 June 2019 in Luxembourg. The deputy permanent representative to the European Union, Katrina Williams, represented the UK.

The Council adopted conclusions on: closing the gender pay gap; implications for the safety and health of workers in the changing world of work; and the EU Council auditors’ report on the fund for European aid to the most deprived (FEAD).

The Council noted a progress report on the directive on equal treatment and debated employment and social policy aspects of country specific recommendations.

The presidency gave updates on two current legislative proposals: a regulation on European social statistics and revision of the regulations on the co-ordination of social security systems. The Council closed with information on events and initiatives in the broader field of employment and social policy.

In the margins of the meeting, Bratislava, Slovakia, was elected to host the new European labour authority.

[HCWS1638]

Office for Nuclear Regulation Annual Report and Accounts 2018-19

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): Later today the Office for Nuclear Regulation’s annual report and accounts for 2018-19 will be published. Having consulted the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who is accountable for nuclear security, and the Office for Nuclear Regulation, I can confirm, in accordance with paragraph 25(3) of schedule 7 to the Energy Act 2013, that there have been no exclusions to the published document on the grounds of national security.

[HCWS1639]
Written Statements

Monday 24 June 2019

TREASURY

ECOFIN

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):
A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Luxembourg on 14 June 2019.
ECOFIN was preceded by a meeting of the European Investment Bank (EIB) Board of Governors:
Annual EIB Board of Governors meeting
The meeting included: statements from the Chairman, President and Chairman of the Audit Committee; a governors discussion; a presentation on the annual report of the Audit Committee; and a vote for partial renewal of the Audit Committee. The UK was represented by Mark Bowman (Director General, International Finance, HM Treasury) during the EIB meeting.

Following this, EU Finance Ministers discussed the following at ECOFIN:

Early morning session
The Eurogroup President briefed the Council on the outcomes of the 13 June meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission provided an update on the current economic situation in the EU.

Banking union
The Council endorsed the progress report on the banking union.

Financial transaction tax
The Council received a progress update in relation to the enhanced co-operation on financial transaction tax.

G20 follow-up
The Romanian presidency and Commission presented the main outcomes of the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors, which took place on 8 to 9 June in Fukuoka, Japan.

European semester
The Council discussed a horizontal note on the draft 2019 country specific recommendations, and progress towards the Europe 2020 targets.

Stability and growth pact
The Council adopted Council decisions and recommendations on the implementation of the stability and growth pact.

Clean planet
The Council held an exchange of views on a strategic long-term vision for a climate-neutral economy.

Non-performing loans
Under any other business, the Commission provided an update on the implementation of the action plan to tackle non-performing loans in Europe.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

EU Environment Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):
The next EU Environment Council will take place on 26 June, in Luxembourg. I will be attending to represent the UK.

On environment items, the main legislative focus will be a general approach on the regulation on water-reuse. In addition, there will also be an exchange of views on the environment implementation review (EIR), as well as the adoption of Council conclusions on a sustainable EU chemicals policy.

Any other business (AOB) will include information from the Commission and the presidency on four items:
Clean Planet for all: Strategic long-term vision for a climate-neutral economy (information from the presidency);
A discussion on current legislative proposals (information from the presidency);
A discussion on regulation on LIFE; and
A discussion on shipping monitoring, reporting and verification.

Reports on main recent international meetings (information from the presidency and the Commission):
Triple conference of the parties to the Basel (COP 14), Rotterdam (COP9) and Stockholm (COP 9) conventions (Geneva, 29 April-10 May 2019); and
Fourth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-4) (Nairobi, 11-15 March 2019).

Communication on the draft integrated national energy and climate plans (presentation by the Commission).

There are currently five member state led AOBs:
Workshop on the “Future environment action programme” (information from the Austrian delegation);
Possible European measures to support clean mobility and in particular, electromobility (information from the Bulgarian delegation);
Conference on carbon pricing and aviation taxes (information from the Netherlands delegation);
G7 Environment Ministers’ meeting (information from the French delegation); and
Work programme of the incoming presidency (information from the Finnish delegation).

TRANSPORT

High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am today publishing the statement of reasons Command Paper for the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill. The Command Paper is titled the “Government overview of the case for HS2 Phase 2a and its environmental impacts”. This is required by parliamentary Standing Order 224A to assist the House during the Third Reading of the High Speed Rail (West Midlands - Crewe) Bill. This document summarises the work that has already been done to assess, control and mitigate the environmental impacts.
of HS2 Phase 2a, and explains why the Government continue to take the view that the HS2 Phase 2a project is worthy of their support.

Copies of the statement of reasons will be made available in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-06-24/HCWS1647/.

[HCWS1647]
Written Statements

Tuesday 25 June 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

EU Council

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The EU Energy Council will take place on 25 June 2019 in Luxembourg, where the Deputy Permanent Representative to the European Union will represent the UK.

The presidency will put the Council conclusions on the future of the energy systems in the energy union to Ministers for adoption.

The European Commission will provide information regarding the EU’s external energy relations. This will be followed by an exchange of views.

Any other business (AOB) will include:

- A presentation from the Commission on the draft integrated national energy and climate plans; and
- Information from the Finnish delegation on the work programme of the incoming presidency.

[HCWS1649]

TREASURY

Finance Bill

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The Government will introduce the Finance Bill following the next Budget.

In line with the approach to tax policy making set out in the Government’s documents “Tax Policy Making: a new approach”, published in 2010, and “The new Budget timetable and the tax policy making process”, published in 2017, the Government are committed, where possible, to publishing most tax legislation in draft for technical consultation before the legislation is laid before Parliament.

The Government will publish draft clauses for the next Finance Bill, which will largely cover preannounced policy changes, on Thursday 11 July 2019 along with accompanying explanatory notes, tax information and impact notes, responses to consultations and other supporting documents. All publications will be available on the www.gov.uk website.

[HCWS1657]

DEFENCE

F-35B Lightning Aircraft

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): The House may welcome an update on the deployment of the RAF’s new F-35B Lightning II aircraft.

The F-35B Lightning II is an advanced, fifth-generation aircraft procured to operate alongside the RAF’s Typhoon. It will be jointly manned by the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy, will be able to operate with equal capability from land and sea, and will form an integral part of carrier strike operating from the Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers. With advanced sensors, mission systems and low-observable technology (stealth), the Lightning is a fifth-generation air system which will provide the UK with a world-beating combat air capability. The Lightning will give the UK operational flexibility, allowing us to act at a time and place of our choosing. Some 17 of the first tranche of 48 F-35Bs have already been delivered; we will maintain our plan to buy 138 F-35 Lightning aircraft over the life of the programme, as stated in the strategic defence and security review 2015.

A detachment of F-35B Lightnings from RAF Marham has been forward-based at RAF Akrotiri since late May, developing the capabilities of this formidable new fifth-generation combat aircraft. This deployment has proven extremely successful. It was therefore, decided to offer the aircraft for use on Operation SHADER as part of the UK’s contribution to global coalition operations against Daesh. On 16 June, UK F-35B flew its first ever operational sortie as part of Operation SHADER. Since then, UK F-35B Lightnings have flown in the skies of Iraq and Syria, performing a variety of roles for our partner forces on the ground.

This F-35 activity is part of the UK’s ongoing contribution of sophisticated air power to global coalition efforts to find, identify and degrade Daesh’s military capabilities. Although Daesh’s military capability has been diminished, the organisation continues to pose a threat, and counter-Daesh operations are as crucial now as they were at Daesh’s height. The UK’s F-35B Lightnings will continue to help combat Daesh over Iraq and Syria, before returning to the UK in July 2019.

[HCWS1650]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Commonwealth Games

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I wish to inform the House that, on 25 June 2019, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport laid a minute advising of the investment of £778 million in Birmingham and the west midlands to deliver the 2022 Commonwealth games. This is an update to the minute laid on 9 October 2017, which set out the contingent liabilities that were taken on by the Government in order to support Birmingham’s bid to host the 2022 games.

The Government’s other commitments to the games, including the underwriting of the organisation and delivery of the games and a number of guarantees, will remain in place until the end of the 2022-23 financial year, following the successful bid by Birmingham and our agreement of a hosting contract with the Commonwealth Games Federation.

[HCWS1658]

EDUCATION

Relationships and Sex Education: Statutory Guidance

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Today, following the successful passage of the regulations for the introduction of relationships education, relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education, the Government have published the final accompanying statutory guidance.
At the heart of preparing children for life in modern Britain is making sure that they understand the world they are growing up in. It is 19 years since the sex and relationships guidance was last updated. For children and young people, the challenges that they face today are very different. Children are encountering a more interconnected and interdependent world, and this has changed significantly how they build relationships, interact with their peers and manage their own mental and physical wellbeing.

This presents both opportunities and risks, as children have greater exposure to information, content and people that can and do cause harm. There is little distinction for many young people between their lives online and off, and that is why we believe now more than ever, that we need to provide young people with the knowledge they need in every context to lead safe, happy and healthy lives.

We have therefore brought forward measures requiring the introduction of compulsory relationships education for all pupils in primary schools, compulsory relationships and sex education for all pupils in secondary schools, and compulsory health education for all pupils in state-funded schools from September 2020.

With cross-party support, the regulations for these subjects were approved by both Houses of Parliament and were made by the Secretary of State on 9 May. The statutory guidance published today sets out the legal duties with which schools must comply, the required core teaching content for the subjects, and guidance on how the content should be delivered in an age appropriate way.

We will be setting out further details on how we will support schools to introduce the new subjects in September 2020. This will include working closely with the many schools who are choosing to begin teaching the subjects from September 2019, so that we can support their journey, learn lessons and share good practice.

We will also be convening a new working group, who will provide insight into how the new guidance is working in practice. This group, with representatives from teaching unions, sector experts, faith and minority groups, parents and young people, will provide us with evidence and feedback to improve the delivery of these subjects.

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

HOME DEPARTMENT

Forensic Service Provider: Cyber Incident

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): On 3 June, Brussels-based scientific testing company Eurofins Scientific reported that it had been victim to a global ransomware attack. In the UK, its subsidiary Eurofins Forensic Services (EFS), which is a significant private sector forensic testing provider was affected.

Ministers have been briefed on the situation by operational leads and a range of actions have been taken to mitigate the impact on our criminal justice system and the public.

The National Crime Agency (NCA) has taken the operational command of the criminal investigation in the UK, with the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) leading our cyber response. Both the NCSC and NCA have deployed specialist officers to Brussels to assist Eurofins in the international investigation. These experts continue to work closely with both the company and the Cyber Incident Response firm EFS has employed to contain the situation. The affected UK law enforcement agencies reported the incident to the Information Commissioner’s Office. There is no evidence to date that this crime was specifically targeting the UK company.

We have taken immediate steps to minimise the impact of this crime on the criminal justice system. The National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) suspended use of EFS immediately and isolated police networks from the forensic service provider to retain their integrity. The NPCC put in place the national contingency plan and diverted urgent and priority submissions to alternative suppliers. Other forensic submissions are being managed nationally to ensure that sufficient capacity is available for all forces.

These measures are temporary but will remain in place for as long as necessary. The NPCC, the UK Accreditation Service and the Forensic Science Regulator are working closely with the company to assess when it can continue to resume accepting forensic submissions.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) is working to ensure all hearings remain based on reliable evidence. While investigations are ongoing, prosecutors will assess the impact on a case-by-case basis working closely with partners across the CPS and EFS.

If prosecutors or the police believe that there may have been an impact, they will contact the victims or witnesses involved. But if any victims are concerned, national support services are also available. These include the 24-hour Victim Support helpline with details on the Ministry of Justice website. However, I want to stress that at present we have no reason to believe there has been an impact on the forensic evidence tested by EFS.

The serious nature of this incident highlights the importance of all firms being cyber-aware; and we urge businesses of all types and sizes to follow the guidance on this growing threat on the NCSC’s website.

The Government continue to assess and enhance our cyber-security capabilities and it is vital we build strong defences—and every person, organisation or business has a part to play.

The investigation into this serious cyber-attack remains live but we will use our understanding of this latest incident to limit future harm to the UK.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Joint Inspection Team: Contingent Liability for Indemnity

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): I am today informing the House of changes to the contingent liability for the provision of an indemnity for the Joint Inspection Team (JIT) as set out in my statement and associated Department minute of 11 December 2018.
The Government judge that in this particular case there is no practical effect of not being bound as the Decision pertains to the EU’s participation as an observer at the meetings of the Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO). The UK tabled a statement at Council expressing regret at not having the three month period allowed for under the EU treaties to reach this decision. Additionally, the UK underlined that the Council Decision had not gone through Parliamentary scrutiny processes and that the procedure should not constitute a precedent for similar decisions.

PRIME MINISTER
Office for Disability

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This written statement confirms that the Office for Disability Issues (ODI) will transfer to the Cabinet Office from the Department for Work and Pensions in November 2019 through a machinery of government change.

The ODI will be incorporated into the newly established cross-Government disability team based in Cabinet Office. This move recognises that disabled people face barriers across a wide range of aspects of their lives and coordinated cross-Government action is therefore vital. It also signals the importance the Government place on disability.

The new disability team in the Cabinet Office will sit in the new equalities hub alongside the Government Equalities Office and the race disparity unit. Together they will be better equipped to drive meaningful progress on equality and to tackle intersectional issues.

This aligns with the Minister for disabled people’s written statement laid today on a new cross-Government approach to disability.
The Department for Work and Pensions will also in the coming months bring forward a Green Paper on health and disability support, to enable a conversation about building a welfare system for the future that is an ally of disabled people. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will also be setting out plans to work with Departments, regulators and stakeholders to improve consumer outcomes for disabled people through developing metrics to compare how well companies deliver for disabled customers in essential markets.

The team will work closely with disabled people, disabled people’s organisations and charities to take forward this new approach to disability, with their views and experiences at the forefront of any new policy.

This written statement aligns with the Prime Minister’s written statement tabled today on Machinery of Government change for the Office for Disability Issues.
Written Statements

Wednesday 26 June 2019

CABINET OFFICE
EU Exit Preparedness

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): While the Government believe that leaving the EU with a deal is the best outcome, leaving without a deal remains the legal default at the end of the extension period on 31 October 2019. As a responsible Government, we have been preparing to minimise any disruption in the event of a no deal scenario for over two years and are continuing with these preparations. This statement is intended to provide the House with an update on these preparations.

We have published approximately 750 pieces of communications on no deal since August 2018, including 106 technical notices explaining to businesses and citizens what they need to do to prepare. Our advice covers a wide range of information, from maintaining funding for EU-funded programmes to driving in the EU after exit. To provide further advice, we have also contacted businesses directly—for example about 145,000 businesses that trade with the EU—to help them get ready for no deal customs procedures.

Since an extension to article 50 was agreed between the UK and the EU, the Government have continued to prepare for no deal. We continue to lay statutory instruments to ensure a functioning statute book by exit day. Since 12 April the Government have laid statutory instruments to address deficiencies in retained EU law in areas such as the environment, aviation safety, emissions trading and Euratom. The Government will continue to bring forward further statutory instruments to ensure we are fully prepared for exit.

We have signed a number of trade continuity agreements, including with Switzerland, a key trading partner. In addition to these signed agreements, the UK has also reached an agreement in principle with South Korea on the terms of a continuity trade agreement, through which businesses will be able to continue to benefit from existing trade arrangements. Once that agreement is signed, the UK will have signed agreements with countries that account for 63% of the UK’s current trade with those countries for which the UK is seeking continuity.

Guaranteeing the supply of critical “category 1” goods, including medicines, medical products, veterinary medicines and chemicals remains an essential element of the Government’s no deal contingency planning. The Government are therefore undertaking steps to secure freight capacity for suppliers of these goods in a no deal scenario.

The Department of Health and Social Care is starting the process of setting up an express freight contingency arrangement to support continuity of supply of medicines and medical products. This will be an urgent contingency measure for products requiring urgent delivery, within a 24 to 48 hour timeframe, if the UK leaves the EU without a deal. This express freight contingency arrangement forms part of the Department’s multi-layered approach, which includes rerouting medical supplies from the short strait crossings, extra warehouse space, stockpiling, buffer stocks, clarifying regulatory requirements, supporting traders to have all necessary paperwork in place at the border, and strengthening the processes used to deal with shortages to ensure that patients have uninterrupted access to medicines and medical products if the UK leaves the EU without a deal. Government will only pay for capacity as and when it is needed and used. This will be designed to cover all of the UK. The Department will be writing to industry to set out further details of these preparations.

The Department for Transport is putting in place a freight capacity framework agreement that will provide Government Departments with the ability to secure freight capacity for our critical supply chains as and when required. This framework does not commit the Government to purchasing or reserving any freight capacity, but it does provide a flexible list of operators and options for the provision of the capacity that can be drawn upon if needed.

In the coming months, the Government will make further announcements on their preparations for a possible no deal exit on 31 October, including on trade continuity agreements to limit disruption to our trade with third countries after we leave the EU.

Many of the most important mitigations require businesses and citizens to act. There have been hundreds of meetings at ministerial and official level to discuss preparedness with businesses and civil society groups. The Government will continue to engage with stakeholders across the UK to ensure they are ready for all scenarios. We have published extensive advice on the steps that businesses and citizens may need to take to prepare for our exit from the EU, which is available on www.gov.uk/euexit.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable Development Goals: Voluntary National Review

The Secretary of State for International Development (Rory Stewart): The Government have today published the United Kingdom’s first voluntary national review of progress towards the sustainable development goals (also known as the global goals). We are proud of what we have achieved but humbled by what we have not. It is not an end in itself but rather has taught us about what we must do better. It balances achievements with shortcomings and, most importantly, outlines next steps.

In September 2015, the 193 member states of the United Nations agreed the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development, including the 17 global goals (the goals). This ambitious agenda sets out the framework through which the world will work together to combat the most pressing challenges of our time, including eradicating extreme poverty, ending hunger, protecting our environment and breaking down gender barriers. These goals apply to all people in all countries, including here in the UK.

The goals are not just about doing more, they are about protecting what we have: protecting the environment, protecting heritage, protecting communities, protecting health and wellbeing, protecting the rights of vulnerable groups, and protecting our planet.
Our voluntary national review sets out the collective efforts of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland on the goals since their adoption in 2015. It covers domestic and international work across all 17 goals, with a focus on the domestic. It has been produced through collaboration with, and input from, numerous UK Government Departments and the devolved Administrations. Additionally, over 380 organisations from civil society, the private sector and faith groups, as well as many individuals, have been engaged.

While we have made significant progress and have strong foundations on which to build, there is more work to do if we are to meet the ambitious targets by 2030.

Conducting our voluntary national review has further deepened our respect and understanding of the global goals and stiffened our resolve to leave no one behind. I am grateful to all those who contributed to the review. Electronic copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The review is available at www.gov.uk/sustainabledevelopmentgoals

[HCWS1660]

JUSTICE

Law Commission Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): As part of its efforts to make the UK the safest place online in the world, the Prime Minister announced in February 2018 that the Law Commission was to review the current law around abusive and offensive online communications and highlight any gaps in the criminal law which cause problems in tackling this abuse. This commitment also stemmed from the work by the Committee on Standards in Public Life into intimidation in public life (a review which, in turn, was commissioned by the Prime Minister).

The Law Commission published phase 1 of their review of Abusive and Offensive Online Communications on 1 November 2018. Its scoping report can be found online at:
https://www.lawcom.gov.uk/abusive-and-offensive-online-communications

I would like to inform the House that the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport have now engaged the Law Commission on a second phase of their review of Abusive and Offensive Online Communications.

This work will begin in July 2019 and will build on the analysis undertaken by the Law Commission as part of phase 1 of this review. This found that while abusive online communications are in general criminalised to the same degree as equivalent offline offending, there remains considerable scope for reform—in particular, around the nature of some behaviour in the online environment, and the degree of harm it can cause.

As part of phase 2, the Law Commission will also consider the criminal law around the non-consensual taking and sharing of intimate images. The review will look at existing offences—for example section 33 of the Criminal Justice and Courts Act, which captures the non-consensual disclosure of intimate images with the intent to cause the victim distress—and identify whether there are any gaps in the scope of the protection already offered to victims, making recommendations to ensure that the criminal law provides consistent and effective protection against the creation and sharing of intimate images without consent. This honours the commitment given in the Commons by the hon. Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) during the passage of the Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019.

In parallel with this, the Law Commission will review the current communications offences (including section 127 of the Communications Act 2003 and section 1 of the Malicious Communications Act 1988) to establish whether the law is fit for purpose, and make specific recommendations about options for reform in this area. Alongside this, the Law Commission will also consider whether co-ordinated harassment by groups of people online could be more effectively dealt with by the criminal law.

The two strands will be concluded in a joint report, due to be published in spring/summer 2021.

A copy of this statement will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1659]
The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Government are in no doubt that the we face an environmental and climate emergency—from climate change to biodiversity decline, from poor air quality to plastic pollution—which requires urgent action. The decisions we make today will affect the future of our planet for generations to come.

The Government’s approach is defined not by the words we use, but by the actions we take. That is why, in October last year, we commissioned the independent Committee on Climate Change to provide advice on the implications of the Paris agreement for our long-term emissions reduction targets, and why the Government have now responded to that advice by setting a new legally binding target for net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, via an amendment to the Climate Change Act that came into force on Thursday 27 June 2019. This will bring an end to the UK’s contribution to the world’s contribution to the greenhouse gases over the next generation.

This latest action builds on the leading role we have taken in solving global environmental challenges, as we move towards a cleaner, resource efficient, more resilient and environmentally sustainable form of economic growth.

The UK was the first country in the world to introduce legally binding long-term emission reduction targets through the Climate Change Act 2008. Between 1990 and 2017, we reduced our emissions by 42 per cent while growing the economy by 72 per cent. We have been independently assessed by PwC as leading the G20 in decarbonising our economy since 2000. The independent International Energy Agency has recently stated that the UK is a world leader in decarbonising energy supply, both in terms of actual emissions reductions and ambitions set out in our future carbon targets.

We are continuing this proud record of action; we are now the first major economy in the world to have legislated for a net zero target. This commitment has been made possible by many years of hard work from Members across both Houses of Parliament and beyond.

Clean growth is at the heart of our modern industrial strategy, backed by the UK’s biggest ever increase in public investment in research and development. Whether it be through our global offshore wind industry, our leadership on green finance or our unrivalled research base that is leading the charge on electric vehicles, we are showing the economic benefits of cutting emissions while growing our economy. Low carbon technology and clean energy already contribute more than £44 billion to our economy every year. We already have almost 400,000 jobs in the low carbon economy and its supply chain, and by one estimate this could grow to two million jobs in 2030.

We are taking clear steps to build on this leadership and meet our future carbon budgets, building on our clean growth strategy. Last year we published our Road to Zero strategy, which sets out a clear pathway to zero emissions from road transport, alongside plans to develop one of the best charging networks in the world. In the power sector, £92 billion has been invested in clean energy since 2010, and earlier this year we published the £250 million offshore wind sector deal, which commits the industry to providing a third of electricity by 2030. We are continuing to improve the route to market for renewables, by making up to £557 million available for further contracts for difference, with £65 million budgeted for the latest allocation round 3. And the Chancellor announced the future homes standard, ensuring that by 2025 all new homes are future-proofed with low carbon heating and world-leading levels of energy efficiency.

Climate change and biodiversity decline globally are interlinked threats for wildlife and people. We must solve both challenges or we will solve neither. The recent IPBES report shows we must redouble our efforts at home and internationally. This is why we are introducing the landmark Environment Bill, the first in over 20 years. The Bill will include measures to improve air quality, put the protection and enhancement of biodiversity at the heart of the planning system, improve waste management and resource efficiency, and improve surface waste ground water and wastewater management. The Bill will put environmental ambition and accountability at the heart of Government, establishing the office for environmental protection and introducing statutory environmental principles. We are exploring options for developing a framework of targets to drive environmental improvement alongside sustainable growth.

The Bill will also place the Government’s flagship 25-year environment plan onto a statutory footing. The plan signals a step-change in ambition, setting out how we will improve the environment within a generation, by creating richer habitats for wildlife, improving air and water quality, and curbing the scourge of plastics in the world’s oceans. The first progress report, published in May 2019, finds that 90 per cent of our priority actions have been delivered or are on track for timely delivery.

In December 2018, the Government published a comprehensive resources and waste strategy as a blueprint for moving to a more circular economy which keeps resources in use for longer, eliminating all avoidable waste and doubling resource productivity by 2050.

We have laid the Agriculture Bill in Parliament, which sets out our plans to reward land managers for protecting and restoring the environment and farming sustainably. This year, we will also start developing a new emissions reduction plan for agriculture, in which we will set out our long-term vision for a more productive, low-carbon farming sector. We are putting our new environmental land management scheme at the corner of our agricultural policy, providing public money for public goods, including the protection of habitats which will support our biodiversity goals and climate change mitigation and adaptation. This will help deliver a key outcome set out in the 25-year environment plan.

We have kick-started the creation of a vast northern forest—which will see 50 million trees planted from Liverpool to Hull over the next 25 years—and announced £50 million to help plant new woodlands through the
We must go further if we are to deliver net zero and leave our children and grandchildren.

We need to see and help to secure the future of the world we live in for humanity.

We need to seize the opportunity to tackle one of the greatest threats to our order in the next decade in order to achieve our 2050 net zero target.

Our forthcoming Energy White Paper will outline the Government’s vision for the energy system in 2050 and the actions that will enable the system to evolve during this next decade in partnership and deploying resources where they will have greatest impact.

We should celebrate the progress we have made, but we must go further if we are to deliver net zero and leave the environment in a better state than we found it. With further ambitious domestic policy and concerted international action, solving the challenge of climate change and environmental degradation is possible.

It will require Government—and political parties of all colours—to work together with all sectors of business and society. And we must fully engage young people too, which is why a new youth steering group, led by the British Youth Council, will be set up to advise Government, for the first time giving young people the chance to shape our future climate policy.

It is the year 2020 that the nations of the world must come together to agree stronger action for climate, nature and ocean protection. The UK is committed to leading action globally on halting the loss of biodiversity and developing an ambitious new post-2020 global framework for biodiversity under the convention on biological diversity. We continue to drive action with global partners on climate change and other environmental concerns, as we bid, in partnership with Italy, to host the 26th session of the UNFCCC conference of the parties in 2020 under a UK presidency. If we are to meet the challenge of climate change, we need international partners across the world to step up to our level of ambition.

We will build on the strong frameworks of the clean growth strategy and industrial strategy to deliver the necessary transformation of our economy. Our forthcoming Energy White Paper will outline the Government’s vision for the energy system in 2050 and the actions that will enable the system to evolve during this next decade in order to achieve our 2050 net zero target.

Acting together, we can seize this once-in-a-generation opportunity to tackle one of the greatest threats to humanity.

It is actions like these that will deliver the changes we need to see and help to secure the future of the world we leave to our children and grandchildren.

Implementing Geological Disposal

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): In 2010 the UK Government committed to report on progress in implementing geological disposal in response to a recommendation by the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee. Geological disposal is the Government’s policy for the long-term management of the higher activity radioactive waste that has accumulated over many decades through the use of nuclear technology in industry, medicine and to generate clean electricity. Today the Government are publishing their eighth report.

In December 2018, the Government published, “Implementing Geological Disposal: Working with Communities”, which sets out the policy framework for the future implementation of geological disposal. This also signified the launch of a new process to identify a suitable location for a geological disposal facility in England. The Welsh Government launched a similar process in January 2019. Scotland and Northern Ireland are not participating in the geological disposal programme.

The commitment to report to Parliament on progress on implementing geological disposal was made in relation to a previous siting process which ended in 2013. Since then the Government have carried out a full policy review and with the launch of the new siting process are now implementing this new policy.

Moving forward, Radioactive Waste Management Ltd, the delivery body for the GDF, will provide more focused reports on the progress of the siting process to replace these annual reports.

I will place a copy of “Implementing Geological Disposal: Progress Report” in the Libraries of both Houses.

CABINET OFFICE

Public Appointments: Diversity

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): Today I have published the Government’s response to Lord Holmes’ review into opening up public appointments to disabled people, alongside a refreshed public appointments diversity action plan 2019.

In 2017 the Government published their public appointments diversity action plan making the moral and business case for more diverse public appointments and also setting out our goals and a 10 point action plan on diversity. As part of that action plan, we commissioned Lord Holmes to review the barriers preventing disabled people from taking up public appointments and he reported back in December 2018.

The Government have now responded to Lord Holmes’ recommendations and I take this opportunity to thank him again for his invaluable work and efforts in this important area.

We remain committed to bringing more people from diverse backgrounds into public appointments. The Government have set out how they will take forward...
Lord Holmes’ recommendations and will include these actions in a refreshed public appointments diversity action plan 2019, published today and deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Government accept the principle of all the recommendations that Lord Holmes has made and believes that there is wider applicability to removing barriers for all groups, not just disabled people. The diversity action plan reconfirms the Government to their ambitions that 50% of all public appointees are female and 14% of public appointments should be from ethnic minorities by 2022. In December 2020, the Government will also consider the case for setting an ambition in relation to disabled people, once they have taken steps to improve the data.

Attachments can be viewed online at http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-06-27/HCWS1670/.

Single Departmental Plans

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The Government have today published an updated set of single departmental plans for 2019-20, covering the duration of the Parliament.

These set out each Government Department’s objectives and how they will achieve them. Taken together, they show how Departments are working to deliver the Government’s programme.

This year, following recommendations from the National Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee, and the Institute for Government, CO and HMT officials have worked with Departments to improve single departmental plans in three key areas: to ensure that they are more specific, more focused on departmental priorities and include improved performance indicators.

Building on the introduction of equality objectives last year, this year all Departments’ plans include diversity and inclusion indicators to track the Government’s progress in making the civil service the UK’s most inclusive employer. Each plan too reflects the Government’s ambition on diversity in public appointments that, by 2022, 50% of all public appointees are female and 14% of all public appointments made are from ethnic minorities. They also indicate how Departments are contributing to the domestic delivery of the sustainable development goals. For the first time, Departments’ plans incorporate the principles of the public value framework. This is just one of the steps we are taking to have a greater focus on outcomes delivered for taxpayers’ money.

Single departmental plans allow Parliament and the public to track Departments’ progress and performance against a number of indicators. Their annual report and accounts, which will be published in due course, show how a Department has performed against the objectives in their single departmental plan over the course of the last year.

Single departmental plans will be revised annually to reflect new priorities or changes in responsibilities.

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Times and The Sunday Times/Evening Standard

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): I wish to make a statement on media matters.

The Times/The Sunday Times application to vary 1981 conditions

On 10 January 2019, News UK submitted an application to vary certain conditions put in place in 1981 by the then Secretary of State for Trade. The proposed changes would allow The Times and The Sunday Times to share journalistic resources, subject to the agreement of each newspaper’s editor.

Having considered this application (using my quasi-judicial power as Secretary of State as set out in the Enterprise Act 2002) alongside the representations made to the invitation to comment published on 17 January 2019, I concluded that there had been a material change in circumstances since 1981 that would justify the variation as the effect of the proposed changes did not, in my view, materially impact on the public interest considerations as set out in section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002.

In my written statement to the House on 11 April 2019, I announced that I was minded to accept News UK’s application to vary the 1981 undertakings. However, in considering the proposed new undertakings as a whole, I also noted that the existing governance arrangements lacked clarity and certainty over roles and responsibilities. Before agreeing the application, I therefore made it clear to News UK that their proposals needed to be suitably updated and enhanced to reflect corporate best practice.

I asked officials at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to take forward discussions on these issues with News UK in order to consider proposals from News UK which would address my concerns. Following the conclusions of these discussions, News UK have submitted revised undertakings which, in my assessment, represent a sufficient improvement on those contained in the original proposal and which substantially meet my concerns. I therefore propose to accept the revised News UK undertakings.

Before doing so, and in line with the Enterprise Act 2002, I have today published a consultation notice on the Government website seeking representations on the proposed undertakings. I have also published the revisions to the Times Newspaper Holdings Limited articles of association, which give effect to the agreed changes.

Views are sought on the revised News UK undertakings and the supporting documents by 10 am on Monday 15 July 2019. Responses should be sent to mergers@culture.gov.uk or to the DCMS media team, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 100 Parliament Street, London, SW1 2BQ.

I will consider any representations received on the revised undertakings before this deadline, and will consider whether any further modifications are required in light of them, or if the undertakings are now sufficient. I will keep the House informed of further developments with this matter.
Acquisition of 30% shareholder stake in the Evening Standard.

On 13 June I instructed my officials to write to Lebedev Holdings Limited (LHL) and Independent Digital News and Media Limited (IDNM), the owners of The Evening Standard and The Independent, to inform them that I was “minded to” issue a public interest intervention notice (PIIN). I can confirm today that I am issuing the PIIN.

This relates to concerns I have that there may be public interest considerations—as set out in section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002—that are relevant to the recent acquisition of a 30% stake by the International Media Company (IMC) in LHL and the linked transaction involving the acquisition of a 30% stake by Scalable LP in IDNM and that these concerns warrant further investigation.

I invited the parties to submit representations to me, which they have done. I acknowledge the points they have raised about the structure of the transactions and the turnover of the companies. Nonetheless, I still consider that there are reasonable grounds to suspect that a relevant merger situation has been created. I have also noted what they have told me about protections for editorial independence, including the provisions in their shareholding agreement. However, I continue to believe that it may be the case that the public interest considerations are relevant to this merger. I thus consider it appropriate for me to intervene in this matter.

At this stage, my decision to issue the PIIN triggers the requirement for the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) to report to me on jurisdictional and competition matters, and for Ofcom to report on the media public interest considerations in section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002: (2A). The need for (a) accurate presentation of news; and (b) free expression of opinion. I have asked both the CMA and Ofcom to report back to me by 23 August 2019.

My role as the Secretary of State in this process is quasi-judicial and procedures are in place to ensure that I act independently and follow a process which is scrupulously fair, transparent and impartial.

I will update the House once I have received both reports from the regulators and have had time to consider the recommendations.

[HCWS1677]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): I represented the UK at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council in Luxembourg on 18 June.

The Council discussed the European maritime and fisheries fund (EMFF) budget for 2021-27, and agreed a partial general approach. The EMFF is part of the wider EU multiannual financial framework 2021-2027, and is intended to ensure the proper implementation of the common fisheries policy’s objectives. While there was disagreement about the level of support for certain aspects of the fund, such as engine replacement and vessel acquisition, Council approved the partial general approach with a qualified majority. Although the EMFF will not apply to the UK once we have left the EU, I supported the proposal in line with the position adopted by the majority of member states.

The Commission then briefed the Council on the progress of the common fisheries policy (CFP) and consultation on fishing opportunities for 2020. While there were a number of successes such as record profits for the industry and improved governance of fisheries through multiannual plans, the Commission also outlined that challenges remained. In 2020 it will be the first year that all stocks must meet maximum sustainable yield (MSY) while the full implementation of the landing obligation (LO) continues. In an exchange of views, member states generally welcomed the Commission communication and restated their commitment to the CFP objectives. I intervened to express the UK’s support for maximising stocks at MSY, but noted that certain exceptions are necessary, such as in mixed fisheries whereby catches must be managed appropriately and in consideration of low volume quota species. I also called for a formal review of the landing obligation to inform how compliance can be improved.

In public session the Council discussed a presidency progress report on the common agricultural policy (CAP) post 2020 reform package. Open questions across all three CAP legislative files meant that a Council partial general approach on the texts could not be reached at this stage. Most delegations marked areas where they wanted further debate under the incoming Finnish presidency. These include the new delivery model which would give member states more flexibility in the way they use EU funds, achieving environmental outcomes, the exemption of small farmers from conditionality, voluntary coupled support/market orientation, and gender equality.

A number of items were discussed under “any other business”:

The Lithuanian delegation informed Council of the parlous state of the cod stock in the eastern Baltic sea. Lithuania urged the Commission to present an emergency support package for fisheries relying on eastern Baltic cod, including direct EMFF support.

The Commission informed member states about the joint recommendations under article 11 of the CFP regulation in the field of environmental legislation (habitats and birds directives). The Commission highlighted that only a few joint recommendations on fisheries conservation measures had been submitted so far and encouraged member states to submit further joint recommendations.

The Spanish delegation informed Council about the outcome of the congress on the post-2020 CAP green architecture which focused on the environmental and climate change challenges faced by European agriculture.

[HCWS1664]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): I represented the UK at the General Affairs Council (GAC) in Luxembourg on 18 June 2019. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a
full member state and continue to act in good faith. A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the Council of the European Union's website at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2019/06/19/

**Multianual financial framework 2021–27**

Ministers discussed the multianual financial framework (MFF) for 2021-27, ahead of the June European Council. The presidency had streamlined the options on the negotiating table ahead of the June European Council. Ministers agreed that the negotiations should conclude by the end of the year. However, issues that remained unresolved included: the prioritisation of funding between cohesion, common agricultural policy (CAP) and current spending; the framing of the debate on rebates; Horizon Europe; and restating of positions on own resources. The Commission underlined that the new European Parliament (EP) would be ready to restart discussions between the European Commission and the Council of the European Union in July.

**Preparation of the European Council on 20-21 June 2019: Conclusions and European Council follow-up**

The Council finalised preparations for the European Council on 20-21 June and Ministers broadly accepted the latest draft of conclusions. The agenda comprised: the next institutional cycle; MFF; climate change; the European semester; disinformation and hybrid threats; and external relations.

Member states discussed the projected timeline for the MFF and many requested a special November summit to facilitate further progress on negotiations. On climate, some member states pushed for a commitment to climate neutrality by 2050, as well as upholding the Paris agreement. Other member states continued to resist these proposals and insisted that an EU strategy should not pre-empt their own work in this area.

I intervened in support of the ambitious climate targets and highlighted the UK’s recent commitment to climate neutrality by 2050. I stressed the importance of EU leadership in tackling climate change. I also supported improving the EU’s security culture and enhancing its resilience against external hybrid security threats. I highlighted that countering disinformation remained a key priority for the UK and welcomed the language welcoming the adoption of the restrictive measures regime for cyber threats. On external relations, I underlined the need to continue to tackle Russian aggression and to support the full implementation of the Minsk agreement. I welcomed the inclusion of the relationship with Africa and reference to the five-year anniversary of the downing of flight MH17.

**Enlargement and stabilisation and association process**

Ministers agreed conclusions on the western Balkans and Turkey, in response to the Commission’s 2019 enlargement package. The conclusions take note of the Commission’s recommendation to open accession negotiations with the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania, based on its evaluation of the positive progress made. They also welcomed the Prespa agreement between Greece and North Macedonia. The Council will revert to the issue with the intention of reaching a clear and substantive decision no later than October 2019.

**European semester—Horizontal report on country-specific recommendations**

Ministers discussed the Commission’s horizontal report on the macro-economic situation of the EU, which draws on country-specific recommendations (CSR), and decided to pass the report to the European Council.

**FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE**

**Foreign Affairs Council**

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My hon. Friend the Minister for Africa attended the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 17 June. It was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Luxembourg.

**Current affairs**

The High Representative and Foreign Ministers discussed the most pressing issues on the international agenda. They referred to the situation in Venezuela, stressing their concern as the political and humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate. They reiterated their call for a political, negotiated solution within the framework of the Venezuelan constitution that would ultimately lead to free, fair and credible presidential elections and their support for efforts in this direction.

They also discussed the situation in the Republic of Moldova, following the formation of the new Government. They reiterated the EU’s readiness to work with a reform-committed Government, on the basis of the EU-Moldova association agreement.

The High Representative also referred to the first anniversary of the Prespa agreement, which was signed by Greece and North Macedonia exactly one year ago.

**EU global strategy**

Foreign and Defence Ministers discussed the EU global strategy, in light of the High Representative’s third annual progress report: “The EU Global Strategy: three years on, looking forward”. They took stock of progress made in the last three years and reflected on future perspectives, adopting conclusions on EU action to strengthen rules-based multilateralism.

Ministers also focused on security and defence co-operation, and welcomed the substantive progress made to enhance the Union’s security and its role as a security provider and global actor, including through its common security and defence policy.

**Common foreign and security policy effectiveness**

Foreign Ministers discussed the common foreign and security policy (CFSP)’s effectiveness, reflecting the shifts underway in the global landscape. Ministers reflected on practical ideas for enhancing the effectiveness of the
EU’s CFSP and in particular, on how to increase coherence and consistency to strengthen unity.

**Sudan**

Ministers expressed their deep regret at the deteriorating situation following the violence on 3 June and underlined the opportunity for positive change in Sudan. The UK Minister led the widespread condemnation of violence and called for accountability, welcoming the messaging in the EU28 statement released immediately after the FAC. She suggested the EU consider targeted measures against those guilty of the most serious crimes and human rights violations.

Ministers expressed support for the AU’s leadership role and their efforts (alongside Ethiopia) to secure agreement for a civilian-led transition authority, delivering on the aspirations of the Sudanese people. There was broad agreement that the EU should provide immediate assistance to support humanitarian needs, while preparing a longer-term package to support a civilian transition authority.

**Informal lunch on the middle east with the Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi**

Foreign Ministers had an exchange of views with the Foreign Minister of Jordan, Ayman Safadi. They focused on latest developments in the region, including Syria, tensions in the Gulf region, and prospects for the middle east peace process.

**Council conclusions**

The Council agreed a number of measures:

- The Council adopted conclusions on security and defence in the context of the EU global strategy.
- The Council adopted conclusions on a new EU strategy on central Asia, adapting the EU policy to new opportunities that have emerged in the region.
- The Council adopted conclusions on the EU’s engagement to the Black sea regional co-operation.
- The Council adopted conclusions approving EU human rights guidelines on safe drinking water and sanitation.
- The Council decided to revoke the framework for restrictive measures against the Maldives that it had adopted on 16 July 2018.
- The Council approved and authorised the signature on behalf of the EU of a joint declaration with the Pacific alliance.
- The Council adopted a decision on the position to be taken, on behalf of the European Union, in the Trade Committee established under the interim partnership agreement between the EU and the Pacific states, to take account of the accession of Samoa and of future accessions of other Pacific island states.

**Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act: Human Rights Violations**


The report details the 17 regulations laid under section 1 of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 during the reporting period from 23 May 2018 to 22 May 2019, including seven regulations which state a relevant human rights purpose. In this time, the Government prioritised preparation on sanctions for a no-deal exit, specifically on making the necessary secondary legislation to carry over existing EU sanctions into UK law on exit day.

We have also included information on additional actions the Government have taken related to human rights sanctions. I can confirm to the House that HMG are actively considering establishing a UK autonomous human rights sanctions regime. Whilst the UK continues to be a member of the EU or during the implementation period, EU sanctions will apply in the UK, including those regimes which have a human rights element. We will look to use the powers provided by the Sanctions Act to the fullest extent possible during this period, but there are some limitations on the measures that we can impose autonomously.

**HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE**

**Junior Doctors Contract Review**

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I am delighted to tell the House that we have successfully brought to an end the junior doctors dispute, following a review of the 2016 contract. The British Medical Association announced yesterday that junior doctors had overwhelmingly—by 82%—backed a four-year deal incorporating pay increases, and improved flexibility and conditions. The vote by BMA members means that the BMA and NHS employers will now move to collectively agree the amended junior doctor contract.

Throughout negotiations we have worked closely with the NHS and the BMA to agree an offer which recognises the dedication of our 39,000 junior doctors to their patients and our nation’s health.

The agreement also includes improved working conditions. The contract changes prioritise doctors’ physical and mental wellbeing through introducing new limits on working hours, more breaks and making it easier to get time off for important moments in their lives.

This is a “something for something” deal—guaranteed pay increases in return for contract reform which will help improve productivity, recruitment, retention and motivation. There will be around £90 million of investment into the contract including a new pay point for the most senior doctors in training, an allowance for those working less than full time to support flexible working and increased pay for those working the most weekends or whose shifts end in the early hours of the morning. Taken alongside an 8.2% four-year pay rise, this will give junior doctors and current medical students the support they fully deserve.

The NHS would be nothing without its dedicated workforce. For our junior doctors, as well as all our staff and volunteers, I want the NHS to be an incredible place to work. This deal marks another step in our long-term plan for the NHS, which will safeguard our health service and benefit us all for generations to come.
Biometrics Commissioner: Annual Report

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): My noble Friend the Minister of State, Home Office (Baroness Williams of Trafford), has today made the following written ministerial statement:

I am pleased to announce that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today publishing the fifth annual report of the Biometrics Commissioner, together with the Government’s response.

The Commissioner, Paul Wiles, is appointed under section 20 of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012. His responsibilities are:

- to decide applications by the police for extended retention of DNA profiles and fingerprints from persons arrested for serious offences but not charged or convicted;
- to keep under review national security determinations made by chief officers under which DNA profiles and fingerprints may be retained for national security purposes;
- to exercise general oversight of police use of DNA samples, DNA profiles and fingerprints. His report is a statutory requirement of section 21 of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012.

I am grateful to Mr Wiles for this report, which we have published in full.

Copies of the report will be available from the Vote Office. The Government’s response will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories: Beneficial Ownership Information

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Today I am laying before the House the 18-month statutory review of the implementation of the exchange of notes on beneficial ownership between the United Kingdom, Crown dependencies and relevant overseas territories.

In 2016, the UK, the three Crown dependencies (CDs: the Bailiwick of Jersey, the Bailiwick of Guernsey including Alderney but not Sark, and the Isle of Man) and the six overseas territories with global financial centres (OTs: Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Gibraltar and Turks and Caicos Islands) committed to enhance the effectiveness of long-standing co-operation between law enforcement agencies (LEAs) in sharing beneficial ownership information for corporate and legal entities incorporated in their respective jurisdictions. These bilateral arrangements between the UK and each of the OT and CD jurisdictions are called the exchange of notes (EoN) and came into force on 1 July 2014. Law enforcement authorities for each participant can submit a request for information to another participating dependency or territory, who can also do likewise with the UK.

The UK, CDs and participating OTs jointly completed a six-month internal review of the EoN arrangements covering the period 1 July 2017 to 31 December 2017. A written ministerial statement covering that review was laid before Parliament on 1 May 2018.

Under section 445A of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, I am required to prepare a report covering the first 18 months of implementation of the EoN, including an assessment of their effectiveness, to cover the period 1 July 2017 to 31 December 2018.

Officials from the joint anti-corruption unit in the Home Office carried out this review in collaboration with officials from the other participating jurisdictions. During the course of this review, the CDs and OTs have reiterated to the UK authorities their commitment to the EoNs, as demonstrated by their positive and proactive approach to implementation and engagement in the review process.

I am pleased to provide the following key findings of the review and recommendations for the future of these arrangements.

The findings and recommendations of this review are based on material supplied by, and discussions with, all of the participating jurisdictions. The position varies across these different jurisdictions, and not all of the findings and recommendations of this review apply to all. Where a jurisdiction already complies with the points covered by a particular finding or recommendation, it should continue to do so.

Key findings

UK law enforcement agencies (LEAs) report that the EoN have been extremely useful in accessing the information needed to support ongoing criminal investigations.

This process gives UK LEAs rapid access to beneficial ownership information on over half a million entities based in the three CDs and six participating OTs. This represents 87% of businesses in scope of the scheme. Plans are in place for this to reach 100% by December 2020. In addition, these jurisdictions have reciprocal access to information on 3.8 million UK entities through the UK’s people with significant control public register.

During the first 18 months of operation, 296 requests were made, of which 118 asked for multiple pieces of information in a single request. This equates on average to nearly four requests per week. Responses were provided for all requests made, and all but four were provided within the agreed time frame.

As many of these requests are in support of long-running investigations, it is too soon to quantify the full outcome in terms of successful investigations, but interim indicators are positive.

The statutory review notes a number of challenges during the first six months (July-December 2017), including some information being shared with caveats on its use and the occasional use of out-of-date contact address lists when making or responding to an information request. Substantial progress was made on all of these issues following an internal review, but some residual administrative issues remain.

This review did not identify any instances in which a search, or any details about a search, became public knowledge, including in relation to the beneficial owners of companies being investigated.

This review has made seven recommendations:

- All registers should be completed by the end of 2020 at the latest;
- participants may wish to review best practice on verifying information in the beneficial ownership registers;
- if third parties need to be contacted to respond to a query, the requesting LEA should be informed before communication takes place, and suitable legally binding agreements should be in place to prevent disclosure;
- LEAs should use the correct contact details when making requests;
- existing dialogue and engagement should continue;
consideration and discussion on the appropriateness of expanding the scope of EoN to include civil tax cases or beneficial ownership information for trusts should continue; and evidence should continue to be gathered on the impact of the process with regard to long-term benefits.

Participants in the EoN arrangements will take forward the recommendations of this statutory review, and will take responsibility for tracking progress. The next joint internal annual review of the EoN arrangements will take place next year and will cover the performance for 2019.

It should be noted that this review is in addition to ongoing monitoring of the practical application of the commitment by all participants.

Copies of the statutory review will be available from the Vote Office and it will also be available on the gov.uk website.

[HCWS1671]

**National Crime Agency Retention of Specialist Skills**

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid):** I am today laying before the House of Commons a departmental minute on the use of contingent liability by the Home Office for the NCA retention of specialist skills (ROSS) litigation.

The litigation relates to 15 claims from current NCA officers and the application of an abatement to those officers who chose to retire and return under the NCA’s ROSS scheme.

The NCA’s precursor, the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA), implemented ROSS in 2009, drawing on guidance from the Home Office. A section of the ROSS policy enabled officers, where there was exceptional need, to retire and return to their posts, whilst accessing their pensions (including the lump sum element). Those officers who retired and returned under ROSS had their salaries abated to reflect the pension income.

[HCWS1672]

**HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

**Housing Market: House Building and Leasehold Reform**

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire):** Making sure the housing market works is a key priority for this Government. Today I am announcing a number of additional measures the Government are taking to ensure we deliver the homes this country needs and promote fairness for people, wherever they live.

The Government have set an ambitious target to deliver 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s. Last year more homes were provided than in all but one of the last 31 years. In September 2018, the Prime Minister announced an additional £2 billion to support long-term strategic partnerships with housing associations through to 2029. Today we are launching the bidding process for £1 billion of this funding through Homes England and are working with the Greater London Authority to launch bidding for a further £1 billion for housing associations in London as soon as possible. This marks the first time any Government have invested such long-term funding in new affordable homes through housing associations, supporting the development of more ambitious long-term plans to build the homes this country needs.

We are also announcing today that the Government will be providing £2.85 million to support the development of 19 new garden villages. These new communities stretch from County Durham in the north to Truro in the south-west and together have the potential to deliver 73,554 homes.

Planning is also a core part of ensuring we deliver our home-building ambitions but the process is currently too costly and decision-making takes too long. The forthcoming accelerated planning Green Paper must explore new approaches to meeting the cost of the planning service. We will invite innovative proposals to pilot new approaches to meeting these where this improves performance, including considering whether local authorities could recover a greater proportion of these costs and reinvest the additional revenue into improving the speed and quality of planning services.

The Government have also been clear that we must cultivate a housing market which provides people with the fair and decent housing they deserve. Yesterday, the Prime Minister announced that we will shortly be consulting on the removal of section 21 of the 1988 Housing Act. This will end so-called “no fault evictions”. As part of the consultation, we will also review the existing grounds for possession and provide additional grounds for when landlords need to move into or sell their property. We also plan to reform the court process for housing cases to make it more efficient, ensuring landlords can swiftly and smoothly regain their property where they have a legitimate reason to do so.

When moving home, some tenants struggle to provide a second deposit to their new landlord, while they wait for their first deposit to be returned. These tenants risk falling into debt or ultimately finding themselves trapped in their current home, missing out on the opportunity of finding a better place to live or a new job. We want to understand the scale of this problem, as well as seeking new approaches. That means tenants do not have to provide a second full deposit to move home. This could include approaches to allow tenants to directly “passport” their deposit between tenancies.

To protect the rights of homebuyers and hold developers to account when things go wrong, we also announced our intention to introduce a new homes ombudsman and, when parliamentary time allows, to legislate mandating that developers of new build homes belong to this ombudsman scheme. Today, we have taken a further step, and published our consultation to inform the proposed UK-wide legislation, including on the design and delivery of the ombudsman, the approval mechanisms and standards that it must meet and on whether a code of practice for developers should be underpinned in legislation. The consultation will run until 22 August 2019 and is available on the Government’s website here: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/redress-for-purchasers-of-new-build-homes-and-the-new-homes-ombudsman.
We are also acting on our commitment to end exploitative and unfair leasehold practices which have no place in a modern housing market. Today, we are publishing our response to the technical consultation on reforms to the leasehold system. As announced in December 2017, we will legislate to ensure that unless there are exceptional circumstances, all new houses will be sold on a freehold basis. Through the consultation, we have also decided that:

- Ground rents on future leases will be reduced to a peppercorn of £0, meaning leaseholders will no longer be charged a financial sum for which they receive no material benefit;
- Freeholders on private and mixed-use estates will receive rights to challenge the reasonableness of estate rent charges and the right to apply to the first-tier tribunal to appoint a new property manager;
- Freeholders and managing agents will be required to provide leasehold information within 15 days and set the maximum fee for providing this information at £200 (plus VAT).

Finally, we have previously said the new help to buy: equity loan scheme from 2021 will not be used to support the unjustified use of leasehold houses. Today, we are announcing that we are seeking to vary contracts with developers to ban the sale of leasehold houses, except in the rare cases where this can be justified, within the current help to buy scheme.

Taken together, this package ensures we make progress not just on delivering more homes, but on ensuring decent and fair housing for the people and communities that need them. This is an important part of helping communities to thrive, putting them at the heart of new developments and building a housing market that works fairly for all.

[HWS1674]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

International Bank for Reconstruction and Development: Contingent Liability

The Secretary of State for International Development (Rory Stewart): Today I have laid a departmental minute relating to the intention by the Department for International Development (DFID) to create an additional contingent liability of $1,912,245,702.50 with respect to the World Bank’s International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD). This contingent liability would be in the form of “callable” capital, which is a commitment to make a capital contribution to IBRD in the very unlikely event that the IBRD is unable to meet its financial obligations.

The additional callable capital would permit the United Kingdom to subscribe to the additional shares allocated to it in the 2018 IBRD general and selective capital increases. This would support the United Kingdom’s inclusion of the World Bank’s International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) support to its clients consistent with our development, prosperity and security priorities.

A call from IBRD from shareholders for this capital is considered very unlikely. IBRD has a triple A credit rating, with a very diversified portfolio of investments across a large number of countries. As of 30 June 2018, it held $43.5 billion in equity and a general reserve of $28.6 billion. If the liability were to be called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal Supply procedure.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Edward Argar): Today marks the first anniversary of the publication of the Government’s female offender strategy. With its roots in Baroness Corston’s seminal review of vulnerable women in the justice system in 2007, our strategy set out plans to improve outcomes for women at all points of the justice system, based on our vision to see:

- Fewer women coming into the criminal justice system;
- Fewer women in custody, especially on short-term sentences, and a greater proportion of women managed in the community successfully; and
- Better conditions for those in custody.

Female offenders can be amongst the most vulnerable in society, in both the prevalence and complexity of their needs. Many experience chaotic lifestyles involving substance misuse, mental health problems, homelessness and offending behaviour, which are often the product of a life of abuse and trauma.

Frequently, women in custody are sentenced for non-violent, low level but persistent offences, often for short periods of time. If we take the right approach to female offenders, one that addresses their vulnerability, follows the evidence about what works in supporting them to turn their lives around, and treats them as individuals of value, it could have substantial benefits for victims, families, and offenders themselves. The strategy launched a programme of work that will take some years to deliver. On this first anniversary, I should like to celebrate the improvements that are already taking place, including on our key commitments below:

We published, last December, a new policy framework for prison and probation staff working with women. This sets out duties, rules and general guidance for staff, and includes accompanying guidance covering a range of issues, such as “caring for perinatal women in prison”.

Lord Farmer’s review for women, commissioned by the strategy, was published on 18 June. I am immensely grateful to Lord Farmer for undertaking this review, which looks at how supporting female offenders in custody and community to engage with their families can lower recidivism, aid rehabilitation and assist in addressing the issues of intergenerational crime. We will look closely at how we can best give effect to Lord Farmer’s findings and recommendations.

We committed to develop a “residential women’s centre” pilot in at least five sites across England and Wales, offering a robust alternative to short custodial sentences. We have recently concluded our first phase of consultation with local voluntary and statutory agencies, partners and providers from a range of backgrounds and specialisms across England.
and Wales to inform the scoping of this project. We will continue to consult with partners as we refine the design and delivery of the pilot.

Our strategy recognises the valuable role that sustainable community services, such as women’s centres, can play in supporting vulnerable women to turn their lives around. We have invested £5 million in community services for women in 2018-19 and 2019-20. This funding is helping to sustain and enhance existing services, as well as supporting the development of new services in areas without provision. I am looking at opportunities to further increase sustainability of this sector, and would like to see agencies coming together to provide much needed multi-year funding.

Partnership working is a key theme of our strategy, and yesterday we held a major conference to promote multi-agency, whole system approaches (WSA) for local agencies including health, police and crime commissioners and local authorities, to provide them with tools and information to enable them to develop a WSA in their local areas. We are working with other Government Departments, stakeholders and local justice, statutory and voluntary agencies, to develop and publish a national concordat on female offenders by autumn 2019. This will facilitate better joined up working and collaboration at both national and local level to improve outcomes for female offenders.

Work is under way to improve outcomes for female offenders and women at risk of offending across the justice system, aimed at taking a gender and trauma informed approach to female offenders, such as trialling a new checklist for pre-sentence reports on women, to ensure that sentencers receive high quality advice addressing all relevant issues, including details of dependent children, and a new training package, POWER, so that staff working with female offenders have the skills and knowledge they need.

I am grateful to those parliamentarians who continue to take a close interest in this work. I would also pay tribute to the members of the advisory board on female offenders, who provide invaluable advice and challenge on implementation of the strategy’s aims. Together, we can make a real and lasting improvement for these often vulnerable women, and their families.

The female offender strategy is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/female-offender-strategy

[HCWS1662]
The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Government’s modern industrial strategy sets out a long-term plan to boost the productivity and earning power of people throughout the UK. Sector deals bring industry and Government together in partnership to boost productivity in their sector and to ensure sectors are able to take advantage of major global changes such as those identified in the industrial strategy grand challenges. The tourism sector has the scale and geographical reach to deliver real change for local economies.

The deal that has been struck today means that the Government and industry have agreed a plan that will drive economic growth, underpin continued infrastructure investment and enhance the attractiveness of the sector as a long-term career.

Tourism zones will bring businesses and local organisations together to establish a co-ordinated strategy for growth in their local visitor economy—and a reduction in the impact of seasonality. Industry will deliver 30,000 apprenticeships in England per year by 2025 as well as leading a mentoring programme aimed at supporting 10,000 employees—so that they are more likely to remain in the sector.

The UK will continue to be Europe’s leading hub for hotel investment for the next decade with over 130,000 additional bedrooms added to accommodation stocks by 2025—with 75% of these outside of London.

A new independent tourism data hub will be created with support offered from some of our biggest travel companies. This will allow organisations, including SMEs, to make the most of the big data revolution to understand activity and product preferences in their area.

In conjunction with the sector deal, the UK Government have also published an international business events action plan. The action plan outlines in detail how the Government will support the business events industry in attracting, creating and growing international business events.

These mutual commitments are impressive but we want to go even further—ensuring that as many different visitors as possible can experience our tourism offer. That is why this deal commits to ensuring that the UK will become the most accessible tourism destination in Europe by 2025 and increasing the number of international disabled visitors by 33%.

Additionally, the introduction of sustainable development plans as part of the tourism zones policy sets a clear expectation on the sector to reduce its carbon footprint today, and in the future, helping the UK on its path to clean growth.

Taken together these measures are key in building a world-class experience economy and will ensure the tourism industry can continue to grow inbound visitor numbers by an estimated 25% by 2025. They will boost local economies by making best use of tourism assets throughout the year—ensuring we will be able to give the visitors of the future the very best of experiences throughout our country.

This is an ambitious deal—which is why joint delivery mechanisms are being established to ensure government and industry work closely together to deliver the plans. The UK Government will also work closely with the devolved Administrations—complementing their existing tourism strategies—and ensuring the benefits of the deal extend right across the UK. It is a deal that will support tourism and hospitality employees as the sector grows—helping it to remain a global leader, long into the future.

I will be placing a copy of this document in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1678]
The Global Fund is an extremely successful public-private partnership which was rated as one of the top three performers in the UK’s multilateral development review. This partnership has so far helped to save 27 million lives, reducing deaths from AIDS-related illness, tuberculosis and malaria by one third in the countries where it invests. Joining forces with other donors to negotiate low prices for life saving health technologies, the Global Fund has saved $855 million in procurement over the last five years. It is the leading international financier of the fight against multi-drug resistant tuberculosis, a disease which causes a third of all deaths due to antimicrobial resistance.

I am pleased that the UK will pledge up to £1.4 billion to the sixth replenishment of the Global Fund which will be hosted by France in October. The UK’s investment will help to:

- Provide life-saving antiretroviral therapy for more than 3.3 million people living with HIV;
- Support treatment and care for 2.3 million people with tuberculosis;
- Distribute 92 million mosquito nets to protect children and families from malaria;
- Make countries’ health systems stronger, promote global health security and tackle antimicrobial resistance.

I am particularly concerned that the number of malaria cases is at risk of increasing due to growing resistance to our current tools and the potential impacts of population growth and climate change. I have agreed to double the value of private sector contributions to the Global Fund for malaria up to a maximum of £200 million, providing £2 for every £1 contributed by the private sector. This will help us to meet our target to spend £500 million a year on malaria over the five years from 2016-17 to 2020-21. Our previous malaria match funds have so far raised almost £200 million in additional private sector contributions to the Global Fund.

The UK pledge to the previous Global Fund replenishment included, for the first time, a £90 million published performance agreement which set out areas to support achievement of universal health coverage; a greater focus on disease prevention; strengthening the focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and marginalised, including women and girls; and antimicrobial resistance and global health security. These are all critical to the Global Fund’s long-term success. Each year my officials will speak with the Global Fund’s senior management to review their progress on these critical areas and make sure that we are working together as effectively as possible.

A successful replenishment will help the Global Fund partnership to save 16 million lives, avert 234 million cases or new infections, and strengthen countries’ health systems to accelerate progress towards universal health coverage. To reach the Global Fund’s ambitious target of at least $14 billion and get the world back on track to end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria by 2030, as called for in the sustainable development goals, everyone must step up.

We will use our early decision to encourage other donors, new and existing, to make ambitious commitments. Meanwhile our commitment to a new £200 million malaria match fund is an invitation to the private sector to contribute to and play an essential role in delivering the sustainable development goals. Ultimately, though, protecting the health of citizens is the responsibility of national Governments. We expect them to play their part and further increase their public spending on health.

I am aware of the significant degree of interest in this issue from Members across the House, whose advice and support on this issue have been invaluable for the Government. For the convenience of Members, I am depositing a copy of the performance agreement in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1680]

CHILDREN'S FUNERAL FUND

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): I am pleased to announce that today the Government will lay regulations to establish the children’s funeral fund for England (the “CFF”).

No parent should ever have to endure the unbearable loss of a child. Whilst recognising that nothing can ever truly heal the pain of such a loss, it is right that the Government ensure that all families who lose a child are given the support they need.

Under the CFF, bereaved families will no longer have to meet the fees charged for a cremation or burial of a child under the age of 18. Rather, they will now be able to access this provision for free at the point of need, with the costs being met by Government funding and providers applying to the CFF for reimbursement. As a further gesture of this Government’s commitment to supporting bereaved people, families in England will also be provided with a contribution of up to £300 towards the price of a coffin (or shroud or casket, where preferred), and will meet other specified expenses.

The CFF marks a key milestone in the delivery of the Government’s manifesto commitment to provide bereaved parents with the support they need. Its provision will be universal, available to all bereaved parents in England who have lost a child regardless of their means. It is also intended to complement other measures such as the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018, which received Royal Assent last September and is expected to apply from April 2020.

We have worked closely across government to ensure that the CFF is compatible with other relevant measures and will continue to work with devolved Administrations to ensure co-ordination with their own equivalent schemes.
In particular, I have worked closely with the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), and officials in the Department for Work and Pensions in order to ensure the CFF’s compatibility with the social fund funeral expenses payment scheme.

In developing the CFF, we have engaged with a range of interested parties from across the funeral services sector, whose insight and expertise continue to be invaluable to ensuring the successful implementation of the CFF. I am also grateful for the continued support offered to bereaved families by the wider funeral industry. I hope that the CFF will be a welcome addition to the existing free provision which is already made available for families who have suffered the loss of a child.

In conclusion, I would like to pay tribute to the tireless work of the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for bringing this important issue to the Government’s attention. Drawing on her own experience, she has led a courageous campaign to secure this additional support for all those families who, tragically, face the burden of losing a child. As the Prime Minister has said, it is in memory of the hon. Lady’s own son, Martin, that the CFF is being established.

[HCWS1681]

TRANSPORT

Maritime Safety

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am delighted to inform the House today about the launch of Maritime Safety Week 2019 following the extremely successful inaugural event last year.

The maritime industry is crucial to the UK economy. It is a simple truth that, if safety were not a priority for the sector, it would rapidly grind to a halt.

The UK is recognised internationally for its world-class maritime safety framework and already sets the standard in ensuring the wide variety of people who use and enjoy our waters for business or pleasure can do so in safety. It is not only Government who have achieved this reputation, through the work of organisations like the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and the general lighthouse authorities, but also sector bodies like the Royal National Lifeboat Institution.

The marine environment can be dangerous, however, and there is always more that can be done to keep people out of harm’s way.

Maritime Safety Week aims ultimately to help reduce preventable maritime accidents. The week creates a focal point to recognise the fantastic and innovative work that is already being delivered and the strong partnership between Government and the sector which is vital for further continuous improvement.

As well as recognising the excellent safety work that already goes on, my key objectives for maritime safety week 2019 are to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, experience and best practice and to focus on some of the challenges which remain. That is why, as well as meeting many of the organisations and individuals who make a difference through their work, I will be hosting a fishing safety MP roundtable this week to consider what more can be done to make the fishing industry a safer one.

Throughout the week I will be launching new initiatives and announcing new funding in support of maritime safety. Today I will also be publishing the Government’s first maritime safety action plan. This sets out a path for the future of maritime safety work in the UK, makes new commitments and specifies the actions which will be taken to deliver them. The action plan underpins our Maritime 2050 strategy, which I published in January, outlining our ambitious vision for the future of the sector. Copies of the maritime safety action plan have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and are available on gov.uk.

Ultimately, I want to reduce the number of preventable accidents in UK waters and Maritime Safety Week 2019 is an important step towards that goal. I invite Members to show their support on social media by sharing our content and using our hashtags for the week—#MaritimeSafetyWeek and #MaritimeSafetyMatters.

The attachment can be viewed online at http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-07-01/HCWS1679.

[HCWS1679]
Written Statements

Tuesday 2 July 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Green Finance Strategy

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): Today the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), and I are publishing the UK Government’s first Green Finance Strategy. The UK has a proud record in tackling climate change and protecting the environment. We were the first country in the world to legislate for a net zero greenhouse gas emissions target for 2050. It is an important part in helping us to continue to lead the way. The financial sector has a central role to play in delivering the investment we need to meet our environmental ambitions, through a package of measures on energy efficiency in buildings, and through the Climate Change Act 2008. We have led the G20 in decarbonising our economy. Through our 25-year environment plan, we are delivering our commitment to leave the environment in better condition than we found it. And only last week we became the first major economy in the world to record in tackling climate change and protecting the environment. The UK is well placed to grasp the opportunities from international commercial opportunities arising from climate and environmental factors and markets for green financial products are robust in nature; accelerate finance to support the delivery of the UK’s carbon targets and clean growth, resilience and environmental ambitions, through a package of measures on energy efficiency in buildings, and through the launch of the Green Finance Institute; and ensure that UK financial services capture the domestic and international commercial opportunities arising from green finance.

I will place a copy of the Green Finance Strategy in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1682]

TREASURY

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): HM Treasury will incur new expenditure in connection with a legal settlement in 2019-20. Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £84,200,000 for this new expenditure will be sought in a supplementary estimate for HM Treasury. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £84,200,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS1685]

EDUCATION

Early Years Education

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Today, I am announcing the allocation of just over £22 million for 66 School Nurseries Capital Fund (SNCF) projects across the country. This investment is part of our commitment to create more high quality school-based nursery provision for disadvantaged children. These innovative projects are intended to test and evaluate approaches aimed at closing the disadvantage gap, deepen our understanding of “what works” and spread best practice throughout the sector.

I am also announcing the launch of a new campaign called Hungry Little Minds to encourage parents to provide a language-rich home learning environment, which, evidence shows, is crucial for improving early outcomes. The campaign is underpinned by a behaviour change model published by the Government in November and follows the ambition set last July by the Secretary of State for Education to halve in 10 years the proportion of children who finish reception year without the expected level of development in communication, language and literacy.

These initiatives are part of our work to provide equality of opportunity for every child, regardless of background or where they live, because we know that improving support in the early years is the cornerstone of social mobility.

Details of today’s announcement are being sent to all SNCF applicants and a list of successful projects will be published on www.gov.uk. Copies will be placed in the House Library. This statement has also been made in the House of Lords.

[HCWS1684]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Paterson Inquiry Indemnity

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is not statutory authority, for the Minister concerned to present a departmental Minute to Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the statement, except in cases of special urgency.
I have today laid a departmental Minute proposing to provide an indemnity that is necessary in respect of a Department of Health and Social Care established non-statutory, independent inquiry into the issues raised by the malpractice of the former breast surgeon, Ian Paterson, in the independent sector and the NHS. The actions of Ian Paterson have affected a significant number of patients. The disclosures about the seriousness and extent of his malpractice are deeply and profoundly shocking. The inquiry reflects the Government’s commitments to ensuring lessons are learnt in the interest of patient protection and safety, both in the independent sector and the NHS.

In 2017, the Minister of State for Health announced the establishment of the Inquiry (HCWS323, on 7 December 2017) to be chaired by the right Reverend Graham James, Bishop of Norwich. This indemnity will cover the entire duration of the inquiry’s work, from December 2017 until when the inquiry submits its report, now expected at the end of 2019. The indemnity will cover the Chair and all independent advisers appointed to the inquiry against any liability for any act done or omission made honestly and in good faith in the execution of his or her duty as such, or in the purported execution of his or her duty as such. The indemnity only applies to acts done or omissions made during the course of the inquiry. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

The Treasury has approved the proposal in principle. If, during the period of 14 parliamentary sitting days beginning on the date on which this Minute was laid before Parliament, a Member signifies an objection by giving notice of a parliamentary question or by otherwise raising the matter in Parliament, final approval to proceed with incurring the liability will be withheld pending an examination of the objection.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-07-02/HCWS1683/.

[HCWS1683]
Written Statements

Wednesday 3 July 2019

CABINET OFFICE

Common Frameworks and Intergovernmental Relations

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Today I have published four documents providing an update on progress towards the formation of the common UK frameworks. These include:

- A progress report on the formation of the common frameworks;
- A document outlining key phases necessary to deliver the common frameworks and;
- An outline framework relating to hazardous substances planning.

A set of draft principles for intergovernmental relations.

Publication of these documents reflects the considerable programme of work we have undertaken with the devolved administrations as part of our preparations for EU exit and beyond.

Together with the devolved Administrations, we continue to make significant progress in the development of common frameworks. This work is underpinned by the framework’s principles agreed with the Scottish and Welsh Governments in October 2017 at JMC(EN). Since then, the UK Government have published two iterations of the frameworks analysis, in March 2018 and April 2019 respectively, which set out all the policy areas where EU law intersects with devolved competence and our approach in each. We have also published three statutory reports setting out progress on common frameworks under the terms of the EU (Withdrawal) Act. These reflect the fact that, based on the good work done to date, the UK Government have not brought forward any section 12 regulations under that legislation. The Scottish and Welsh Governments have in turn agreed not to diverge in areas where policy discussions are ongoing.

The documents published today reflect the latest developments in this area of work and are intended to underline the UK Government’s commitment to transparency in this area, and facilitate a more detailed process of scrutiny by Parliament and wider stakeholders.

I am also enclosing a set of draft principles for intergovernmental relations. A review of intergovernmental relations was commissioned by the Joint Ministerial Committee (Plenary), consisting of the Prime Minister and the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales on 14 March 2018. The UK Government and the devolved Administrations continue to work closely with on this joint review of the existing memorandum of understanding between us.

The draft principles for intergovernmental relations were developed jointly by a working group of representatives of all four administrations. The principles are intended to establish a solid foundation for the ways in which all four administrations will work together in the future.

They will be presented for formal adoption to a future Joint Ministerial Committee (Plenary) and, subject to the timing of its re-establishment, to a new Northern Ireland Executive for its endorsement.

The UK Government and the devolved Administrations are committed to making rapid and substantive progress on the review. This will include agreeing a joint plan of next steps, developing a clear timeline covering all four remaining workstreams of the review. This will focus in particular on dispute avoidance and exploring options for an independent element in the process for resolving any future intergovernmental disputes which might arise.

The attachments can be viewed online at http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-07-03/HCWS1687/.

[HCWS1687]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU Law Services

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (James Cleverly): Today, I wish to inform the House about the release of two new services by The National Archives, operating in the capacity of the Queen’s Printer, which will help aid legal certainty and support research in preparation for EU exit.

Yesterday, I signed regulations for the commencement of the relevant powers and duties under part 1 of schedule 5 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which placed on the Queen’s Printer the statutory obligation to make arrangements for the publication of EU legislation relevant to the UK after exit.

At 9:00 today, The National Archives released two new services. First there is a new online collection of documents and data, relevant to the UK, drawn from the EUR-Lex website: the official source of EU law, delivered as part of the Government’s official web archive. This is available for the public to search and will be updated until exit day, when it will be frozen and act as a permanent historical record of the relevant EU documents on our exit from the EU.

Secondly, The National Archives has added relevant EU legislation to www.legislation.gov.uk, the official legislation website, in order to allow the public to locate the law as it applies to them postexit. This brings together EU legislation that will be retained in UK law on exit with details about the corrections made by UK statutory instruments for EU exit and will show the ‘as amended’ UK applicable versions of the texts. This service includes a full timeline of changes pre-exit and will incorporate the amendments made by UK legislation postexit, with annotations so users can verify the text of the legislation for themselves, if they wish.

The Government have commenced these powers and duties now because these services are ready and their availability will be useful to those, such as businesses and the legal sector, who need to understand what the law is and will be on exit.

[HCWS1686]
Written Statements

Thursday 4 July 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Radioactive Waste: Geological Disposal

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): For over 60 years our country has benefited from nuclear technology. It provides clean energy to our homes and businesses and will continue to play an important role as we transition to a low carbon economy. We also have a long history of using radioactive materials to treat and diagnose serious illnesses, to deliver research and development and to help deliver industrial processes. Radioactive waste is created from a variety of sources including electricity generation, defence and healthcare. Most of this waste is low in radioactivity and is disposed of safely every day by skilled nuclear engineers across the country. However, some materials remain radioactive for thousands of years and require more specialised disposal facilities. Currently this waste is held safely in stores above ground. But this is only an interim measure, a permanent solution is needed. Geological disposal is internationally recognised as the safest and most secure means of permanently managing this type of waste.

A geological disposal facility will contribute to the Government’s industrial strategy, which identified the key role the nuclear sector has in increasing productivity and driving clean growth. It is a multi-billion pound infrastructure investment and will provide skilled jobs and benefits to the community that hosts it for more than 100 years. It is likely to involve major investments in local transport facilities and other infrastructure.

I am today laying before Parliament the revised national policy statement for geological disposal infrastructure and Government’s response to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee for its very helpful report and recommendations, and also those who contributed to the subsequent debate on this issue in the House of Lords in September 2018.

The Government have considered the consultation responses and the report of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee in producing this revised version of the national policy statement.

Copies of the national policy statement for geological disposal infrastructure and Government’s response to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee will be laid before Parliament. I am also publishing these documents on the Department’s website, with the Government’s response to the public consultation on the draft national policy statement and the equality analysis for the national policy statement.

Consumer Contracts Regulation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Today, I am publishing the statutory report on the Objectives of Consumer Contracts (Information, Cancellations and Additional Charges) Regulations 2013. This report sets out the conclusions of the review of these regulations.

A key foundation of our modern industrial strategy is delivering a strong, transparent and attractive business environment in the UK. The strength of the UK’s business environment is founded on our fair and open regulatory frameworks. For our regulatory frameworks to remain fair and open, they must meet the ever-changing needs of the modern consumer, the modern business and the modern world.

There is often an imbalance of power between businesses and consumers; these regulations were intended to empower consumers and create a fairer balance between the two. This was to be achieved by increasing transparency surrounding contracts they are entering into and give them the time to understand the product and consider its price before deciding to enter the contract, building consumer confidence and willingness to trade remotely in the process.

The regulations also implement the EU consumer rights directive, an obligation we are committed to meeting under the single market. But the UK has a strong history of protecting consumer rights, which is achieved not by the creation of new legislation and its enforcement but always seeking to understand whether, and how well, we achieve our underlying objectives. This report will set out objectives intended to be achieved by the regulations, assess the extent to which those objectives have been achieved, assess whether those objectives remain appropriate, and, if so, the extent to which they could be achieved in a way that imposes less regulation.
As part of the review, we made the call for evidence, which ran from 7 March to 1 May 2019. We are acutely aware of some of the issues highlighted by the response, such as the challenge of consistent enforcement. The Government’s consumer White Paper will set out our proposals for the next phase of action to strengthen the consumer regime and will be the vehicle through which the Government consider this, and a range of other issues not addressed within this report. The Government’s consumer White Paper is due to be published later this year.

Overall, it was the expressed view that the regulations continue to meet the objectives for which they were established and that these remain appropriate five years on from them coming into force. Following comments we will, however, be reviewing the existing guidance to ensure that it is sufficiently clear to support the regulations.

I will be placing a copy of the statutory report on the Objectives of Consumer Contracts (Information, Cancellations and Additional Charges) Regulations 2013 in the Libraries of both Houses.

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Response to Opposition Day Debate: Over-75s Licence Fee Concession

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): On 8 May 2019, the House debated a motion calling on the Government to guarantee the maintenance of free TV licences for over-75s beyond 2020.

The concession which was debated by the House, was introduced in 2000, and allows every person over the age of 75 in the United Kingdom access to a free TV licence. The concession was funded by the Department for Work and Pensions in full between 2000 and 2017.

In the 2015 funding settlement, the Government agreed with the BBC that Government funding for the concession would be phased out between 2018 and 2020, with control of the concession passing to the BBC from June 2020. The Government and the BBC agreed this was a fair deal for the BBC; in return, the Government committed to close the iPlayer loophole and committed to increase the licence fee in line with inflation, among other measures. The Government are clear that the future of the concession from June 2020 is the responsibility of the BBC.

Parliament made this decision and legislated to put it into effect. Transferring responsibility for the concession was debated extensively during the passage of the Digital Economy Act 2017, which was agreed by Parliament.

The BBC announced on 10 June 2019 that from June 2020 only those who are over 75 and in receipt of pension credit would continue to receive a free TV licence.

The Government are disappointed that the BBC will not protect free television licences for all viewers aged 75 and over. We recognise that television is a vital link to people of all ages, but particularly so for older people who value television as a way to stay connected with the world. That is why we have guaranteed the over-75 concession until June 2020 and that is why we believe that the BBC can do more to support older people, and why we have asked them to do so.

The debate was an opportunity to acknowledge the importance of the BBC to every licence fee payer in the UK. The BBC is one of the UK’s most treasured institutions and is part of the social and economic fabric of the country. It is a world-class broadcaster and a cultural institution producing some of the best television and radio in the world.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Windrush Generation: Compensation Scheme

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The Government deeply regret what has happened to some members of the Windrush generation and when I became Home Secretary I made clear that responding to this was a priority. The compensation scheme I launched in April is a key part of this response.

The compensation scheme has been open to receive claims since April 2019 and the Home Office is now in a position to start making payments.

Specific legislation to give direct financial authority for payments made under the scheme will be brought forward to Parliament when parliamentary time allows. In the meantime, it is lawful for the Home Office to make payments for compensation scheme claims, without specific legislative authority for this new expenditure. As Home Secretary I am able to consider other factors, including the sound policy objectives behind the scheme and the importance of righting the wrongs suffered by the Windrush generation.

I have therefore written to the permanent secretary today formally directing him, as accounting officer for the Home Office, to implement the compensation scheme for the Windrush generation and to ensure that compensation payments can be made pending the passage of the legislation. The exchange of letters relating to this direction can be found at https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/correspondence-on-the-work-of-the-home-office-windrush. This direction has been issued on the basis of regularity.

I am committed to providing members of the Windrush generation with assurance that they will be appropriately and promptly compensated where it is shown that they have been disadvantaged by historical Government policy. A direction to proceed is therefore optimal to ensure the Government are acting in the best interests of affected members of the Windrush generation.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council will take place on 8 July 2019 in Brussels. The deputy permanent representative to the European Union, Katrina Williams, will represent the UK.
This extraordinary meeting of the Council is held to deal with the traditional “spring package” of items relating to the EU semester, which exceptionally were not available in time for its meeting on 13 June. The Council is to approve non-binding country specific recommendations (CSRs) to member states, and it will receive a joint opinion of the Employment and Social Protection Committees assessing the 2019 CSRs and the implementation of those from 2018. The Council will also adopt guidelines for the employment policies of the member states 2019, the substance of which is rolled-forward from last year’s guidelines.

Additionally, there will be policy debates on the “economy of wellbeing” and on “employment aspects of the strategic long-term vision for a climate neutral economy”.

Under other business, the Commission will provide information on international developments in the area of social and employment policy.

The Government respect the decision of the Supreme Court judgment in Walker v. Innospec and was published on 26 June 2014.

The review was conducted jointly by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and HM Treasury (HMT), which are the Departments with policy responsibility for private and public service pension schemes respectively, and was published on 26 June 2014.

The review considered the differences in survivor benefits in occupational pension schemes between different categories of member and the costs and other effects of eliminating those differences by the equalisation of survivor benefits. The review investigated the differences between:

- same-sex survivor benefits and opposite-sex survivor benefits provided to widows;
- same sex-survivor benefits and opposite-sex survivor benefits provided to widowers; and
- opposite-sex survivor benefits provided to widows and opposite-sex survivor benefits provided to widowers.

The review considered the extent to which same-sex survivor benefits are provided in reliance on paragraph 18 of schedule 9 to the Equality Act 2010 and the extent to which same-sex survivor benefits and opposite sex survivor benefits are calculated by reference to different periods of pensionable service.

The review further considered survivor benefits provided to same-sex civil partners and those provided to same-sex married couples. The law treats same-sex civil partners equally to same-sex married couples for the purposes of survivor benefits in pension schemes because these relationships provide comparable rights and responsibilities. There is no significant difference between them. As such, any differences in the benefits provided to survivors of same-sex civil partners when compared to same-sex
spouses would be difficult to justify. The review therefore gave no further consideration to differences between these two groups.

The review demonstrated that there are a variety of differences in treatment in survivor benefits in occupational schemes in respect of rights built up in the past. These differences reflect the change in social attitudes over the last 60 years and the subsequent introduction of new forms of legal relationships. As new groups have been brought into survivor benefit provision, changes have generally been applied prospectively to benefits built up from the point of that change.

The Government support equal treatment of survivors of all legal relationships, and Parliament provided that survivor benefits must be built up equally for all these groups on accruals from 5 December 2005 (when the Civil Partnership Act 2005 came into force).

The Walker judgment has clearly changed the legal position relating to survivor benefits in respect of same-sex unions, and the Government have acted; public service pension schemes will now implement changes to provide that survivors of registered same-sex civil partnerships or same-sex marriage will be provided with benefits that replicate those provided to widows of opposite-sex marriages, with the exception of specific schemes where survivor benefits depend on making the correct contributions. As was made clear earlier in this statement, private pension schemes must take advice and act accordingly in complying with the judgment.

Following careful consideration of the review’s findings, the Government have concluded that, aside from those changes brought about by the Supreme Court judgment, they will not make any further retrospective changes to the existing provisions in respect of occupational pension schemes to equalise survivor benefits. While this means that the differences in survivor benefits for accruals in past periods will remain for some, these will work their way out of the system in time.
Petitions

Tuesday 18 June 2019

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Climate change

The petition of residents of the constituency of Gloucester:

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Richard Graham.]

OBSERVATIONS

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Walsall Arboretum: park organisation

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom

Declares that Walsall MBC’s decision to restructure the management of Walsall Arboretum in Walsall South constituency was made with no consultation with the public; further that the changes leave the Arboretum with no onsite management and no dedicated management team; further that these changes return the management of the Arboretum to the situation it was in prior to investment by the Heritage Lottery; and further notes a related petition on this matter on change.org with over 1200 signatures.

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

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Valerie Vaz, Official Report, 4 June 2019; Vol. 661, c. 107.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak):

The Government recognise the value of parks and green spaces in providing vibrant and inclusive locations for communities to socialise, volunteer, work, and exercise. They recognise that green spaces foster health, well-being, integration, and social engagement. The Government are committed to working to safeguard the future of parks and green spaces.

Ultimately spending on parks is a matter for local authorities; where local authorities have prioritised the protection, and indeed expansion, of Green Spaces they have found the funds to do so. We will not dictate to local authorities how they should allocate spending.

Local authorities act independently of central Government. Ministers have no remit to intervene in the day-to-day affairs of local authorities, except where specific provision has been made in an Act of Parliament. Local authorities are ultimately accountable for their actions to their electorate.

Councils must, of course, comply with the legislation that governs them, including their decision-making process, as well as complying with their own standing orders and constitution. Where a member of the public has a concern about a decision, action or service of a local authority, our advice is that first and foremost they make a formal complaint using the local authority’s formal complaints system.

In the last six months my Department has invested £15 million in the parks and green spaces agenda with £9.7 million to local authorities to improve their green spaces; £3.75 million to the Pocket Parks Plus programme and £1.2 million to the Heritage Lottery Fund and National Trust “Future Parks Accelerator” programme to support improvements to parks and green spaces over the longer term. In addition, £500k to the Parks Action Group has helped deliver a co-ordinator role, research into green infrastructure, promotion of a skills event and a new community empowerment work stream.
Petition

Monday 24 June 2019

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Non-stun slaughter

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that animals killed by having their throats cut while fully conscious is unacceptable; further that animals should not be made to suffer such profound trauma in the name of religion; further that this method of slaughter runs counter to any belief in compassion and mercy; further that animals should be stunned before they are slaughtered; further that, Shechita slaughter does not allow animals to be stunned before they are slaughtered; further that, when the Holy Prophet was alive, modern stunning methods did not exist; further that the Food Research Institute states that killing an animal before it is bled out by high voltage electrical stunning does not affect the amount of blood from the carcass; and further that this petition relates to e-petition 131591.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons debate non-stun slaughter.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented to the House but not read on the Floor, Official Report, 22 May 2019; Vol. 660, c. 8P.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley):

The Government encourage the highest standards of animal welfare and would prefer all animals to be stunned before slaughter, but is committed to respecting the rights of Jews and Muslims to eat meat prepared in accordance with their beliefs.

The European Council Regulation 1099/2009, on the protection of animals at the time of killing, sets out the main requirements for slaughter including a requirement that all animals are stunned by a permitted method before slaughter. The EU regulation includes a derogation from stunning for religious slaughter and also allows individual member states to impose stricter national rules for religious slaughter.

In England, the Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing (England) Regulations 2015 (WATOK) enforce the EU requirements and contain stricter national rules that apply when animals are slaughtered by either the Jewish or Muslim method.

National regulations on religious slaughter have a long history. Religious slaughter was first debated in Parliament in 1875. The Slaughter of Animals Act 1933 introduced a legal requirement for stunning of animals prior to slaughter, and contained an exemption where animals were slaughtered for specific religious communities. Over the years, the rules governing religious slaughter have developed to provide additional protection for animals slaughtered in accordance with religious rites and have maintained the long standing exception for Jews and Muslims to eat meat prepared in accordance with their religious beliefs.

Animal welfare requirements are monitored and enforced by official veterinarians of the food standards agency to ensure that animals are spared unnecessary pain, suffering or distress during the slaughter process.

The Government are aware that there is public concern about meat from animals being slaughtered in accordance with religious beliefs being sold to consumers who do not require their meat to be prepared in this way and that there are calls for such meat to be labelled. The Government believe that consumers should have the necessary information available to them to make an informed choice about their food. This is an issue the Government are considering in the context of the UK leaving the EU.

The Government are currently engaging with religious communities and other stakeholders on issues around religious slaughter, including consumer transparency.
Petition

Tuesday 25 June 2019

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Treating epilepsy/multiple sclerosis with cannabis oil

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the petitioners are disturbed by the Home Office ban on doctors prescribing cannabis oil and THCA to those with epilepsy or multiple sclerosis, especially the two children Billy Caldwell who needs a prescription urgently, and Alfie Dingley; further that this is very urgent as the Sunday Times on May 20 stated that Mrs Caldwell only has enough medication to last until June and her son's epileptic fits were very serious and life threatening and he needed oxygen before he had the treatment, first in Holland and then in County Tyrone in Northern Ireland, whereas with the treatment he can lead a normal life; further that a few weeks ago his doctor, Dr Brendan O'Hare, was warned not to write any more prescriptions for Billy, and further that cannabis can be dangerous in the wrong amounts, but in the correct dosage, prescribed by a doctor it can be very beneficial.

The petitioners therefore requests that the House of Commons urges the Government to urge the Home Office and the Department for Health and Social Care as a matter of urgency to inform Dr O'Hare, that he can resume his prescriptions for the child Billy, although they include THCA; further that we urge the Government to inform Mrs Dingley that her doctor can prescribe medicines containing cannabis to her son Alfie whose epileptic seizures were reduced by 60 to 70% in Holland with cannabis oil but are much worse now, without it; further to urge the Government to write to the Multiple Sclerosis Society to say that doctors may now prescribe cannabis; further to urge the Government to allow doctors to prescribe cannabis oil (cannabidiol) which is supposed to be legal in the UK, and THCA, which is a Class A drug, to patients and to provide doctors with an easy-to-fill-in, two-page form to get a licence to do so, instead of ordering them to stop the treatment as they did to Billy's doctor, and further to urge the Government to announce that it will allow doctors to prescribe treatments derived from cannabis whenever the patients need it, such as those with severe epilepsy and multiple sclerosis, to prevent desperate patients having to go to illegal drug dealers.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Caroline Lucas.]

[P002480]
declare that free TV licences to households with someone aged over 75 should remain for the foreseeable future; notes that this scheme should remain in governmental hands rather than being privatised via the BBC; further that the removal of the free TV licences will have a negative impact on some of the poorest pensioners in the constituency and across the country; further notes that one of BBC’s proposals in the consultation is means-testing the concession by linking the free licences to pension credit; further that the Department for Work and Pensions own estimates show that nationally 40% (two in five) of those entitled to receive pension credit are not in receipt of the benefit and would be excluded; further that access to media, especially if frail or housebound, can reduce loneliness in older age and improve wellbeing.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reverse the planned decision to end the funding of the free TV licence to households with someone aged over 75 and the privatisation of this to the BBC.

And the petitioners remain, etc. — [Presented by Dr Lisa Cameron, Official Report, 3 May 2019; Vol. 657, c. 1218.]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright):

In the 2015 funding settlement, the Government agreed with the BBC that Government funding for the concession would be phased out between 2018 and 2020, with control of the concession passing to the BBC from June 2020. The Government and the BBC agreed this was a fair deal for the BBC. In return, the Government committed to close the iPlayer loophole and committed to increase the licence fee in line with inflation, among other measures. Parliament subsequently legislated on this matter, so the future of the concession from June 2020 is the legal responsibility of the BBC.

The BBC announced on 10 June 2019 that from June 2020 only those who are over 75 and in receipt of pension credit would continue to receive a free TV licence.

The Government are very disappointed that the BBC will not protect free television licences for all viewers aged over 75. We recognise that television is a vital link to people of all ages, but particularly so for older people who value television as a way to stay connected with the world. That is why we have guaranteed the over 75 concession until June 2020 and that is why we believe that the BBC can do more to support older people, and why we have asked them to do so.

On the concerns about loneliness, the Government recognise loneliness as one of our biggest public health challenges and we are working to help people of all ages to have meaningful social relationships and to avoid loneliness. We were the first Government to appoint a Minister to lead work on tackling loneliness and last year we published a world first Government strategy and secured £20 million of new grant-funding for projects run by charities and community groups to bring people together. The strategy contains over 60 policy commitments, covering many aspects of people’s lives, from transport to health to education.

On the point about the take up of pension credit, not all those who are entitled to claim this benefit are doing so and we would like to see take up increase. The Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that older people receive the support they are entitled to. The DWP uses a wide range of channels to communicate information about benefits; including information on https://gov.uk/, in leaflets and by telephone. DWP staff in pension centres and Jobcentres are also able to provide help and advice about entitlement to benefits, as are staff in local authorities who administer housing benefit.

The DWP has developed a pension credit toolkit to help agencies and welfare rights organisations working with older people in their communities every day to ensure they support older people in this matter and drive take up. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pension-credit-toolkit

People who believe that they may be eligible can use the pension credit calculator https://www.gov.uk/pension-credit-calculator or call 0800 99 1234 to check if they are eligible, get an estimate of what they may receive and help on how to claim.

TV Licences for Over 75’s

The petition of the residents of Linlithgow and Falkirk, etc.

Declares that free TV licences to households with someone aged over 75 should remain for the foreseeable future; notes that this scheme should remain in governmental hands rather than being privatised via the BBC; further that the removal of the free TV licences will have a negative impact on some of the poorest pensioners in the constituency and across the country; further notes that one of BBC’s proposals in the consultation is means-testing the concession by linking the free licences to pension credit; further that the Department for Work and Pensions own estimates show that nationally 40% (two in five) of those entitled to receive pension credit are not in receipt of the benefit and would be excluded; further that access to media, especially if frail or housebound, can reduce loneliness in older age and improve wellbeing.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reverse the planned decision to end the funding of the free TV licence to households with someone aged over 75 and the privatisation of this to the BBC. — [Presented by Martyn Day, Official Report, 10 April 2019; Vol. 658, c. 425.]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright):

In the 2015 funding settlement, the Government agreed with the BBC that Government funding for the concession would be phased out between 2018 and 2020, with control
of the concession passing to the BBC from June 2020. The Government and the BBC agreed this was a fair deal for the BBC. In return, the Government committed to close the iPlayer loophole and committed to increase the licence fee in line with inflation, among other measures. The Government are clear that the future of the concession from June 2020 is the responsibility of the BBC.

Parliament made this decision and legislated to put it into effect. Transferring responsibility for the concession was debated extensively during the passage of the Digital Economy Act 2017, which was agreed by Parliament.

The BBC announced on 10 June 2019 that from June 2020 only those who are over 75 and in receipt of pension credit would continue to receive a free TV licence.

The Government are disappointed that the BBC will not protect free television licences for all viewers aged over 75. We recognise that television is a vital link to people of all ages, but particularly so for older people who value television as a way to stay connected with the world. That is why we have guaranteed the over 75 concession until June 2020 and that is why we believe that the BBC can do more to support older people, and why we have asked them to do so.

On the concerns about loneliness, the Government recognises loneliness as one of our biggest public health challenges and we are working to help people of all ages to have meaningful social relationships and to avoid loneliness. We are the first Government in the world to appoint a Minister to lead work on tackling loneliness.

The Government are taking important steps to tackle loneliness, which can particularly affect older people. Last year, we published the world’s first Government strategy on loneliness, as well as securing £20 million of new grant-funding for projects run by charities and community groups to bring people together. The strategy contains over 60 policy commitments, covering many aspects of people’s lives, from transport to health to education.

On the concerns about the take up of pension credit, the Government are committed to ensuring that older people receive the support they are entitled to and the DWP targets activity on engaging with people who may be eligible to benefits at pivotal stages, such as when they claim state pension or report a change in their circumstances. The DWP uses a wide range of channels to communicate information about benefits to potential customers, including information on https://gov.uk/, in leaflets and by telephone. DWP staff in pension centres and Jobcentres including visiting officers are able to provide help and advice about entitlement to benefits, as are staff in local authorities who administer housing benefit.

One of the best ways to reach eligible customers is through trusted stakeholder working in the community and we have developed the pension credit toolkit, as an on-line tool for agencies and welfare rights organisations to use in order to encourage pension credit take up. It can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pension-credit-toolkit.

The toolkit contains resources for anyone working with pensioners and includes guides to pension credit. It also contains publicity material and guidance designed to help older people understand how they could get pension credit and help organisations support someone applying for pension credit as well as ideas for encouraging take-up. The toolkit also provides links to information about disability and carers benefits.

Most recently we have provided to relevant stakeholders a fact sheet about pension credit and the changes introduced on 15 May for mixed age couples to ensure that accurate information is available in the places where people are most likely to seek information.

Potential customers can use the pension credit https://www.gov.uk/pension-credit-calculator to check if they are likely to be eligible and get an estimate of what they may receive. People wishing to claim pension credit can do so by calling 0800 99 1234.
The petition of residents of Glasgow South West

Declares that Mary Nnamani and her family who fled from Nigeria in danger of their lives have become a full and valued part of our community in Glasgow through our schools and Church Community; further that the Nnamani family have claimed asylum here and we would dearly love them to say.

The petitions, therefore, request that the House of Commons urges the Home Office to grant Mary Nnamani and her family the right to remain in this country, where they have claimed asylum.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Chris Stephens, Official Report, 5 June 2019; Vol. 661, c. 235.]

Petitions in the same terms were presented by the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) [P002460]; the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) [P002461]; the hon. Member for Glasgow North East Paul Sweeney) [P002462]; the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) [P002474].

Observations from The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes):

The Government have noted the concerns raised by the residents of Glasgow South West, Glasgow Central, Glasgow North, Glasgow North East and Glasgow East and their request that Mary Nnamani and her family are allowed to continue to live in the UK where she has claimed asylum.

The Government cannot comment on individual cases, because doing so would breach their obligations to treat such personal matters in confidence.

The Government have a proud record of providing protection for those who genuinely need it, in accordance with our international obligations under the Refugee Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights. Every asylum claim is carefully considered on its individual merits, by assessing all the evidence provided by the claimant against policy, relevant caselaw and available country information from a wide range of recognised and publicly disclosable sources. These include the UN and its agencies, governments, the media and human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The Government will grant protection where someone demonstrates that they face persecution or serious harm in their country and they are unable to seek protection from the national authorities or move to another part of their country to live safely. The Government are very clear that we do not return anyone who faces persecution or serious harm to their country or where there will be a breach of its obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights.

There is also provision in the Home Office policy on Discretionary Leave to allow people to stay in the UK on a discretionary basis, where they do not qualify for protection, but where there are other exceptional circumstances such that expecting them to return to their country would not be appropriate.

Where a decision has been made that a person does not require international protection, and there are no remaining rights of appeal or obstacles to their return, the Home Office expects failed asylum seekers to return voluntarily to their home country. Return and reintegration assistance is available through the Home Office’s Voluntary Returns Service. If they do not leave voluntarily, the Government will seek to enforce their removal.

Where an asylum claim has been refused, but an individual subsequently obtains new information in support of their claim to be at risk of persecution, or that would support a claim to be allowed to remain in the UK on the basis of their private of family life here, the Home Office will ensure that the new information is carefully considered. Enforcement action will not proceed until a decision has been made on any fresh evidence submitted.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Yamuna River

Declares that the Yamuna is worshipped by millions and is considered a holy river; the residents of the United Kingdom recognise the work of the Save Yamuna campaign and request that the British Prime Minister work with the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, and the Indian Government to treat their industrial and domestic waste and not pour treated or untreated waste water into the Yamuna river and necessarily ensure that adequate natural flow of fresh water throughout the stretch, which starts from Yamunotri to Allahabad.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to assist the Indian Government and take into consideration that there is a dire need to save the Yamuna river and remove toxic waste.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Keith Vaz, Official Report, 4 June 2019; Vol. 661, c. 2P.]

Observations from the Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriet Baldwin):

The impact of pollution from waste, industrial chemicals and plastic is having an impact on all of us, disproportionately affecting the poorest communities in the world. Declining water quality is a significant challenge faced by many developing countries and this, amongst other challenges such as floods and droughts, contributes to ill health and poverty. Like the Petitioners, the Department for International Development (DFID) champions the importance of saving our natural resources and combating toxic waste. We note with particular concern the drought currently affecting millions of people in India.

While we do not currently work on decontamination of the Yamuna river specifically, DFID has a number of programmes that focus on water pollution such as our Water Security Programme, which helps developing
countries to promote sustainable and responsible water management and to bring together industries, communities and Governments to take collective action to address challenges such as pollution.

India’s Department of Science and Technology (DST), the UK’s Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) have funded a joint programme on India-UK water quality to develop understanding of the sources and fate of different pollutants, and by supporting the development of management strategies and technologies to reduce pollution levels. The UK contributes £4.2 million to this programme, which is then matched in research by DST. The aim of this programme is to provide policymakers, regulators, businesses and local communities with information and solutions that will help them tackle India’s water quality issues and secure the provision of clear water, rejuvenate rivers, and restore ecosystems. This will be achieved by supporting research to improve understanding of the sources, transport, transportation, interactions and fate of pollutants, and determine the risks they pose to both people and the environment. Importantly, the joint programme will also develop new management strategies and technologies to clean-up water courses and enable better monitoring of pollution levels.

India’s Department of Biotechnology (DBT), UKRI’s Innovate UK, Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) are working on a joint programme (worth £9.9 million) through the Newton Bhabha Fund on Biotechnological Solutions for tackling industrial waste and facilitating academic and industrial collaboration to help address industrial waste. This programme also aims to improve value recovery from waste by using biotechnology across large industrial sectors in India. Projects supported by the programme are exploring a number of approaches to help cut waste and pollution—for example: using bio-refining techniques to recover value from industrial, waste; transforming mixed solid waste into high-value chemical products; turning paper-mill waste into chemical wealth; cutting waste produced by sugarcane processing; and extracting value from waste generated by the sugarcane sector and associated industries.
Ministerial Corrections

Monday 17 June 2019

TRANSPORT

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Transport questions on 13 June 2019.

Step-free access at railway stations is still the responsibility of Network Rail, which, sadly, is not responsible to the Scottish Government. Currently, only 40 of over 350 railway stations in Scotland have step-free access. Is that not another reason why it is so important to see the devolution of Network Rail, so that this unacceptable situation can finally be resolved?

Ms Ghani: There is a £300 million step-free access programme. I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman’s complaint, because 73 further stations were identified in Scotland to get step-free access between 2019 and 2024.


Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray).

The correct response should have been:

Ms Ghani: There is a £300 million step-free access programme. I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman’s complaint, because 73 further stations were identified across Great Britain, including six in Scotland to get step-free access between 2019 and 2024.

EDUCATION

Inequality and Social Mobility

The following is an extract from the Opposition day debate on Inequality and Social Mobility on 12 June 2019.

Nadhim Zahawi: Making progress means building a strong economy, achieving record levels of employment and reforming the welfare system so that it supports people into work. Now, 665,000 fewer children grow up in workless households, the support of an income making them less likely to grow up in poverty. The UK’s national living wage is growing faster than similar or higher minimum wages in other OECD countries, such as Belgium, France or Germany.


Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi):

Errors have been identified in my winding-up speech in the debate.

The correct information should have been:

Nadhim Zahawi: Making progress means building a strong economy, achieving record levels of employment and reforming the welfare system so that it supports people into work. Now, 667,000 fewer children grow up in workless households, the support of an income making them less likely to grow up in poverty. As a proportion of median earnings, the UK’s national living wage is growing faster than similar or higher minimum wages in other OECD countries, such as Belgium or Germany.
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 18 June 2019

WORK AND PENSIONS

Inequality and Social Mobility

The following is an extract from the response given to the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) during a debate on Inequality and Social Mobility on 12 June 2019.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady raises a good point. We are considering how best to respond, ensuring that we put the interests of the clients first. I also point out that we are spending £2 billion more on disabled people than was spent under the legacy system.


Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova).

The correct response should have been:

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady raises a good point. We are considering how best to respond, ensuring that we put the interests of the clients first. I also point out that we are spending over £5 billion more on disabled people than was spent under the previous system.
Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 19 June 2019

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Hong Kong

The following is an extract from the Urgent Question on Hong Kong on 18 June 2019.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The words “rule of law”, are much used on both sides of the argument, both in Hong Kong and in the People’s Republic of China. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the rule of law is only there if one looks at the rules themselves, at how they are made, and at punishments? In addition, they should be underpinned by the universal declaration of human rights. That is what the rule of law means.

Mark Field: I would agree with what my hon. Friend says. He takes these matters seriously, and has dealings with leading figures from Taiwan who are based in London. He will be aware of the constraints that we are under in the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence in standing up for One China. Equally, there is a terrific amount of work that goes on in relation to trade and in educational exchanges with Taiwan. Taiwan is succeeding very rapidly as a country, not least because it stands up for the rule of law in the way in which my hon. Friend describes.


Letter of correction from the Minister for Asia and the Pacific:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy).

The correct response should have been:

Mark Field: I would agree with what my hon. Friend says. He takes these matters seriously, and has dealings with leading figures from Taiwan who are based in London. He will be aware of the constraints that we are under in the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence in standing up for One China. Equally, there is a terrific amount of work that goes on in relation to trade and in educational exchanges with Taiwan. Taiwan is succeeding very rapidly, not least because it stands up for the rule of law in the way in which my hon. Friend describes.
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 25 June 2019

EDUCATION

Free Schools

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Free Schools on 19 June 2019.

Nick Gibb: The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) said that the academies programme has led to more schools being put into special measures and requiring improvements, but the opposite is the case. In 2010, when there were just 200 academies, 68% of schools were good or outstanding; today, that figure is 86%.


Letter of correction from the Minister for School Standards:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to a point made by the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis).

The correct information should have been:

Nick Gibb: The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) said that the academies programme has led to more schools being put into special measures and requiring improvements, but the opposite is the case. In 2010, when there were just 200 academies, 68% of schools were good or outstanding; today, that figure is 85%. 
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 2 July 2019

EDUCATION
Children’s Future Food Report

The following is an extract from the Backbench Business debate on the Children’s Future Food Report on 27 June 2019

Nadhim Zahawi: Last year, more than 1 million disadvantaged children were eligible for and claimed a free school meal, and that important provision has recently been expanded in three significant ways. First, in 2014, we introduced free meals in further education colleges. Secondly, in the same year, we also introduced universal free school meals to all infant children in state-funded schools. Thirdly, under our revised criteria for free school meals, which were introduced last April, we estimate that more children will benefit from free meals by 2022 compared with under the previous benefit system. In fact, numbers released today show that 1.2 million children are benefiting from free school meals.


Letter of correction from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education.

An error has been identified in my response to the debate on the Children’s Future Food Report.

The correct response should have been:

Nadhim Zahawi: Last year, more than 1 million disadvantaged children were eligible for and claimed a free school meal, and that important provision has recently been expanded in three significant ways. First, in 2014, we introduced free meals in further education colleges. Secondly, in the same year, we also introduced universal free school meals to all infant children in state-funded schools. Thirdly, under our revised criteria for free school meals, which were introduced last April, we estimate that more children will benefit from free meals by 2022 compared with under the previous benefit system. In fact, numbers released today show that 1.2 million children are benefiting from free school meals.